Schools of Scandal:
Gossip in Theory and Canadian Fiction

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SCHOOLS OF SCANDAL:

GOSSIP IN THEORY AND CANADIAN FICTION

BY

BRIAN JOHNSON

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

ABSTRACT

"Schools of Scandal: Gossip in Theory and Canadian Fiction," addresses the neglect of gossip in literary studies by considering the relationship between moral, scientific, and literary discourses of scandal, in light of poststructuralist theories of history, subjectivity, and language.

In Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose's use of gossip as a method of self-construction and also of ethical self-constitution dramatizes both the power of traditional discourses against gossip, and their association of gossip with women as they are understood from the perspective of Michel Foucault's account of power/knowledge and subjectivation.

Dunstan Ramsay's gossip in Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business* addresses functionalist defences of "idle talk" in the social sciences which emphasize gossip's psychoanalytic advantages, even as it instantiates Julia Kristeva's model of abjection in identity-formation.

Gossip in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* develops the feminist articulation of gossip as a politically subversive discourse, but also suggests the dangers of gossip in its "legitimized," institutional form in ways that are illuminated, respectively, by M. M. Bahktin and Jacques Derrida's theories of language.

The study of gossip in Canadian literature ultimately dialogizes discourses of scandal, literature, and poststructuralism to show how gossip itself serves as the basis for a critique of the politics of poststructuralism, which are not always as revolutionary as they seem.

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For my parents,

who taught me that discretion

isn't always a virtue.

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Introduction:
Toward a Politics and Poetics of Literary Gossip

Although gossip and literature are profoundly similar in many respects, they are seldom studied together, much less accorded comparable degrees of legitimacy. Whereas literature occupies a position of esteem and cultural privilege, gossip is traditionally situated on the lowest rung of the discursive ladder. Such hierarchical opposition, however, has not hindered the intermingling of the latter with the former. Even a cursory glance at the Western canon suggests that gossip has been, and continues to be, as eminently productive a force within literary production as it is within social life. Gossip has been a frequent subject of literary representation in works as diverse as Chaucer's "House of Fame," Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, Jane Austen's *Emma*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. If literary gossip has rarely received serious critical attention, it has certainly not been for paucity of examples.

Instead, gossip's low profile in literary discussions might be explained by the fact that its study as a cultural form is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to its sporadic appearance in ethnographic case-studies dating back to the turn of the century, and its more rigorous theoretical elaboration by social scientists since the 1960s, gossip was more likely to be condemned or dismissed than investigated. In Michel Foucault's terms, gossip has been constituted, historically, as an "object of discourse" by Judeo-Christian moral codes, imaginative literature, conduct manuals, moral philosophy, and legal institutions--all of which have vigorously maintained its exclusion from the arena of truth and knowledge. Such discursive practices have identified gossip as a morally reprehensible activity, variously associated with a prurient interest in the affairs of others; the dangerous, unchecked dissemination of private information; an unhealthy preoccupation with the trivial, the superficial, and the mundane; malicious motives or idleness; rumormongering,

hearsay, and lying; the violation of trust; character assassination; and the betrayal of secrets. Moreover, such discourses characteristically attribute gossiping exclusively to women, as Dr. Johnson's eighteenth-century definition of the gossip as "One who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in," most succinctly confirms.

Recently, however, the social sciences have presided over the dethroning of such a hegemonic morality, generating a variety of defences for idle talk, and bringing gossip to the forefront of critical investigation. Whereas the traditional attack on gossip derived its authority from a defence of scandal's victims, these new discourses of gossip emphasized the positive aspects of the relationship between gossipers which is usually marked by a spirit of communality and the intermingling of pleasure and power. These discourses are generally broken down into three categories: "the sociological-anthropological approach, the social psychological approach, and the individual approach" (Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi 181-82).

The first of these approaches, associated with anthropologists like Elizabeth Colson and Max Gluckman, focuses on the functions of gossip in small social groups, making gossip the guarantor of community norms and moral values, a form of social control which pre-emptively ensures conformative behaviour on the part of the gossiper, and a means of preserving social groups by providing a mechanism for the socially-acceptable discharge of conflict and hostility. Complementing such socially-oriented studies, the second approach narrows its focus to account for ways in which individuals exploit social practices like gossip to further their own interests. Gossip is therefore seen as a kind of social coin which purchases immediate emotional satisfaction, provides a basis for social comparison, and serves as a technique of information management whereby gossipers increase their social status by gossiping about their opponents and by securing a maximum of commodifiable information for a minimum expenditure of "currency" (Paine, "Alternative" 282-83). Finally, the individual approach to gossip is concerned with analogies between gossip and psychotherapy. In particular, it "regard[s] gossip as part of the fantasy life of

the individual person," and approves of its value as "an adaptive defence mechanism" which "resembles illusions, dreams, jokes, and stories in that it offers an ambiguous, unstructured stimulus that allows hidden fantasies to surface" (Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi 182).

Although such theories offer a wide and suggestive array of approaches to gossip that may fruitfully be adapted to a consideration of literary gossip, they are also problematic models for literary criticism. As Nicholas Emler has pointed out, the scholarly rehabilitation of gossip "has typically involved an attack on one of the negative elements in its reputation while retaining other details of the conventional image." In particular, he notices "a number of treatments that are highly critical of the ways in which it is disparaged but continue to emphasize that it is a female activity" (Emler 120). In practice, the functionalist approach of the social sciences thus tends to skirt the issue of gossip's scandalous reputation--and especially its implicit (or explicit) inscription of gossip in categories of gender--by arguing that gossip's ill-repute "is more in the nature of an unsubstantiated (and even malicious) rumor than a reliable judgement" (Ben-Ze'ev 24). Functionalism, in other words, paints the moral attack on gossip as a misunderstanding, on the grounds that "[m]uch of the negative press gossip has received stems from a confusion of extreme and excessive instances with typical and common cases" (Ben-Ze'ev 24).

But, if there has been any misunderstanding, it has been on the part of the social scientist who fails to realize that his own definition of gossip as "idle talk" reinscribes the very condemnations he claims to dismiss:

> People indulging in gossip do not want to ponder deeply the content or consequences of what they say...When people are involved in serious, practical, and purposive talk, they are not gossiping. Thus when two psychiatrists analyze the love affair of my neighbor, their discussion is not gossip; however, when my wife and I consider the same information, gossip it is. The psychiatrists' discussion is not idle talk (or so they claim). (Ben-Ze'ev 13).

The failure to acknowledge the institutional contexts in which distinctions between "idle" and "serious, practical, and purposive talk" are produced, is not quite redeemed by

equivocating parenthetical comments. Although Ben-Ze'ev's "(or so they claim)" allows him to hedge his bets--hinting at the fact that the psychiatrists are exempt from charges of gossiping *because they are psychiatrists*, and not because their talk is inherently serious, practical, or purposive in a way that "gossip" is not--his definition of gossip assumes an uncritical position with regard to traditional stereotypes.

It is with an eye to the lessons of such doubtful "vindications" of idle talk that feminist gossip theorists have taken a step further the critique of moralizing discourses. As Hélène Cixous notices, the stereotype of the female gossip does not refer to a specific structural definition of gossiping in which women, among others, happen to participate. Rather, gossip is a category which actively determines the "truth" about all women's talk, especially in the absence of men. Her caution that we should "Always keep in mind the distinction between speaking and talking" points directly to the consequences and to the underlying ideology of associating women with gossip: "It is said, in philosophical texts, that women's weapon is the word, because they talk, talk endlessly, chatter, overflow with sound, mouth-sound: but they don't actually *speak*, they have nothing to say. They always inhabit the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing. And neither is to their benefit, for they remain outside knowledge" (486). Feminist critics like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Lorraine Code, Louise Collins, Domna Stanton, and Deborah Jones have all reassessed the significance of "gossip" with such a critique in mind. By exposing the patriarchal assumptions which inform "moral" attacks on gossiping, such theorists radically expand narrow definitions of gossip to include all aspects of women's talk, including, as Jones suggests, "scandal," "bitching," "house-talk," and "chatting." Moreover, they subvert staid attitudes about gossip in ways that the social sciences do not--by suggesting that "The ferocity of several centuries' attack on derogatory conversation about others probably reflects justifiable anxiety of the dominant about the aggressive impulses of the submissive" (Spacks 30).

Despite the ubiquity of gossip in literature, and the proliferation of new approaches to

gossip, Spacks's groundbreaking study, *Gossip* (1985), remains the sole extended treatment of the relationship between fiction and various forms of "idle talk." Her inspired reading of gossip in the English and the American novel only inaugurates the crucial task of mapping the rich terrain of literature's persistent fascination with gossip and scandal, even as it frame questions about the relationship between the structure of gossip and literary forms, analogies between gossip and reception theory, the nearly universal association of gossip with women, and the subversive potential of gossip itself. What emerges from Spacks's study is a portrait of gossip as a transgressive practice with political consequences. Clearly, however, many questions about gossip still remain. The role of gossip in Canadian literature, for instance, has yet to be explored in any way by literary criticism. Furthermore, although Spacks hints at some of the ways in which a study of gossip can be illuminated by contemporary literary theory, she fails to see the ways in which a study of contemporary literary theory can also be illuminated by gossip. For this reason, her references to contemporary theorists tend to be allusive and anecdotal. Spacks's methodology is avowedly "intuitive," taking its cue from the representations of gossip found in imaginative literature, rather than working through the implications of social theories of gossiping.

Significantly, the double-focus on Canadian texts and contemporary theory missing from Spacks's analysis of gossip comes together briefly in Robert Kroetsch's meditation on Canadian writing via Jean-François Lyotard's diagnosis of *The Postmodern Condition*: "'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives...To the obsolescence of the meta-narrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements...' I am suggesting that by Lyotard's definition, Canada is a postmodern country" (Kroetsch 22). Linda Hutcheon, too, has argued that

"Canadian writers...may be primed for the paradoxes of the postmodern by their history...and also by their split sense of identity, both regional and national," especially since "Canadian writers have first had to deconstruct *British* social and literary myths in order to redefine their colonial history" (Hutcheon 4, 6). Implicitly, at least, literary critics have sensed the affinities between gossip and Canadian fiction for some time since gossip, like postmodernism, seems to be informed by a process of decentering which "refuse[s] privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of meta-narratives" (Kroetsch 23). What Hutcheon calls "the Canadian postmodern" itself might well be identified by larger cultural practices akin to gossip.

I wish to examine both the possibilities and the limits of such a formulation with respect to practices of gossiping in Canadian fiction. By theorizing gossip in terms of poststructuralist theories of language, history, and subjectivity in readings of three Canadian novels--Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*--I will begin to map a politics and a poetics of literary gossip. Although the moral, socio-anthropological, psychological, and feminist discourses of gossip will provide crucial contexts for my discussion of scandal, they are in no way intended to be the last word on gossip theory, nor do they describe models of gossip which the novels simply instantiate. On the contrary, my method will be to position gossip theory, literary theory, and literary texts in interilluminating constellations so that the lines of modelling and interrogation will be multi-directional. In Bahktinian terms, my methodology seeks to dialogize groups of texts which constitute competing or oppositional views of gossip in order to "revitalize," "de-privilege," and "interanimate" them. In particular, I believe that the juxtaposition of "high" cultural texts like theory and literature with "low" discourses like gossip is an important strategy by which to question issues of authority, power, and ethics in contemporary culture and thought. The use of poststructuralist theory to read gossip theory which in turn reads a literature of gossip, must also be reversed to see ways in which literary representations of

gossip interrogate gossip theory and furthermore, how literary and "scientific" discourses of gossip interrogate the assumptions of poststructuralist theory and practice.

In part, my choice of texts has been informed by the fact that, in addition to offering a spectrum of variables such as gender, class, politics, and social era, gossip is central to their workings and effects: in each case, it is the primary means by which protagonists engage with the world, create themselves as ethical subjects, or subvert dominant discourses which threaten to silence them. Although only *The Handmaid's Tale,* of all these novels, is usually considered "postmodern," both *Fifth Business* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* are profoundly enmeshed in poststructuralist concerns about indeterminacy, the historical variability of "truth," and the questioning of stable, Cartesian models of subjectivity. They thus provide crucial sites for the mutual investigation of gossip theory and poststructuralism. Moreover, out of the juxtaposition of these texts, a narrative emerges which begins to relate a genealogy of gossip whose history I have briefly outlined above. From Munro to Davies to Atwood, gossip unfolds as a movement from stereotypes of female gossiping, to sociological/psychological justifications of scandal, and finally to feminist deconstructions of the politics of gossip. In each text, a different emphasis on positions or relationships within the gossip triangle (consisting of gossiper, gossip recipient, and gossipee) means that the primary tension between functional and moral approaches to gossip is played out in different, and illuminating, ways.

In chapter 1, I examine Munro's depiction of gossip in *Who Do You Think You Are?* in terms of Michel Foucault's theories of power/knowledge and self-constitution. The relationship between authority, power, and ethical self-determination in his texts furnishes a way of reading traditional "moral" models of gossip, but also suggests ways in which gossip allows individuals to appropriate the structure of such institutional practices in order to construct themselves as superior subjects. Although Flo's gossip with Rose is at once valued for sustaining the women's relationship as well as for shattering the pretensions of Hanratty's townfolk, the stories all return to the idea that malicious gossip, by transforming

life into story, ultimately serves the immediate needs of the gossiper. Gossip about others is thus used as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement, usually at the expense of gossip's unfortunate objects whose scandalous activities fall outside the realm of normalcy and acceptability. A stereotype of the old crone in Munro's text links women to scandal-mongering, thus reactivating objections that gossip is an anti-social activity. Flo and Rose's disregard for the objects of their gossip finally raises ethical questions about the price of self-constitution through gossip for the gossiper herself, culminating in Rose's humanist rejection of gossip and her embrace of an ethic of silence. Munro's text thus opens a dialogue between moral and functionalist approaches to gossip which ultimately privileges the former. In other ways, as well, Rose's refusal to gossip suggests the limitations of Foucauldian theory which does not seriously entertain the possibility of refusing power, but emphasizes instead its continuous exercise in differing guises and transformations.

In chapter 2, I examine Dunstan Ramsay's attempts in *Fifth Business* to turn gossip into a transcendental art, which allows the gossiper to control public perceptions of his own image from beyond the grave. In many ways, Davies's novel holds a mirror up to *Who?* and reverses the direction of the gossip's education. Whereas Rose moved from gossip to silence, Ramsay seems to pass from silence into chatter. Here, functionalist and "moral" discourses of gossip co-exist within a "schizophrenic" subject who claims to keep secrets, all the while proving to be a malicious gossip of exceptional proportions. Ramsay's privileged use of gossip thus seems to exemplify the "vindication" of gossip by the social sciences which focuses on the functional value of gossip for the gossiper. My discussion of Ramsay's techniques of self-constitution in this chapter are informed by, even as they problematize, Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of the negative logic of abjection in subject formation. By examining ways in which the gossiper employs a discourse both with abjecting functions and which is itself abject, I see the gossiper as a border-crosser--a profoundly disturbing figure within culture and society in contrast to the affirming and

often unproblematic role afforded him by the social sciences.

Although the narrators of *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Fifth Business* arrive at seemingly opposed conclusions about the ethics of gossiping, Rose's rejection and Ramsay's justification of idle talk both ultimately address questions of authority and the role of gossip at the level of personal identity. In chapter 3, I show how such private concerns are expanded and politicized in an explicitly feminist formulation of gossip in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* which emphasizes the subversive power of gossip when it is put in the service of an underground resistance. Through an analysis of the limitations of social-science theories of gossip when they are applied to women's talk, I argue that feminist explanations of gossiping dramatically reject the stereotype of the Crone articulated in Munro's novel. For the Handmaids, oppressed by totalitarian gender politics, gossip provides a means of solidarity, of expression, and of resistance through the use of parody and transgression for political ends. Mikhail Bahktin's theory of dialogism, as well as his account of the carnivalesque, thus prove to be valuable models for examining the politics of gossip. Conversely, the reproduction of oppressive discourse in Atwood's satire on academics at the end of the novel suggests the dangers posed by institutionalized practices of gossiping to the absent authors of social and political texts. Such gossip is illuminated by Roland Barthes's account of the death of the author in poststructuralist thought, and also by Jacques Derrida's notion of iterability and by the consequences of his critique of logocentrism for the political subject.

In addition to providing a suggestive narrative culminating in a political theory of gossip, these three texts are linked generically by a common autobiographical impulse. Rose, Ramsay, and Offred all relate their life stories as performances of gossip and scandal. The ways in which the Self is constituted through gossip about the Other is thus a significant thread running through and connecting all of gossip's various manifestations in these pages. In contrast to classical models of autobiography which presupposed a self-present, universal, and imperializing subject, could the mutual constitution of Self and Other in

gossip not provide a crucial context in which to re-examine both the politics and the poetics of autobiographical self-constitution?

Chapter One

The Gossip's Apprentice:

Scandalous Self-Constructions in *Who Do You Think You Are?*

> Gossip is charming. History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.
>
> Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*

Most of Alice Munro's critics would agree with W.R. Martin's general thesis that *Who Do You Think You Are?* is a *Bildungsroman* that traces the development of its heroine, Rose, from an "early immature self" through her growth into "a whole mature person" (123, 119). Munro's narrative documentation of Rose's life from childhood and adolescence in rural Ontario of the 1930s and 40s under the tyrannical eye of her stepmother Flo, to college, marriage, motherhood, divorce, and beyond, certainly bears all the scars and triumphs typical of the novel of education. Moreover, if the work's title insistently poses the question of identity, the text seems, in turn, to provide a response. The conviction that, by the end of the novel, Rose "now knows who she is" (Martin 122) is reinforced by the strategic repetition of "Who Do You Think You Are?" as the title of the final story in the book--a positioning that promises conclusive answers and advances a teleological vision of identity.

More subtly, some of Munro's critics have noticed a pre-occupation with story-telling that limns the more general story of Rose's education even as it destabilizes essentialist versions of identity by pointing to various constructions of the self. Rose's youth in Hanratty is heavily saturated with Flo's stories of small town life and even with her own stories about school hijinks which anticipate the stories she tells as an adult, when, "offering various scandals and bits of squalor from her childhood" to those "people who wished they had been born poor, and hadn't been," "she would queen it over them" (*Who*

24) . As David Williams remarks, "[t]he reader who has failed to see story-telling itself as the subject of the novel has, like Rose, evidently 'been paying attention to the wrong things'" (*Confessional* 206). Or, to put it another way, the pervasiveness of story-telling in a novel of education suggests that, for Rose, the story of identity is the story of fiction-making. Viewing Munro's novel as a "metafiction" and its heroine as a "highly self-conscious parodist" (204), Williams discerns a self-justifying narrative strategy at work that is both a "defence against self-knowledge" (206) and a "means of self-invention" (211). Rose's identity is thus linked to a particular way of speaking that might be characterized as parody or "a habit of mockery intended to displace reality," that "gives her power--makes her 'queen'--over those who submit to more polite ways of seeing" (Williams 203). Finally, however, through the intercession of a "reformed parodist," Rose learns "how to give up parody" (Williams 205) to "finally become the story-teller who, looking back on all her previous tellings, acknowledges the truth of her own duplicity, the self-concealment of her parodic doublings" (218).

The style of story-telling that Rose inherits from Flo, however, seems to constitute a discourse that is at once more mundane and more deceptive than what Williams calls "parody." In particular, it seems significant that Rose's "chronicles" are originally presented within the context of her step-mother's gossip about small-town scandals. Flo's cutting imitations of "Mrs. Lawyer Davies, Mrs. Anglican Rector Henely-Smith, and Mrs. Horse-Doctor McKay," do indeed have a parodic effect: "Monsters, she made them seem; of foolishness, and showiness, and self-approbation" (10-11). And yet the many discursive performances in *Who?* are hardly exhausted by tricks of mimicry. The lengthy story Flo tells about Becky Tyde, "the butcher's prisoner, the cripple's daughter, the white streak at the window: mute, beaten, impregnated" (8), occupies a significantly different register:

> The story being that the father beat them, had beaten all his children and beaten his wife as well, beat Becky more now because of her deformity, which some people believed he had caused (they did not understand about polio). The stories

> persisted and got added to. The reason that Becky was kept out of sight was now supposed to be her pregnancy, and the father of the child was supposed to be her own father. Then people said it had been born and disposed of.
>
> "What?"
>
> "Disposed of," Flo said. "They used to say go and get your lambchops at Tyde's, get them nice and tender! It was all lies in all probability," she said regretfully. (7)

In this case, Flo's story seems to have less to do with "introduc[ing] the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 55), than it does with the titillation and self-aggrandizement that are the province of malicious gossip. As Patricia Meyer Spacks defines it, such gossip typically "plays with reputations, circulating truths and half-truths and falsehoods about the activities, sometimes the motives and feelings, of others. Often it serves serious (possibly unconscious) purposes for the gossipers, whose manipulation of reputation can...generate an immediately satisfying sense of power, although the talkers acknowledge no such intent" (4). The transgression of social taboos which animates Flo's narrative; the suppositional language in which it is conveyed; the conspiratorial assurances that "everyone knew" (6); the fluid nature of the stories that "persisted and got added to"; the delicious sense of impropriety in repeating information that makes its telling all the more irresistible--such characteristics confirm Rose's view of her stepmother as "capricious, injust and *gossipy*" (88; my emphasis).

Later, when we find that "Flo and Rose had switched roles. Now Rose was the one bringing stories home, Flo was the one who knew the names of the characters and was waiting to hear" (41), the discursive register in which "stories" are told has not changed. Thus, "the sort of story Rose brought home" (42) about Muriel Mason's elusive Kotex and Ruby Carruthers' sexual misadventures precisely mirrors "the sort of story Flo told Rose" (43). The "story-telling" that seems so important to Rose's self-invention is therefore not strictly reducible to "parody" since Rose's stories, as much as Flo's, participate in the more general discourse of gossip. If Williams is at least partly right when he says that Rose "acquired from Flo...the art of parody" (207) as an instrument of self-construction, she

comes by this art as the gossip's apprentice. *Who?* would then be less of a *Bildungsroman* --or even a *Künstlerroman,* as Williams would have it--than what we might call a *Klatchmaulroman*: a novel of the education of the gossip.

Peter Bergmann's analysis of gossip as "discreet indiscretion" suggests that such an education would be conducted as a tug-of-war between contradictory values since gossip is a profoundly duplicitous discourse. In the first place, the gossip's education includes an initiation into a practice of gossiping that is performed unconsciously, "without having 'to call it by its proper name'"; it constitutes what Schütz and Luckmann have termed "habitual knowledge" (qtd. in Bergmann 20-21). Gossip's disrepute as a morally unsavory practice, however, means that learning to gossip is not only a matter of "knowing how," as Gilbert Ryle says, but further, "knowing that" (qtd. in Bergmann 21). The moral interdictions against gossiping which arise in biblical declamations, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conduct books, and contemporary treatises on moral philosophy constitute a pervasive body of norms attempting to control and even to contravene "backbiting," "slander," and "idle talk," that the gossiper cannot fail to acknowledge. "Knowing that," in this case, means recognizing gossip as a discursive object. Bergmann's cautionary assertion that "gossip's significance has not begun to be clarified," thus rests on "the discrepancy that exists between talking about gossip and its practice--the discrepancy between the collective public denunciation and the collective private practicing of gossip" (Bergmann 21). To gossip or not to gossip: that, Bergmann suggests, is the question.

As I will argue, Rose's "education" is conducted as a tensed movement between these two possibilities. A shifting awareness of gossip's significance in *Who?* provides the central means by which Rose learns to constitute herself, in the terms of Michel Foucault, as an "ethical subject." Initially, Rose approaches gossip as a discursive practice that allows her to construct herself as a "chronicler" with imaginative power over other people based on a set of "nonegalitarian and mobile relations" (Foucault, *History* 94) which are inherent in gossip's very structure. Through this exercise, I argue, Rose constitutes herself

as a privileged "moral" subject in relation to the objects of her discourse regardless of whether or not they violate a system of norms governing social behaviour. Over the course of the novel, however, Rose becomes increasingly uncomfortable with this particular form of self-constitution as she discovers that her power depends on a structure which is itself reversible and, as such, can be turned against its user. By the end of the novel, Rose has radically revised her view of her own freedom as a gossip, finding her power not in its use but in its renunciation. This growing discomfort with gossip as a practice and the consequent privileging of censorious discourses make *Who?* a valuable text for interrogating the traditional view that gossip is simply an idle or malicious activity. Moreover, the silent, but always "understood" adjunct to this traditional view, the nearly exclusive association of gossip with women, is also an important feature of Munro's text. Thus, through an analysis of the ways in which Flo and then Rose employ gossip as a technology for self-constitution, I hope to recontextualize a stereotype of the crone which links women to scandalmongering within a Foucauldian problematic of discourse and its relation to identity in "the techniques of the self" (Foucault, *Uses* 11).

When they acknowledge it at all, critics tend to underestimate the importance of gossip in Munro's text. The strategies of the few critics who *do* address the presence of gossip in *Who?* furnish suggestive reasons for what amounts to a critical embargo on idle talk. Most telling, perhaps, is the fact that despite being treated by very different kinds of critics from either side of the postmodern divide, gossip is always met with the same strategies of suppression and displacement. A formalist critic like W.R. Martin, for example, discerns gossip as a feature of Munro's text only to neutralize its discursive singularity with a normalizing gesture that translates its significance into a communal version of literary "art." Congratulating Munro on her rustic realism, Martin notes that, "in telling her tale, Flo speaks 'for everyone,' and she gives us an example of story-telling as a popular art" that is, reassuringly, "not necessarily inferior to sophisticated modern 'art' stories" since it "may express moral or poetic truth" (105). Martin's aestheticizing of gossip thus emphasizes the

"artistic" aspects of such story-telling in order to assure us that "the simplifications, exaggerations, sensationalism and melodrama that come to colour thrice-told tales" (105) are performed in accordance with the proper modernist criteria of mastering content through form: Flo "copes with brutality and horror by converting them into legend" (104).

More recently, Ajay Heble performs a similar redemption of gossip in *Who?*, although the terms of normalization have changed. Noting "the recurrence of suppositional phrases" and "a repeated interest in what is supposed to be the case" in Flo's discourse, Heble recognizes "that her tales evolve out of a local commuity of gossip" (102). If he is concerned to show that "Flo's stories are about the transforming, myth-making powers of memory," however, Heble does not do so in order to reconcile Flo's discourse with modernism as Martin does. On the contrary, he associates gossip with "the nether voice [which] is usually a subversive voice of uncertainty or instability, a voice that structurally and thematically threatens to distance us from the reality of what is being represented" (Heble 101). In other words, gossip, "an oral tradition...of a telling and retelling of narratives" (Heble 105), comes to mimic the disruptive logic of the trace in its endless reinscription of *différance*. It is thus enlisted and excused as a trope of postmodern indeterminacy. In the course of such substitutions, however, the polyvalence of gossip's actual functioning is lost, or at least obscured. Like two amiable neighbours gossiping over the fence about someone of whom they are both fond, Martin and Heble apologize for Munro's depiction of scandal by maintaining that it isn't really gossip at all, but a metaphor for fiction--be it modernist or postmodernist.

The defensiveness of such critical gestures suggests that traditional "moral" declamations of idle talk play an important role in the reception of Munro's dramatization of gossip. Considering the historical legacy of the assault on frivolous conversation, its continued influence is hardly surprising. Initially, biblical injunctions like Paul's singled out the discourse of those who would not acknowledge the authority of God, condemning it as blasphemy and discrediting its speakers as backbiters, whisperers, and scandalmongers

(Rom. 1:29-31). Later, medieval moralists added their voices to Paul's, "link[ing] detraction with three of the seven deadly sins" and even suggesting that "in its perversion of the uniquely human capacity of speech, that gift which links man by analogy to the Articulator of the original creative Word, it symbolizes man's tragically fallen nature" (Spacks 28). These prohibitions were not simply texts which amounted to "a politics of abstract language games," as Paul A. Bové's definition of "discourse" suggests, but "are linked to social institutions which 'have power' in the very ordinary sense we mean when we use that phrase: such institutions can control bodies and actions" (57). Nicholas Emler's history of gossip's public reputation, for instance, observes that "From the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, it was the practice not merely to disapprove of gossip but to mete out more or less painful punishment to the offenders":

> At the milder end of the spectrum was public shaming, which might take the form of forcing the offender to wear a scold's bridle. Ducking stools and stocks were also used to chastise gossips. The city of Dundee contains among other instruments of medieval torture in its municipal museum some examples of the "branks," a kind of iron mask with a spike or pointed wheel that projected into the mouth. The wearers were invariably women. The intention, both symbolically and physically, was to stop their tongues. (119)

In other ways, as well, Emler detects a link between the discourses on gossip and the burning of witches in Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Noting the "strong association between witchcraft accusations and accusations of gossiping" in preliterate societies, Emler suggests that, "[q]uite plausibly, they were in effect burned for gossiping" (119).

The materiality of such discourses was not necessarily dissolved, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when conduct manuals transformed the focus of idle talk "from sin to solecism" (Spacks 28) by emphasizing its social undesirability with respect to rules of etiquette and the management of one's own reputation. For such social discourses of gossip were complemented by the legal definition of gossip as slander, "a false malicious statement concerning a person made by word of mouth" that "imputes to the plaintiff the commission of a crime for which corporal punishment may be inflicted, or the having of

some contagious disorder which may exclude him from society, or has reference to his trade, office, or profession, or is calculated to injure him therein" (Byrne 824). In the nineteenth century, such protection from scandal was extended to women in the Slander of Women Act (1891) which made it illegal to "impute...unchastity or adultery to any plaintiff being a woman or girl" (Byrne 824).

Twentieth-century philosophy has assimilated such prejudices by giving new breadth to old condemnations. In Martin Heidegger's account of experience in *Being and Time*, the significance of gossip shifts beyond either sin or solecism to constitute a major epistemological problem. Contrasting it with "dialog," Heidegger denounces "idle talk" on the grounds that

> ...what is said-in-the-talk gets understood; but what the talk is about is understood only approximately and superficially. We have *the same thing* in view, because it is *the same* averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said...And because the discoursing has lost its primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such a relationship, it does not communicate in such a way as to let the entity be appropriated in a primordial manner, but communicates rather by following the route of *gossiping* and *passing the word along*. What is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider and wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so. Idle talk is constituted by just such gossiping and passing the word along--a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness...
>
> The groundlessness of idle talk is no obstacle to its becoming public; instead it encourages this. Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own...Idle talk...releases one from the task of genuinely understanding. (212-13)

Gossip or "idle talk," in other words, is an inauthentic form of discourse, conducted in bad faith because it is not "concerned," but is groundless, idle, or malicious, making genuine understanding that much more difficult.

But what, we might ask, is the significance of these historically variable definitions that constitute gossip as a shifting discursive object? In many ways, the historical inconsistencies in the discourses on gossip are only superficial. Despite their various transformations and discontinuities, a common thread runs through all of these objections. Regardless of whether gossip is condemned on religious, social, juridical, or

epistemological grounds, the discourses on gossip have always been concerned with validating certain ways of speaking while excluding others. The moral attack on gossip *as* a discourse is thus founded upon a discourse *on* gossip that separates "false" forms of talking from "authentic" ones.

For Foucault, such divisions are evidence that "speech is no mere verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination... it is the very object of man's conflicts": "[i]n appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with desire and power" ("Discourse" 216). The process of normalization which divides statements and speakers into categories of true and false, legitimate and illegitimate, as Foucault maintains, is the general function of discourse within society:

> I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.
>
> In a society such as our own, we know the rules of *exclusion.* The most obvious and familiar of these concerns what is *prohibited.* We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything. ("Discourse" 216).

When Foucault speaks of "a profound logophobia" which infects our society, it is hardly surprising that his account of "a sort of dumb fear...of this mass of spoken things, of everything that could be violent, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it, *of the incessant disorderly buzzing of discourse*" ("Discourse" 229; my emphasis), is marked by the language of gossip.

Although he never actually names it in "The Discourse on Language," gossip is the very prototype of this buzzing speech which proliferates: "What is so perilous," Foucault asks, "in the fact that people speak, and that their speech proliferates? Where is the danger in that?" ("Discourse" 216). The dangers of "free speech"--speech that is free to reproduce itself in the absence of a referent--are precisely the dangers of allowing anyone to say anything without respect for truth or person or position or institution. Society has thus developed three principles of exclusion to limit speech: 1) authority, or "the privileged or

exclusive right to speak of a particular subject" (216); 2) rationality, or "the opposition between reason and folly" (216-17); 3) and "the will to truth" (219), or "the opposition between true and false as a system of exclusion" (217).

Yet each of those systems of exclusion which are set up to check the endless proliferation of discourse is finally indistinguishable from that power which infuses it, since it is no longer a matter of "treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 49). "Gossip," as an object, does not pre-exist its detailed articulation in books on theology and etiquette. This is not to say that knowledge (or "true" discourse) is simply constituted by power. Foucault rejects the simplistic theorem that might makes right. Instead, he sees the two terms as mutually constituting and thus links them together in an unbreakable couplet, power/knowledge: "There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Foucault, *Power* 93). In their several attempts to police the borders of the acceptable, religious, social, and philosophical discourses have thus produced the truth about gossip, and with a vengeance. From this perspective, the moral attack on gossip is coeval with social institutions which legislate normality; gossip is pushed outside the bounds of normality by being banished from the realm of the authentic, the meaningful, the true.

Adapting Foucault's analysis of discourse as a synonym for domination allows us to see that the practice of gossip operates in much the same way. The interplay of power and knowledge animating the prohibitive discourses on gossip also illuminates the structure of the practice they purport to "describe." Such interplay suggests that the discourses on gossip and the practice of gossip are in fact mirror images; that at every level of its functioning gossip is constituted in the play of power and knowledge. Even though it is

excluded as a "false" discourse--part of the quotidian buzz of unofficial information--gossip replicates both the structure and the effects of "true" discourses by providing its own versions of the "procedures" governing discursive practices, objects, and strategies. At the base of this analogy is Foucault's explanation of power as a kind of non-transferrable force that is never possessed by a single person as a potential; rather, it is constantly exercised within a set of hierarchical relations, constituted by systems of knowledge that pre-exist the insertion of any individual agent.

If power is immanent in structural relations as Foucault insists, then Bergmann's definition of gossip exemplifies Foucauldian theory since Bergmann himself is intensely interested in describing "the specific *relational structure* of gossip": "whether news about another person is news about his private affairs (and thereby could be the content of a gossip-conversation) depends not only on the content of this news but equally on *the relational configuration of those who disseminate it, perceive it, and are affected by it"* (48-49; my emphasis). For the speaker in this relational configuration--which consists of the subject, the producer, and the recipient of gossip--"the gossip triad" (Bergmann 45) cannot fail to produce the effects of power. As Heidegger says, "what is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and *takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so*" (my emphasis). Gossip, in other words, produces its own authority; it subverts the first rule of exclusion by giving the producer of gossip "the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject" (Foucault, "Discourse" 216).

Obviously, however, an "authentic" discourse like medicine must be supported by an entire institutional framework and grounded even more insidiously in "the will to truth," whereas gossip derives its provisional authority solely from a unique structural feature: "the *absence* of the subject of gossip" (Bergmann 49). The generation of "true" statements in gossip is thus enabled by the discursive situation in which "the primary relationship-of-Being toward the entity talked about is lost" (Heidegger 212). Like the moral discourses that secure their own privilege through the separation of gossip from authentic speech,

gossip in turn secures the privileged position of its practitioner through the exclusion of its subject.

For the gossiper, the feeling of power this absence enables can be an important means of self-construction since the content of malicious gossip makes the gossiper the arbiter of social norms; in structural terms, the gossiper is identified with the power of social institutions. As for the subject, however, the helplessness which follows from these stories only serves to heighten the certainty that gossip, like the discourses of truth, "systematically forms the objects of which it speaks"; in structural terms, the subject of gossip no longer has the power of social opinion on "her" side, no longer even has the power of self-definition. As for the recipient of gossip who appears not to "mind her own business," a closer analysis suggests that the listener knows her own business very well; in structural terms, the listener who delights in the "folly" of others confirms "her" own reason and normality.

Alice Munro's depiction of gossip in *Who?* is illuminated by a Foucauldian model for self-construction, since Munro revisits an old stereotype of the *crone* as gossip for which categories of gender are as important to the division of discourse as binaries like true/false, acceptable/unacceptable, rational/irrational. Portraying Flo as the wicked stepmother, the spinner of "old wives tales," Munro relies on "the universally widespread opinion that *gossip* is *typically a female form of communication*" (Bergmann 59). As Bergmann argues, this association of women with scandalmongering is so powerful that gossip constitutes a "category-bound activity" (60). In terms of Foucault's model, the categorization of gossip as a female activity is always already an act of exclusion: women are denied the authority to speak sense or truth. For anthropologist F.G. Bailey, in his account of gendered communication patterns in the Swiss village of Valloire, this means that

> For men to sit around in public and gossip is quite acceptable since, it is generally assumed, this exchange is *bavarder*: a friendly, sociable, light-hearted, good-natured, altruistic exchange of news, information and opinion. But if women are

> seen talking together, then something quite different is happening: very likely they are indulging in *mauvaise langue*--gossip, malice, "character assassination." (Bailey 1)

Citing examples from German, French, and Spanish, Bergmann shows how this double standard is etymologically inscribed. He cites fourteen German words alone that describe gossipy women, including "Klatsche," "Klatschweib," "Klätscherin," and "Klatschtlotte" (61). More subtly, however, Bergmann theorizes another connection with "klatz," the original form of "gossip" in Middle High German; the sound of the word was an onomatopoetic interjection designating "a resounding slap" that was "the effect of something wet," while an additional sense of "klatz" signified a "wet spot" or "stain." Finally, Bergmann shows historically how "the meaning of gossip as 'prattle' or 'malicious talk' appeared for the first time in the seventeenth century and with it at the same time--the expression 'an old gossip' is authenticated for the same period--its attribution as a typically female form of expression" (62).

According to Bergmann, all of these etymological tangents converge at "*the washing place* [as] *the symbolic birth place of (female) gossip*":

> the washing place assumed special significance because while doing their wash, which contained the bodily dirt of its user, "revealing" stains and worn out places and holes, the women constantly came across traces of the private and intimate affairs of others. Washerwomen thereby structurally assumed the position of gossip producers who acquired morally contaminated information about the private affairs of others or at least could figure it out from traces (visible evidence). If the resounding slaps of the mallets and the voices and laughter of the women could be heard in the village then in time these sounds assumed for the villagers--especially for the men--a significantly threatening character, and "gossip" thereby became accepted as the designation for the socially condemned, feared, and specifically female form of conversation about the private affairs of others. (63)

When viewed from this perspective, Flo's parodic impulse "to see people brought down to earth" that leads her to "make public what she finds in the laundry bag" (24) is emblematic of the gossip's function:

> Late at night she or Rose, or both of them, would be out at the washing machine in the woodshed. Sometimes, Rose saw, her father's underwear was stained. She would not want to look, but Flo held it up, waved it almost under Rose's nose, cried out, "Lookit that again!" and made clucking noises that were a burlesque of disapproval. (48)

If the crone who menaces the maiden in Grimms' Fairy Tales survives in Hanratty as the gossip who re-members the underbelly of local history, Flo's discourse nonetheless bears the taint of self-interest we have come to expect. In *Who?*, such a history is not a "crone-ography," in Mary Daly's sense of the term, since Flo's telling has little to do with "unmasking deceptive patriarchal history, rendering it obsolete" (Daly 16). Instead, Flo's performance tends to support the sociolect, exploiting patriarchal judgments and moral norms to her own advantage. Flo's ironizing of others is itself ironized in the novel since, in Magdalene Redekop's words, Flo is "like Isis remaking the penis of Osiris" in that she "reinstates and reaffirms the patriarchy even as she appears to challenge it" (117). As Robert Paine argues, such choric reaffirmations are the cornerstone of gossip as a technique in which "morality and self-interest are brought extremely close to each other" in a competition for "moral status" (281). Gossipers thus raise their own status, or "generate an immediately satisfying sense of power," through "appropriate interpretations" (Bergmann 147) of other people's behaviour.

Flo's ribald accounts of scandalous goings-on in Hanratty exemplify this Foucauldian version of gossip. The first story she tells, about the death of Rose's mother, suggests the importance of gossip to Flo's self-construction as a knowing subject. Initially, however, the story is presented as part of a third-person narration:

> Her mother had died. She had said to Rose's father during the afternoon, "I have a feeling that is so hard to describe. It's like a boiled egg in my chest, with the shell left on." She died before night, she had a blood clot on her lung. (1)

Only then is it attributed to Flo and located within the purview of the gossip triad: "Rose was a baby in a basket at the time, so of course could not remember any of this. She heard it from Flo, who must have heard it from her father" (1-2). While this chain of recitation recalls the Heideggerian concept of "passing the word along," the story's contents only seem to reveal the gossip's idle delight in "an aesthetic of surfaces" (Spacks 15):

> Flo's only story about her mother, the one about her death, was oddly grudging. Flo liked the details of a death: the things people said, the way they protested or tried to get out of bed or swore or laughed (some did those things), but when she

> said that Rose's mother mentioned a hard-boiled egg in her chest she made the comparison sound slightly foolish, as if her mother really was the kind of person who might think you could swallow an egg whole. (2)

By holding in abeyance its attribution of the story to Flo, the text foregrounds her subtle, self-reflexive transformation of its significance. When it is repeated this second time, Flo's interest in details, in "the things people say," seems more strategic than idle. Rose's mother may indeed have been "the kind of person" who thought you could swallow eggs whole, but Flo, as she herself implies, is a very different "kind of person." Through her implicit correction of the dead woman, Flo purports to speak the truth, authorizing her own discourse at the expense of the absent mother's. Flo's gossip consequently allows her to enlarge the limits of her own identity by constructing the structurally subordinate objects of her discourse as the Other.

Flo's account of Becky Tyde's life provides similar insights into her self-aggrandizing strategies. Swathed in the lexical indices of gossip, the Tyde-family history is a veritable catalogue of rural horrors: the tyrant butcher-father; the deformed daughter he supposedly beats ("they did not understand about polio"--Flo tells us, knowingly); rumors of an incestuous birth; the mock-trial and murder of the father that follow; the trial, sentencing, and eventual pardon of the young men involved ("A farce, said Flo"); and finally, Becky's ensuing "career of public sociability and display" (9). Despite frequent editorializing, Flo's performance seems to approach a state of rapture, as if she is transfixed by the story itself:

> Rose could be drawn back--from watching the wind shiver along the old torn awning, catching the tear--by this tone of regret, caution, in Flo's voice. Flo telling a story--and this was not the only one, or even the most lurid one, she knew--would incline her head and let her face go soft and thoughtful, tantalizing, warning.
> "I shouldn't even be telling you this stuff."
> More was to follow. (7)

The seductive quality of Flo's discursive strip-tease, however, is troubled by the ambiguous juxtaposition of the last two lines in which prohibition and exhibition go hand in hand. Similarly, the concluding narrative remarks seem calculated to distance Flo from the story she has just recounted:

> That was all. Flo put the lid down on the story as if she was sick of it. It

reflected no good on anybody.
"Imagine," Flo said. (9)

Flo's relationship to her own gossip, in other words, is curiously ambivalent. Although she seems to censor her own telling, and recoils against her story "*as if* she was sick of it," she nevertheless waits until every speculative detail has been divulged to declare her general disapproval. A critic like Helen Hoy would be inclined to see such contradictions as part of "the tumble of reason," Munro's celebration of paradox as "a thematic insistence on the doubleness of reality, the illusoriness of either the prosaic or the marvelous in isolation" (Hoy 101). At the risk of sounding prosaic, however, such "paradoxical" mixed messages do make sense within the Foucauldian context of self-legitimation through prohibition.

Flo may be right within the narrative parameters she sets when she says that the story "reflected no good on anybody," but on a dramatic level, it reflects very well on Flo herself. Or rather, the story reflects Flo to herself. By gossiping about "the shady melodramatic past," Flo allows us to answer the Foucauldian question, "Who is speaking?" (*Archaeology* 52). She is at once "the questioning subject," "the listening subject," "the seeing subject," and "the observing subject," "situated at an optimal perceptual distance whose boundaries delimit the wheat of relevant information" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 52). Occupying this dominant position, Flo distances herself from the transgressions she describes and transforms herself into the center of communal norms and moral self-righteousness. For the judgmental chronicler, the need to tell the tale is clearly as important as the need to censure it or, at least, to "be sorry for people like that" (45). The resulting ambivalence is rendered almost iconically by Flo's concluding injunction, "Imagine," which, on the one hand typifies the function of the gossip to relish contemplation of each scandal in scrupulous detail; and on the other, conveys the contempt and disbelief that accompany the moral exasperation of a superior subject.

Despite the productive power that gossip affords its user in the creation of a persona, it would be a mistake to reify the crone as a powerful, even invulnerable figure. Flo's identity is always menaced by a counter-force that threatens to subvert her careful self-

construction. As Foucault reminds us, "[p]ower's condition of possibility" is relational, and therefore "must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but *the latter are always local and unstable*" (*History* 93; my emphasis). Because gossip's power depends largely on the absence of its object, anyone can occupy any position within the gossip triad at any given moment. The gossiper always risks becoming the gossipee. The instability of this situation has a profound impact on the gossiper who would construct herself by telling stories about other people, since the implicit story of the self imbedded in criticism of others must compete with a potential body of other stories about the gossiper that stretches beyond the horizon of authorial control. Consequently, the gossip is a contradictory figure, typified by an alternation of effervescence and paranoia. The cost of self-aggrandizement manifests itself in a stricter policing of private behaviours to ensure that one's reputation is beyond reproach, or at least beyond the public gaze.

For Flo, this contradictory position is manifested in an obsession with privacy and a constant fear of being overheard. Her admonition to Rose, for example, "You mind your own business" (1), rehearses the attitude that informs Flo's own frantic self-protection prior to Rose's "royal beating":

> "Well we don't need the public in on this, that's for sure," Flo says, and she goes to lock the door of the store, putting in the store window the sign that says "Back Soon," a sign Rose had made for her with a great deal of fancy curving and shading of letters in black and red crayon. When she comes back she shuts the door to the store, then the door to the stairs, then the door to the woodshed. (15)

Considering that she has just gossiped about another royal beating--"they began to beat him and kept beating him until he fell. They yelled at him, *Butcher's meat!* and continued beating him while his nightgown and the snow he was lying in turned red" (8)--Flo's attempts to "shut-up" the beating she precipitates seem especially hypocritical. Nevertheless, as the beating nears a climax, Flo's anxiety intensifies: "She [Rose] has

given up on words but is letting out a noise, the sort of noise that makes Flo cry, *Oh, what if people can hear?*" (17). Such hypocrisy tends to refute the sociological cliché, first devised by E.A. Ross, that gossip functions as a social control for gossipers themselves since, the theory goes, the fear of being gossiped about pre-emptively ensures conformative behaviour (see Bergmann 144). Instead, Flo's antics emphasize the superficiality of an identity forged in the heat of gossip, exposing it as the mere veneer of respectability. Because, in practice, gossip is a social activity, any identity it helps to construct must be a social identity.

Still more problematic is the fact that the gossiper who constructs a moral identity based on other people's breach of norms and prohibitions exploits a system of binaries that paradoxically undercuts her own transgressive speaking. Gossip, as we know, is a practice fraught with prohibitions. The gossiper is therefore caught in the awkward position of using a contradictory discourse that makes her both an out-law and an in-law who trangresses simply by conveying the transgressions of others. As Flo demonstrates, however, the prerogative of the gossip to authorize her own discourse by excluding other perspectives means that the recognition of this contradiction can at least be temporarily deferred. In fact, Flo enlists the discourses on gossip themselves to perform a trick with familiar results. Commenting on a story Flo tells about an encounter with a flasher on a bridge in which she mistakes his member for a "baloney sausage," the narrator notes the special privilege she grants to her own discourse:

> She could say that. It was offered as truth; no joke. She maintained that she despised dirty talk. She would go out and yell at the old men sitting in front of her store.
>
> "If you want to stay where you are you better clean your mouths out!" (11)

These are the same "old men from the neighborhood [who] sat *gossiping*, drowsing, in the warm weather" (3; my emphasis) on the bench outside Flo's store. Flo's censorship of their "dirty talk" therefore amounts to a condemnation of gossip which gives her own discourse the air of "truth"--even though Flo's discursive "baloney" is as phony as that of

the old gossips who sit "chuckling, drifting into aimless obscenity on the subject of women walking by, or any young girl on a bicycle" (3).

In other ways, however, the link between gossip and dirty talk recalls the scatological vocation of the washerwoman who is also the *Klatchbase*, the tattletale. Even if Flo ignores the contradictions inherent in her own discourse, the novel's tendency to associate gossip with bodily waste undermines her self-justifications and ironizes her self-importance by implicitly reinscribing moral rejections of idle talk. The filth and impropriety that Flo attributes to others in order to create her own respectability reassert themselves as metaphors for her own discourse. This link between gossip and Rose's own favorite "toilet locale" (24) is established very early on in the text, when we are told that Flo had an indoor bathroom put into the kitchen:

> They were all familiar with each other's nether voices, not only in their most explosive moments but in their intimate sighs and growls and pleas and statements. And they were all most prudish people. So no one ever seemed to hear, or be listening, and no reference was made. The person creating the noises in the bathroom was not connected to the person who walked out. (4)

In the first place, the location of the toilet is significant since the kitchen, like the washingplace, constitutes a symbolic female space that is frequently seen as a locus for gossip (see Jones). Likewise, the metaphoric loquaciousness of these "nether voices" which produce "pleas" and "statements" involves a type of "body language" which has to be jettisoned from more acceptable ways of speaking. Moreover, the refusal to acknowledge the abject which asserts itself so violently in their midst relates to gossip insofar as "*the central theme of gossip lies precisely in* [a] *tense relationship between a revealed 'first' and a concealed 'second' world*" (Bergmann 53).

In fact, this irreconcilable tension between "the person creating the noises in the bathroom" and "the person who walked out" perfectly describes the dynamic of Flo's scandalmongering:

> Present time and past, the shady melodramatic past of Flo's stories, were quite separate, at least for Rose. Present people could not be fitted into the past. Becky herself, town oddity and public pet, harmless and malicious, could never match the

> butcher's prisoner, the cripple daughter, a white streak at the window: mute, beaten, impregnated. As with the house, only a formal connection could be made. (8)

Like the "bathroom noises," Flo's gossip depends on a rupture between past and present, public and private. Consequently, her histories resemble what Rose finds "in the heaped snow under a glaze of ice, where the snow had melted and frozen again": "turds copious and lonesome, preserved as if under glass, bright and mustard or grimy as charcoal, with every shading in between" (24). Flo, whom Rose fears "would show up at the school with a pail and shovel" to clean out the filthy outhouses, "lambasting everbody in the bargain" (24-25), is finally not so different from the "honey-dumper" whose job she nearly usurps. Her symbolic embodiment of his function offers an important critique of the bullshit artist, even as the honey-dumper's permanent retirement, when "the School Board saw fit to put flush toilets in the cleaned-up basement" (38), anticipates the novel's final judgment on her "dirty talk."

Although, on a dramatic level, Flo's own story has barely begun to be told, a narrative verdict on her gossipy behaviour is rendered as early as the end of the first story. The flash-forward to Flo's incarceration in a seniors' home that concludes "Royal Beatings" implies the reversal of Flo and Rose's positions as gossips which is not made explicit until Rose is in high school. Only this latter emphasis in "Half A Grapefruit" falls on the significance of such a reversal for the gossip in training. But when an older Rose at the end of "Royal Beatings" hears the one-hundred-year-old Hat Nettleton give a radio interview, she finds herself "longing to tell somebody" (22) about this man who had once been among the "[t]hree useless young men ...who got together...to give old man Tyde a horsewhipping, in the interests of public morality" (7): "It was Flo who would enjoy hearing. She thought of her saying *Imagine!* in a way that meant she was having her worst suspicions gorgeously confirmed" (22-23). Until now, the gossip about Hat Nettleton and his cronies had been Flo's gossip with Rose as its mere recipient. Even Hat's obscene reminiscence about horses who "wouldn't pull your cock out of a pail of lard" (22) recalls

Flo's earlier story about baloney sausage. Not surprisingly, then, Rose's repetition of "Imagine!"--the gossip's linguistic signature --is meant to equate Hat's transformation from "Horsewhipper into centenarian" (22) with the crone's idle talk. Like a prosecutor's closing arguments, Rose's summary of events recalls much of Flo's gossipy discourse from earlier in the story.

Even though she has replaced her step-mother in the structure of the gossip triad, Rose still finds her intense desire to gossip frustrated by Flo's new circumstances:

> After Rose had put her in the Home, a couple of years earlier, she had stopped talking. She had removed herself, and spent most of her time in a corner of her crib, looking crafty and disagreeable, not answering anybody, though she occasionally showed her feelings by biting a nurse. (23)

Rose can only resort to third-person narration to gossip about Flo herself, concealing her own tacit act of rebellion in her reduction of the crone who once revelled in Hanratty gossip to the trope of the child who bites her nurse. Ironically, in the words with which she condemned Ruby Carruthers in the heat of gossip, Flo seems at last to "get what she deserves" (43); having "stopped talking," the crone loses the power of self-transfiguration and is left as helpless before Rose as the victims of her own idle talk. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of an adult Rose's nostalgia for gossip with her incipient role as a receiver of gossip in the early stories indicates the direction of Rose's education as a gossip even as the narrative structure of "Royal Beatings" suggests a sequence of experience that leads the gossiper to a kind of verbal asceticism. For Flo's silence unwittingly anticipates Rose's own renunciation of gossip at the end of the novel.

Although it may seem abrupt, Flo's transformation from crone to infant is in fact carefully mediated by another, less dramatic flash-forward to an incident that almost coincides with the aftermath of Rose's royal beating. "One night after a scene *like* this" (20; my emphasis), the narrator recalls Rose's father gossiping about the old men who sit, themselves gossiping, outside of the family's store:

> Rose's father told them that the old men had picked up the idea somewhere that what looked like a star in the western sky, the first star that came out after sunset,

> the evening star, was in reality an airship hovering over Bay City, Michigan, on the other side of Lake Huron. An American invention, sent up to rival the heavenly bodies. They were all in agreement about this, the idea was congenial to them. They believed it to be lit up by ten thousand electric light bulbs. Her father had ruthlessly disagreed with them, pointing out that it was the planet Venus they saw, which had appeared in the sky long before the invention of an electric light bulb. They had never heard of the planet Venus.
>
> "Ignoramuses," said Flo. At which Rose knew, and knew her father knew, that Flo had never heard of the planet Venus either. (20)

Until now, Flo had rigorously maintained her difference from the "old coots" whose dirty talk threatened to expose the contradictions of her own speech; now, Rose's father confirms her identification with them, expelling Flo from the haven of true discourse.

Presented with a situation in which she can be neither the producer, nor even the recipient of gossip, Flo adapts her method of self-construction accordingly:

> To distract them from this, or even to apologize for it, Flo put down her teacup, stretched out with her head on the chair she had been sitting on and her feet on another chair (somehow she managed to tuck her dress modestly between her legs at the same time), and lay stiff as a board, so that Brian cried out in delight, "Do that! Do that!"
>
> Flo was double-jointed and very strong. In moments of celebration or emergency she would do tricks.
>
> They were silent as she turned herself around, not using her arms at all but just her strong legs and feet. Then they all cried out in triumph, though they had seen it before. (20)

Although she is temporarily unseated and humbled by her own lack of knowledge, Flo saves face by momentarily renouncing power, turning herself into the fantastic object of gossip. While her double-jointed contortions may recall Becky Tyde's scandalous deformities, Flo's actual performance--which suggests the motion of meat roasting on a spit--also re-members old man Tyde being beaten to the cries of "*Butcher's meat!*" (8). Flo thus presides over her own "roasting" by turning gossip's mocking laughter back on herself. Furthermore, through such acts of apparent self-abnegation, Flo profoundly disrupts the structural power of gossip by presenting herself as the object of ridicule which is usually absent. For Rose and her father, who are, structurally speaking, the recipients of this performative gossip, Flo undercuts her own authority as a "gossip" producer by objectifying herself as the embodiment of the bizarre:

> Just as Flo turned herself Rose got a picture in her mind of that airship, an

> elongated transparent bubble, with its strings of diamond lights, floating in the miraculous American sky.
>
> "The planet Venus!" her father said, applauding Flo. "Ten thousand electric lights!"
>
> There was a feeling of permission, relaxation, even a current of happiness in the room. (21)

Implicitly, however, Flo has managed to transform herself into a figment of the gossips' imaginations, and so to give an aura of "truth" to their tales of an airship which she makes visible.

As we have seen, the power relations that inform gossip are founded on the difference that arises when experience is subjected to "the will to truth." Flo's transfiguration reflects both sides of the resulting difference, since she is seen to represent both the airship--the fantastic object that prefers the discourse of science fiction to scientific fact--and the planet Venus whose facticity forecloses on the fanciful speculation of old men. The happiness that infuses the room, however, is not only a function of Flo's remaking of the wicked crone as a carnivalesque Aphrodite. Applauding Flo, Rose's father collapses the distinction between the ridiculous object of gossip and the gossiper's privileged knowledge. Because her performance simultaneously invokes for him "The planet Venus!" and "Ten thousand electric lights!", Flo momentarily levels the hierarchy implicit in gossip's structure, replacing it with a "feeling of permission" that accompanies the renunciation of power. For Flo, however, such "renunciations" are problematic since they are reserved for moments of celebration (in which power is never actually threatened), or emergency (in which power is implicitly maintained through an act of diversion or transformation).

If the glaring contradictions in Flo's discourse and practice typify the self-deceptive position of the gossip, critics have been anxious to confine the significance and influence of such strategies to the early stories in the novel. Martin, we recall, leaves Rose curiously free of the charge of gossiping since his reading associates gossip exclusively with Flo. Viewing Flo as "a contrast to the sensitive, imaginative Rose" (102), he suggests that the crone's weakness for sensationalism is only a foil for the real heroine who "typically

examines and ponders events more deeply" (106). Rose might tell stories, Martin concedes, but she certainly doesn't gossip. A closer analysis of Rose's discursive practices, however, seriously questions such a conclusion. Instead, it suggests, the representation of gossip in the novel is not at all circumscribed by the crone's babble; the self-aggrandizing potential of Flo's strategic tellings is usurped by Rose the storyteller.

Prior to her initiation into the practice of gossip around Flo's kitchen table, Rose already demonstrates a precocious interest in its founding principles. Contemplating Flo's promise that she would get "one Royal Beating," Rose reveals an "ability to create imaginative worlds" (Heble 96) that is essential to a speculative practice like gossiping:

> The word Royal lolled on Flo's tongue, took on trappings. Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was stronger than the need to stay out of trouble, and instead of taking this threat to heart she pondered: how is a beating royal? (1)

At this point, however, Rose's interest in "invention and speculation" (Heble 96) remains unfocussed, as does her attraction to "dirty" language like the song she cannot resist singing to Flo: "*Two Vancouvers fried in snot! Two pickled arseholes tied in a knot!*" (12). Both "the filth" (12) that Rose delights in repeating and her imaginative capacity in this first story anticipate their later, far more sophisticated deployment as *mauvaise langue*. In addition to these examples, Flo identifies the salient features of the malicious gossip in Rose's character when she complains to her husband about her stepdaughter's "back-talk and impudence and her terrible tongue" (15). All that is missing from this description of the novice ***Klatchmaul*** is the structural relation that empowers her. As Rose's royal beating suggests, her current position, like her juvenile discourse, is subject to Flo's authority. As yet, her "terrible tongue" is untrained: Rose's "back-talk" has yet to be refined into "behind-the-back-talk."

Although her production of gossip is still forbidden, Rose's active apprenticeship is rounded out by her structural position as a gossip recipient. As Bergmann demonstrates, the gossip recipient "is by no means merely a passive participant whose presence--or more

exactly willingness to listen--is necessary for the communication but who otherwise has no special significance for the specific communicative process of gossip" (67). Describing an "equalizing effect" that binds gossips together in a relation of "co-informership," Bergmann suggests that "[t]he relation between gossip producer and gossip recipient is not least of all determined by the expectation that the gossip recipient at the moment he acquires morally contaminated information can then appear as a gossip producer himself within other contexts" (68). Producer and recipient, in other words, are structurally interchangeable in their relay of mutual identities, as much as in their relay of information. Consequently, the gossip recipient who delights in scandal is implicated in precisely the same dynamics of self-construction that characterize the tattletale. Even though Rose does not directly participate in their articulation, her assumption of the role of listener to Flo's stories about her mother's death, the Tydes, and the "uptown" ladies, confirms her own normality and superiority. About Rose's teacher, "Flo said she had probably fogged her brain with the snuff. It was like being a drug addict. Cigarettes only shot your nerves" (30). In her *ad hominem* attacks on Cora, Rose's schoolyard idol, "Flo said further that Cora had no father, you might wonder what her mother worked at, and who was her grandfather? The honey-dumper!" (37). Such stories, however, do not simply provide models which Rose later learns to emulate; she is already integrated into the gossip triad by Flo's self-justifying constructions which locate Rose within a system of exchange in which "distinctions of rank are hardly tolerated" because she "accepts a gift that [s]he as well as the giver knows is stolen" (Bergmann 68).

Rose's story about Ruby Carruthers, one of her earliest attempts at gossip, epitomizes the fluidity of the producer-recipient relationship in gossip that is a consequence of their common goal: establishing a closed circuit of self-confirming discourse. As Flo--still the more sophisticated gossip--interjects with interpretations of Rose's gossip, shaping her discourse as a moral chorus to the scandal of "a slutty sort of girl" who keeps house for a local family, she dramatizes the exchange and continual shifts that characterize the coffee

klatsch:

> One time when she was there alone three boys went over to see her. Del Fairbridge, Horse Nicholson, Runt Chesterton.
>
> *"To see what they could get," Flo put in.* She looked at the ceiling and told Rose to keep her voice down. Her father would not tolerate this sort of story.
>
> Del Fairbridge was a good-looking boy, conceited, and not very clever. He said he would go into the house and persuade Ruby with no trouble at all, and if he could get her to do it with all three of them, he would. What he did not know was that Horse Nicholson had already arranged with Ruby to meet him under the veranda.
>
> *"Spiders in there, likely," said Flo. "I guess they don't care."* (42; my emphasis)

Rose is still the apprentice telling this story, since it is clearly Flo who anticipates its real significance: "'If you ever got up to any of that with a boy it would be the end of you,' she said. 'I mean it'" (43). Flo's continuing dialogue with the story, which seemed typical of her *self*-constructions in its vigilance of the differences between herself and "them," proves not to be about her after all. Rather, it is Rose who unexpectedly receives the moral of her own story. As the distinctions between producer and recipient blur, Rose nevertheless struggles to assert the self-construction she has only implied: at Flo's reprimand, "Rose flushed with rage and said she would die first" (43). For Rose has already learned from the gossip of the senior girls who, though they delight in the folly of their classmate, say "not pityingly but impatiently": "If I was Muriel Mason I would want to kill myself...I would kill myself" (41). Evidently, Rose's hyperbolic definition of the limits of identity with the limits of being is based on a confirmation of one's own normality at another's expense that is the first lesson of the gossip's apprentice.

Even in the ambiguous play of structural relations between recipient and producer in such gossip about Ruby, Rose's relationship to her own discourse has changed dramatically since her early youth in Hanratty. Having switched places with Flo, Rose now enjoys all the privileges of the gossip:

> Every day when Rose got home she would tell Flo about what went on in school. Flo enjoyed the episode of the Kotex, would ask about fresh developments. Half-a-grapefruit she never got to hear about. Rose would not have told her anything in which she did not play a superior, an onlooker's part. Pitfalls were for others, Flo and Rose agreed. The change in Rose, once she left the scene,

> crossed the bridge, changed herself into a chronicler, was remarkable. No nerves any more. A loud skeptical voice, some hip-swinging in a red and yellow plaid skirt, more than a hint of swaggering.
>
> Flo and Rose had switched roles. Now Rose was the one bringing stories home, Flo was the one who knew the names of the characters and was waiting to hear. (41)

Whereas in Flo's discourse the identification of gossip with a self-dramatizing performance is often only implied, Rose's "chronicles" have an explicit and pronounced effect on her identity. By constructing herself as the story-teller, Rose ensures that she will always be on top and that her superior identity will remain unthreatened. Rose's tranformation into a "retrospective observer" (Williams 206) is no mere side effect of gossip, but the result of gossip's formal structure which gives the gossiper complete control over her material. Rose's omissions are therefore as revealing as her narratives since they expose the proximity of knowledge and power in the practices of the self staged as the production of truth.

The most crucial omission in Rose's story about this "slutty sort of girl" (42) is its actual conclusion which threatens to humanize Ruby and restore her lost dignity:

> Rose did not bother with the rest of the story, which was that Ruby got into a bad mood, sat on the veranda steps with the dirt from underneath all over her clothes and in her hair, refused to smoke a cigarette or share a package of cupcakes (now probably rather squashed) that Runt had swiped from the grocery store where he worked after school. They teased her to tell them what was the matter and at last she said, "I think I got a right to know who I'm doing it with." (43)

The inclusion of each new pathetic detail, from the dirt in Ruby's hair to the (probably) squashed cupcakes, increases the listener's sense of sympathy for Ruby. But when the subject is finally allowed to speak for herself, her affirmation of her human right "to know who I'm doing it with" moves the hearer from distant sympathy for Ruby to visceral empathy with her. For she has been violated by more than a callous group of boys; the gossiper has also violated her right to know what is being said about her.

Ruby's double subjugation recalls an earlier instance of schoolyard gossip when "the word went round: Shortie McGill is fucking Franny McGill" (26). Of course, Franny was already an object of gossip in Hanratty: "Franny McGill had been smashed against a wall,

by her father, drunk, when she was a baby. So Flo said. Another story had Franny falling out of a cutter, drunk, kicked by a horse. At any rate, smashed." (27). The link between the victimization Franny incurs when she is is raped by her brother in the entryway of the Boys' Toilet in front of the entire school and her objectification in the gossip's discourse is emphasized by the narrator's Cassandra-like prediction that "The use Shortie was making of her, *that others made*, would continue" (27; my emphasis). As an object of use, Franny is denied the right ever to speak for herself. Ruby's own discourse too must obviously be suppressed, lest the victim be given a chance to talk back and reclaim her human "right."

Rose's omission of another story in which she herself is ridiculed for the pretentious claim that she eats half a grapefruit for breakfast--which Flo would have thought "as bad as drinking champagne" (40)--undercuts for us, but not for Flo, the impressiveness of her new-found swagger. Rose's hypocrisy is even more glaring, however, in her account of the school girl whose missing Kotex was "smuggled somehow into the trophy case in the main hall. There it came to public notice. Folding and carrying had spoiled its fresh look, rubbed its surface, so that it was possible to imagine it had been warmed against the body. A great scandal" (41). Very much like Flo's story about Rose's mother, this incident is initially presented as part of the narration; only after it has been told is it dramatized as part of Rose's after-school gossip. The effect of this circuitous presentation is once again to foreground the differences between the event and its discursive repetition which is meagrely described: "Flo enjoyed the episode of the Kotex." For Rose's reaction could be described initially as sympathetic identification: "Rose could have been the girl who lost the Kotex. That was probably a country girl, carrying the Kotex in her pocket or in the back of her notebook, for use later in the day. Anybody who lived at a distance might have done that. Rose herself had done it" (40). In the ensuing scandal, however, "Rose was afraid that she might be the leading candidate for ownership, so was relieved when responsibility was fixed on a big sullen country girl named Muriel Mason, who wore slub rayon housedresses to school, and had B.O." (41). In light of Flo and Rose's maxim, "pitfalls

are for others," the "episode of the Kotex" that Rose actually relates must elide her identification with the victim in order to ensure her construction as a superior subject. Rose's gossip is thus fraught with the same contradictions that plague Flo's, and is ironized by the narrator who gets the last laugh.

Despite these contradictions, however, Rose learns to master the practice of gossip, extending her application of Flo's model in unexpected ways. In fact, Rose tests the limits of what constitutes "gossip" through practices that question the precise nature of the *absence* of gossip's object that "is a structural condition of the emergence of gossip" (Bergmann 49). For a gossip like Flo, who plunders a disturbing and mysterious past for her tales, a gap in space is more essential than a gap in time to her successful relation of self-aggrandizing scandal. Because Flo constructs herself at the expense of her neighbours, her gossip depends on metaphors of spatial difference between self and other, inside and outside, subject and object. Conversely, Rose adapts the structure of her discursive inheritance to a gap in time--a strategy which allows her, paradoxically, to make a younger version of herself the object of her own gossip. We have already seen Rose demonstrate her awareness of this difference in terms of Flo's gossip for which, she insists, "present people could not be fitted into the past" (8). As Rose matures, however, she finds that she herself is vulnerable to the same kind of splitting that she had once noticed in Flo's objects. Rose discovers that she cannot fit her present self into the stories of her own past: "When Rose told people these things in later years, they had considerable effect. She had to swear they were true, she was not exaggerating" (28).

As Phillipe Lejeune argues, such self-division is typical of the autobiographer for whom difference from oneself is initially a function of time: "The name is the guarantor of the unity of our multiplicity; it federates our complexity in the moment and our change in time....[And yet] any speaking subject carries within himself that double split of addresser and addressee and of enunciation and utterance...In general, these gaps, these divisions are both expressed and masked by the use of a single 'I'" (34). Lejeune's theory of a subject

who is temporally split--for whom "the first person always conceals...a secret third person" (35)--has radical consequences for the theory of gossip which, as Barthes says, "reduces the other to *he/she*...the third person pronoun is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the non-person, it absents, it annuls" (*Lover's* 185). But as soon as an autobiographer speaks of herself as an absent third-person, this pronominal shift means that the gossiper also carries within herself a younger gossipee whose absence fulfills the structural conditions of the triad.

When Rose brings her snobbish fiancé Patrick back to Hanratty to meet Flo, she has not yet managed to harness the self-aggrandizing potential inherent in her own self-division:

> What a coward he was, she thought angrily, but she knew that she herself was the coward, not knowing how to be comfortable with her own people or the kitchen or any of it. Years later she would learn how to use it, she would be able to amuse or intimidate right-thinking people at dinner parties with glimpses of her early home. At the moment she felt confusion, misery. (90)

We already have seen, however, how Rose will learn to use stories about herself and her past in a way analogous to gossip: "Rose knew a lot of people who wished they had been born poor, and hadn't been. So she would queen it over them, offering various bits of squalor from her childhood" (24). As Williams suggests, Rose's chronicle of schoolyard horrors reflects her desire for transformation (202). Rose the gossip survives her childhood humiliation at the hands of Cora, "the scornful schoolyard queen," and "recreates herself as the new queen of a 'surrealist' fiction" (Williams 202). Such a technique continues to serve her well when she is older and wishes to present credentials, as Flo once did:

> She doubted if she could tell Jocelyn about Hanratty but she began to try. She delivered Flo and the store in broad strokes. She played up the poverty. She didn't really have to. The true facts of her childhood were exotic enough to Jocelyn, and of all things, enviable.
>
> "It seems more real," Jocelyn said. "I know that's a romantic notion." (105)

Nevertheless, Rose's painful self-doubling is linked to the humiliation she feels in front of Patrick when Flo presents her credentials, gossiping about

> a man who cut his own throat, *his own throat*, from ear to ear, a man who shot

> himself the first time and didn't do enough damage, so he loaded up and fired again and managed it, another man who hanged himself using a chain, the kind of chain you hook on a tractor with, so it was a wonder his head was not torn off.
>
> *Tore off*, Flo said.
>
> She went on to a woman who, though not a suicide, had been dead in her house a week before she was found, and that was in the summer. She asked Patrick to imagine it. All this happened, said Flo, within five miles of where she herself was born. She was presenting credentials, not trying to horrify Patrick, at least not more than was acceptable, in a social way; she did not mean to disconcert him. How could he understand that? (89-90)

All of the crone's hallmarks are present in this chilling resumé, including the gossip's syntactical reflex urging her listeners to "imagine." The link between Flo's traditional gossip and Rose's incipient autobiographical gossip is ironically forged in Flo's performance in which she engages in self-construction by gossiping about self-destruction. As Lejeune's model insinuates, the gossip who would change herself into an object is always caught in precisely the same dialectic between creation and immolation because she must first make herself absent before she can "make" herself present.

Despite her skillful manipulation of her own past as gossip in her adult life, Rose still needs to learn that gossip's power cuts two ways. Rose has already expressed the inevitable fear of the gossip during her affair with Clifford when she says, "I felt everyone knew" (123). The threat of imminent reversal that is constitutive of gossip's structure, however, is not fully explored until "Simon's Luck"--the story that is, according to Martin, the "crucial link in the design of the volume: it provides the vital link between Rose's flounderings and her confident magnanimity at the end" (101). As the story begins, Rose finds herself at a party, fearing that "she might be doomed to hang out on the fringes of things, making judgments" (158). Rose quickly learns, however, that she is not the one on the fringes, nor is she the one making judgments. After she is insulted by a student she doesn't even remember,

> She noticed a group of younger members of the faculty--she would have thought them students, except for what the host had said about students not being let in--who were sitting on the counters, and standing in front of the sink. They were talking in low, serious voices. One of them looked at her. She smiled. Her smile was not returned. A couple of others looked at her, and they went on talking. She was sure they were talking about her, about what had happened in the living room. . . .

> *Fucked-up jealous establishment.*
> Rose heard that, or thought she heard it. They were giving her quick, despising looks. Or so she thought; she could not look directly at them. *Establishment.* That was Rose. Was it? Was that Rose? Was that Rose who had taken a teaching job because she wasn't getting enough acting jobs to support herself, was granted the teaching job because of her experience on stage and television, but had to accept a cut in pay because she lacked degrees? She wanted to go over there and tell them that. She wanted to state her case. (162-63)

Suddenly, Rose finds herself the object of someone else's gossip. In contrast to the emphasis on self-construction in her own discourse, the junior faculty's gossip directly threatens Rose's identity, categorically reducing her to a representative of the "Fucked-up jealous establishment." Of course, they too are engaged in an act of communal self-construction, consolidating their self-righteousness by attacking a common enemy. In the discursive practice of power, the privileged and the repressed always appear simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing.

Fighting against what she feels to be an unjust characterization of her, Rose is ironically confronted by the breach between personal experience and its verbal representation in gossip which she chose to ignore when she told the story of Muriel Mason's Kotex. In that case, Rose diguised her weakness by attacking someone else's pitfall; when the shoe is on the other foot, however, she finds herself wanting "to state her case":

> The years of work, the exhaustion, the travelling, the high school auditoriums, the nerves, the boredom, the never knowing where your next pay was coming from. She wanted to plead with them, so they would forgive her and love her *and take her on their side. It was their side she wanted to be on*, not the side of the people in the living room who had taken up her cause. (163)

By experiencing first-hand the reductive effects of gossip, Rose begins to see how quickly one can end up on the wrong side. More significantly, however, Rose identifies this reversal as endemic to the practice of gossip itself, and not simply with an error on the part of her attackers: "But that was a choice made out of fear, not on principle. She feared them. She feared their hard-hearted virtue, their cool despising faces, their secrets, their laughter, their obscenities" (163). In short, she feared their gossip--the "obscenity" with which she is so familiar. Although she has yet to make the connection between the malicious gossip she encounters at the party and her own self-serving discourse, Rose, for

the first time, begins to view gossip as an object, rather than simply taking it for granted as a practice.

Such concern about other people's gossip is compounded in Rose's subsequent relationship with Simon, the man who rescues her from a student's abuse at the party. When Rose buys groceries for their evening together, she discovers how easily her private desperation for love enters the sphere of public knowledge, even if it does not become the subject of malicious gossip *per se*:

> "You must have brought home some company," said the woman who kept the store. She spoke with no surprise or malice or censure, just a comradely sort of envy.
> "When I wasn't expecting it." Rose dumped more groceries on the counter. "What a lot of bother they are. Not to mention expense. Look at that bacon. And cream."
> "I could stand a bit of it," the woman said. (166)

Rose's transparent attempts to protect her pivacy recall her earliest fear of being gossiped about back in Hanratty when, as a teenager, she anticipates going to Toronto to "buy hair-remover to put on her arms and legs, and if possible an arrangement of inflatable cushions, supposed to reduce your hips and thighs" (59):

> She thought they probably had hair-remover in the drugstore in Hanratty, but the woman in there was a friend of Flo's and told everything. She told Flo who bought hair-dye and slimming medicine and French safes. As for the cushion business, you could send away for it but there was sure to be a comment at the Post Office, and Flo knew people there as well. (59)

As Rose discovers at the grocery store, however, gossip in the big city operates, as much as gossip in the small town, according to the logic of Bentham's Panopticon in which "visibility is a trap" (Foucault, *Discipline* 200).

For Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon was the model for a prison that "reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions--to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide--it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two" (Foucault, *Discipline* 200). Organized in annular fashion around a central tower from which the person inside can see in all directions, but remains himself invisible, the prison itself consists of backlit cells

which make the prisoner him who "is seen, but...does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, *Discipline* 200). For Foucault, Bentham's most notorious achievement was to design a structure which "induce[d] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" because, although he will never know "whether he is being looked at at any one moment...he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). Consequently, the actual exercise of power is rendered unnecessary; inmates police themselves.

Foucault insists, however, that the Panopticon is not simply a prison blue-print, but "must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men":

> the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may be detached from any specific use. (*Discipline* 205)

Gossip may constitute just such a "political technology" since, as we have seen, it too seems to be "a marvellous machine which, what ever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power" (Foucault, *Discipline* 202). Flo's contacts in the drugstore and the Post Office, or the woman who envies Rose at the grocery store, create for Rose the impression of being fully visible--always potentially an object of gossip. Like the inmate, Rose gets the unpleasant feeling that she is always being watched. Consequently, she uses Simon as a buffer to ward off memories of public weakness: "'It's good that you're here,' said Rose truthfully. 'Otherwise I'd be spending my time thinking about that boy. I'd be trying not to, but it would keep coming at me. In unprotected moments. I would have been in a state of humiliation'" (167). She avoids the prying eyes of the woman at the store: "She expected him, and she went out and bought groceries, not at the local store this time but at a supermarket several miles away. She hoped the woman in the store wouldn't see her carrying the grocery bags into the house" (168). When Simon

does not arrive, "She put out the lights because she didn't want to be caught sitting up....what could be more desperate than a woman of Rose's age sitting up all night in her dark kitchen waiting for her lover?" (170). All of these examples in which Rose attempts to avoid the panoptic stare of the public only anticipate the climax of the story when she finally decides to give up chasing after Simon out of her fear that her real foolishness will become public knowledge: "she thought of how many crazy letters she had written, how many overblown excuses she had found, having to leave a place, or being afraid to leave a place, on account of some man. Nobody knew the extent of her foolishness, friends who had known her for twenty years didn't know half of the flights she had been on, the money she had spent, and the risks she had taken" (172).

In the final moments of the chapter, Rose finally learns of Simon's death as a snippet of gossip she hears from a woman she had met at the same party at which she had met Simon: "Poor Simon. You know he died...Cancer of the pancreas...Sad. He had it for a long time" (176-77). Ironically, through this bit of idle talk, Rose is roused from the narcissistic feelings of powerlessness she associates with being publicly humiliated, to imagine someone else's vulnerability: "It was preposterous, it was unfair, that such a chunk of information should have been left out, and that Rose even at this late date could have thought herself the only person who could seriously lack power" (177). By making her aware of other people's lack of power, the gossip about Simon's "luck" finally enables Rose to question her own discourse of gossip--not simply in terms of its reversibility, that is to say, its disadvantages for her--but ethically, in terms of its effect on the Other.

Rose's growing discomfort with her own discourse reaches a climax in "Spelling." Initially, Rose assumes her typical discursive stance:

> That was one of the stories she told about Flo. She did it well; her own exhaustion and sense of virtue; Flo's bark, her waving cane, her fierce unwillingness to be the object of anybody's rescue. (183)

Here, the introductory sentence, "That was one of the stories she told about Flo," syntactically recalls the prefaces to earlier pieces of gossip: "This was the sort of story Rose

brought home"; "Here is the sort of story Flo told Rose" (42, 43): even as it suggests that all three stories produce similar self-aggrandizing effects. In contrast to this story, however, Rose recalls a letter that Flo had written to her, responding angrily to Rose's bare-breasted television appearance in *The Trojan Women,* that now radically alters her relationship to her own discourse:

> Rose read the letter, or part of it, out loud to some friends she was having for dinner. She read it for comic effect, to show the gulf that lay behind her, though she did realize, if she thought about it, that such a gulf was nothing special....Halfway through she had to stop reading. It wasn't that she thought how shabby it was, to be exposing and making fun of Flo this way. She had done it often enough before; it was no news to her that it was shabby. What stopped her was, in fact, that gulf; she had a fresh and overwhelming realization of it, and it was nothing to laugh about. These reproaches of Flo's made as much sense as a protest about raising umbrellas, a warning against eating raisins. But they were painfully, truly meant; they were all a hard life had to offer. Shame on a bare breast. (190)

The letter reading, which simulates all of the structural conditions, as well as the effects of gossip, paves the way to a profound discomfort with the temporal gulf upon which Rose's strategy to transform herself from victim into queen is founded. Rose literally stops gossiping in mid-sentence. Suddenly, the past is not "shady and melodramatic," as Rose finds that she cannot make Flo into another Becky Tyde simply "to show people the gulf that lay behind her." In the silence that replaces the reading of the letter, Rose begins to imagine a new strategy for self-construction that would not be based on a practice of gossip, but on a renunciation of the power gossip affords.

Rose's ultimate decision to reject the power of gossip emphatically denies Foucault's model of discourse which cannot account for abdications that empower the Other since, as Jon Simons notes, "Foucault's work is very close to the teachings of Nietzsche," and especially to the Nietzschean idea that "Humans have a 'will to truth' which is as happy with false as with true judgements, because it is also a 'will to power', meaning a will to affirm life as it is" (Simons 18, 19). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche exclaimed: "Only where life is, there is also will: not will to life but...will to power! The living creature values many things higher than life itself; yet out of this evaluation itself speaks--

the will to power!" (138). This monistic philosophy, which proclaims the will to power "as the basic force underlying *all* human activities" (Kaufmann 193), informs Foucault's adaptation of Nietzsche's "will to truth" and its "links with desire and power" (Foucault, "Discourse" 216). For both Nietzsche and Foucault, there is no place "outside" of power, since they see "[e]ven asceticism, humility, self-abasement, and renunciation of worldly power" as simply more subtle manifestations of the will to power (Kaufmann 185).

To such a totalitarian philosophy, *Who Do You Think You Are?* opposes Rose's empowerment of Flo through her final act of buffoonery when she brings Flo the gray-blue wig she had once "pulled over her forehead like a woolen cap" (190). When Flo had worn it, her public outburst, "Look at the Nigger!", made her "look like a comic character, except that her bewilderment, her authenticity, were quite daunting" (191). In Rose's hands, however, the wig reverses Flo's previous humiliation:

> "Rose! What is that you got in your hand, is it a dead gray squirrel?"
> "No," said Rose, "it's a wig."
> "What?"
> "A wig," said Rose, and Flo began to laugh. Rose laughed too. The wig did look like a dead cat or squirrel, even though she had washed it and brushed it; it was a disturbing-looking object.
> "My God, Rose, I thought what is she doing bringing me a dead squirrel! If I put it on somebody'd be sure to take a shot at me."
> Rose stuck it on her own head, to continue the comedy, and Flo laughed so that she rocked back and forth in her crib. (191-92)

Like Flo, who transformed herself into the object of gossip in "Royal Beatings," Rose now makes herself into the object of ridicule. In fact, the endings of these two stories are curiously parallel since both deal with Rose's relationship to her stepmother after Flo is institutionalized. In "Spelling," however, Rose does not simply divert attention from her own gaffe by a "trick" which saves the "truth" of some gossip about an "airship." Rather, her very desire to gossip is overcome by an empathy that is contextualized by her self-censoring attitude regarding the reading of Flo's letter.

Rose's refusal of power thus seriously problematizes a model of gossip based on Foucault's anaylsis of discourse and power which emphasizes the ways in which Flo and

Rose mimic the effects of dicourse and exploit their structural advantage to construct themselves as superior subjects. Rose's shifting attitude to gossip, however, also opens up new ways of applying Foucault's treatment of discourse to the consolidation of identity. Whereas the bulk of Foucault's writing is spent elaborating structures of power that preclude individual agency, in which "there can be no question of interpreting discourse with a view to writing a history of the referent" (*Archaeology* 47), his thought undergoes a significant shift, late in his career. Although he does not retract the importance of discourse in the formation of subjects who are merely raw material, rather than agents of change, Foucault now incorporates the perspective of the subject within his discussion of discourse: "A history of the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct would be concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object" (*Uses* 29).

In his later work, Foucault is most concerned with sexual morality as the pre-eminent form of self-constitution. Mark Poster, however, suggests the limitations of such a view: "are there not business and military codes that may equally serve as the center of discussion? Are there not entrepreneur and worker enmeshed codes and practices in which they constitute themselves as subjects in terms of morals or values?" (67). To which we might add, "is the gossip not also implicated in a web of codes and practices that allow her to constitute herself as a moral subject?" When Foucault refers to "the arts of existence," by which he means "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (*Uses* 10-11), does he not open the door to a significant new way of reading "the arts of gossip"?

The "techniques of the self" by which "individuals question their own conduct...watch

over and give shape to it, and...shape themselves as ethical subjects" (*Uses* 13), perfectly describe the significance of Rose's growing awareness of gossip. Although she is a naive expert in gossip as a form of "habitual knowledge" and she certainly "knows how" to construct herself employing gossip as a practice, Rose must also "know that" gossip is a problematic discourse if she is to consolidate--not simply construct--herself as an "ethical subject." Rose, in other words, has been seeking transformation through the strategic use of gossip since her youth in Hanratty. In "Wild Swans," for instance, Rose conflated Flo's gossip about the "White Slavers" she was to watch out for on the train to Toronto with her gossip about the undertaker who "drove the old hearse all over the country, looking for women" and sang about a girl whose "*throat is like a swan*" (58), to "enter on preposterous adventures in [her] own, but newly named skin" (66). Even in the final pages of the novel, "She wanted to fill up in that magical, releasing way, transform herself; she wanted the courage and the power" (204). Throughout the novel, however, gossip's transfiguring power has been ironized by a narrator who points out the superficiality and the hypocrisy of the "transformation" it accomplishes by linking gossip with waste or suggesting Rose's "real lack of power" (Williams 215). In her gossip, the private and the public Rose remain divided. "The modes of subjectivation," which Foucault also calls "the practices of the self," promise to suture this lesion by working at every level of the subject's thought and behaviour. By bringing into play an "aesthetics of existence," Rose learns to create herself as a work of art in relation to the discursive codes and prohibitions that surround gossip and forbid its indulgence.

Foucault is emphatic that such ethical self-creation is not merely a matter of doing what one is told. Simply following the prescriptions that are laid out in moral law carries little value in and of itself since a personal *ethos* is epitomized by a thoughtful attitude. As Foucault explains, as always, in relation to sexuality, "[i]nstead of looking for basic interdictions that were hidden or manifested in the demands of sexual austerity, it was necessary to locate the areas of experience and the forms in which sexual behaviour was

problematized, becoming an object of concern, an element for reflection, and a material for stylization" (*Uses* 23-24). Expanding upon this idea of problematic moralities, Foucault discerns two significant threads. On the one hand,

> in certain moralities the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case and to embrace every area of behaviour. With moralities of this type, the important thing is to focus on the instances of authority that enforce the code, that require it to be learned and observed, that penalize infractions; in these conditions, the subjectivation occurs basically in a quasi-juridical form, where the ethical subject refers his conduct to a law, or a set of laws, to which he must submit at the risk of committing offences that may make him liable to punishment. (Foucault, *Uses* 29-30)

Despite the surplus of prescriptions and prohibitions its discourses have produced, gossip cannot be defined as a code-oriented morality, since, without a system of punishment, the interdictions against gossiping cannot be enforced. The moral discourses of gossip consequently focus on the individual's relationship to him- or herself as an object of stylization. They focus, as Heidegger does, on whether the subject is living an "inauthentic" or a "genuine" existence. One's relationship to gossip can assume a determining role in establishing "what kind of person you are." The morality of gossip therefore has more in common with

> moralities in which the strong dynamic element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self. In this case, the system of codes and rules of behaviour may be rather rudimentary. *Their exact observance may be relatively unimportant, at least compared with what is required of the individual in the relationship he has with himself,* in his different actions, thoughts, and feelings as he endeavors to form himself as an ethical subject. (Foucault, *Uses* 30; my emphasis)

Bergmann's analysis of gossip as a discourse divided between "collective public denunciation" and "collective public practice" is therefore particularly important since it problematizes gossip's relationship to the code that describes it. Like those of other moral codes, the rules of action in the morality of gossip are "transmitted in a diffuse manner, so that far from constituting a systematic ensemble, they form a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another, and cancel each other out at certain points, thus providing for compromises or loopholes" (Foucault, *Uses* 25). Gossip may indeed be

considered immoral, but, as we have seen, such attributions mean little to the gossiper who refuses to recognize her own discourse as an object.

Moreover, a shift that occurred in the discourse on gossip in the eighteenth century has already destabilized the definition of gossip as a purely moral problem. The publication of conduct books like *Moral Gallantry* or *Humane Prudence, or the Art By which a Man May Raise Himself and his fortune to Grandeur*, means that, increasingly, gossip assumed "a secular social context" (Spacks 28). Thanks to a contradictory structure that is replete with loopholes and the instability of the "moral" discourses that describe it, gossip forms an ideal ground upon which the individual can construct herself as an ethical subject through a theme of austerity that would not be understood "as an expression of, or commentary on, deep and essential prohibitions, but as the elaboration and stylization of an activity in the exercise of [her] power and the practice of [her] liberty" (Foucault, *Uses* 23).

The title of the final story in the novel, "Who Do You Think You Are?," summarizes Rose's characteristic position with respect to her self-constructions. On the one hand, it clearly poses the question of subjectivation. "Who do you think you are?" seems to be a straightforward invitation to consolidate the self through an act of narration. In the text of this final story, however, the question has a very different inflection. Rose is not being invited to produce the very *Bildungsroman* we seem to be reading. Rather, it is not a question at all, but the stern rebuke of a schoolmarm to a pupil who has overstepped her place by breaking the rules and showing off to the class:

> "You can't go thinking you are better than other people just because you can learn poems. Who do you think you are?"
> This was not the first time in her life Rose had been asked who she thought she was; in fact the question had often struck her like a monotonous gong and she paid no attention to it. (200)

The "monotonous gong" of Miss Hattie's rhetorical question is clearly designed to drown out the grandiose delusions of its object. The title of the story, which is also the title of the novel, situates Rose's identity within a problematic of power that is typical of gossip in which self-disclosure threatens to become self-aggrandizement and self-constitution a

matter of showing that "you are better than other people."

As Rose comes to understand "afterwards," however, "Miss Hattie was not a sadistic teacher; she had refrained from saying what she now said in front of the class" (200). By refusing to make Rose's lesson public, Miss Hattie endeavors to practice what she preaches: she circumvents the possibility of exalting herself at Rose's expense, and provides yet another model of refusal to use the ammunition of gossip. She demonstrates, in short, that collapsing the categories of object and recipient yields a discursive practice that is closer to the sincerity of Heideggerian dialog because it ensures that the primary relationship-of-being to the object talked about is preserved. Rose is thus still very much the apprentice, only she has changed teachers. With respect to Bergmann's theory of gossip, Flo taught Rose "how"; Miss Hattie teaches her "that": "The lesson she was trying to teach here was more important to her than any poem, and one she truly believed Rose needed" (200).

Yet, at the beginning of this story, Rose still seems to favor the crone's voyeuristic language because the entire chapter is presented as a gossipy conversation between Rose and her brother:

> There were some things Rose and her brother Brian could safely talk about, without running aground on principles or statements of position, and one of them was Milton Homer. (193)

It is not, however, the gossip about Milton Homer's "scandalous behaviour" (198) that has a profound effect on Rose's education, but her memory of an encounter with Ralph Gillespie, "the reformed parodist," in which Rose longs to penetrate the superfluity of their idle talk (Williams 205):

> when Rose remembered this unsatisfactory conversation she seemed to recall a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness, though certainly no words of that kind had been spoken. That peculiar shame which she had carried around with her seemed to have been eased. The thing that she was ashamed of, in acting, was that she might have been paying attention to the wrong things, *reporting antics, when there was always something further*, a tone, a depth, a light that she couldn't get and wouldn't get. Everything she had done could sometimes be seen as a mistake. (209; my emphasis)

The "antics" Rose spent so much time reporting in her own life in the form of gossip, as a means of constructing an identity, are thrown into question as Rose begins seriously to interrogate the implications of employing a discourse of surfaces:

> There seemed to be feelings which could only be spoken of in translation; perhaps they could only be acted on in translation; not speaking of them and not acting on them is the right course to take because translation is dubious. Dangerous as well.
>
> For these reasons Rose did not explain anything further about Ralph Gillespie to Brian and Phoebe when she recalled Milton Homer's ceremony with babies or his expression of diabolical happiness on the swing. (210)

Rose's chain of gossip is finally broken, then, on the last page of her story. In order to constitute herself as a subject, Rose now has to embrace an ethic of silence. The placement of this reversal seems particularly significant, given the exigencies of subjectivation. Like sexual austerity, the gossip's decision to ensure that there be "one thing at least she wouldn't spoil by telling" (210), "can be practiced in the form of a sudden, all-embracing, and definitive renunciation of pleasures" (Foucault, *Uses* 27). In particular, such a renunciation pertains to "the *telos* of the ethical subject: an action which is not only moral in itself, in its singularity; it is also moral in its circumstantial integration and by virtue of the place it occupies in a pattern of conduct" (Foucault, *Uses* 27-28).

As both Williams and Heble argue, the third-person narrator in *Who?* "is really a kind of disguised first-person narrator, is, in short, Rose: a narrator who writes about herself from a distanced point of view in order to lend credibility to her tale" (Heble 104). If this is the case, Rose takes Foucault's idea of an "aesthetics of existence" quite literally. By placing her appropriation of the discourses on gossip at the end of her struggle, Rose as narrator implies a final transformation: the gossip's education culminates in a rejection of her own "dangerous" voice. If the climax of the novel is meant to signify the *telos* of the heroine, Rose barely escapes becoming the crone.

In other ways, however, Rose's self-imposed silence about Ralph during her gossip with her brother and sister-in-law perfectly coincides with her surrender of authority to Flo when she interrupts the gossipy reading of Flo's letter in "Spelling." By making the Other

the subject of concern; by giving Ralph the right, not of last word, but of first refusal, Rose does indeed "shape herself as an ethical subject," but not in the way that Foucault imagines. As a good student of Nietzsche, Foucault continued to envision "ethics" as "a mere fabrication for purposes of gulling: at best an artistic fiction; at worst an outrageous imposture" (Nietzsche, *Birth* 10). Ethics "at best," according to this theory, is a privileged discourse for those who would, in Wildean fashion, make art "the supreme reality" and life "a mere mode of fiction" (Wilde, *De Profundis* 46). In the case of Rose, however, who finds that she felt Ralph Gillespie's life "close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own" (210), the act of consolidating herself as an ethical subject does not involve turning her life into a work of art, so much as it involves relinquishing the power of self-construction at the expense of the Other. Rose's third-person narration appears less duplicitous in this light as well, since the shift from first- to third-person suggests a further refusal of power. The imperializing, self-protecting "I" of gossip is discarded in favour of Lejeune's "secret third person" who is now exposed and offered up as a potential object of gossip in Rose's narrative. By empowering others, Rose discovers a possibility of "ethical self-constitution" that is not dreamed of in Foucault's philosophy.

Although gossip as a means of self-constitution in *Who Do You Think You Are?* offers an important critique of Foucauldian theory as a replay of Nietzsche's will to power, the novel's presentation of gossip itself seldom strays far from the Heideggerian thesis that "talking extensively about something, covers it up and brings what is understood to a sham clarity--the unintelligibility of the trivial" (208). Or, as another critic suggests, "the implicit standard of conduct is silence and solitude" (Spacks 31). Even if Rose's silence makes sense, given the novel's attitude toward gossip, this is hardly an inevitable, or even desirable conclusion, particularly since the novel is as fascinated by gossip's generative powers as it is suspicious of its methods. Why is it so imperative that Rose not speak on the last page of the text? Surely it is Munro's reinscription of the sexist figure of the crone, which is already so deeply imbedded in Western culture, that catches Rose's tongue.

If Rose has been in command of her own story as a secret third-person narrator since the beginning, however, she has hardly embraced an ethic of silence as fully as she would have us believe. Like Flo's diverting tricks, Rose's "discretion" can be read as a defensive gesture toward silence designed to preserve, not to give up, authority. Rose, in other words, might renounce one form of gossip only to take up another form which now implicates the reader. As Spacks suggests, "gossip provides a model for many operations of the novel [and] opens the way for a kind of interpretation that defines aspects of the text's relation to the reader and locates its roots in ordinary social discourse" (12). Transposing the gossip triad from thematic to formal concern, Rose's autobiographical narration turns the reader into the recipient of her literary gossip. It is not Rose, but the reader, who is revealed to have been the gossip's apprentice all along.

If we are meant to be Rose's apprentices, however, we are clearly expected to learn a very different lesson than she herself learns. As the arbiter of her own story, Rose ultimately confirms the Foucauldian interpretation of gossip by formalizing it: she becomes the author whose authority can not be shaken as much as the gossip's can be. Rose, unlike Flo, achieves "legitimacy" by turning her gossip into open discourse, widely distributed and honestly attributed. What we might be expected to learn from Rose's example is that we cannot escape from gossip, even if we finally make ourselves its object by implicating ourselves in a laying bare of such practices. Even so, Rose gets the last word on everyone by making herself into "the principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (Foucault, "What?" 274).

As readers, however, we could be finally forbidden to gossip about Rose's career or to confirm our own superiority at her expense because she has taught us so well that "not speaking...is the right course to take." Then Rose would not impose an ethic of silence on herself so much as on her readers. As Rose's silent partners, we would have to confirm the gossip's interpretations the same way she had once confirmed Flo's. By adapting her

model of gossip to the structure of the novel itself, Rose ensures that her readers will remain literary voyeurs who may never authentically question the model of the crone that she exploits.

Chapter Two

Gossiping with the Devil:

The Abject Saints of *Fifth Business*

> *Lady Sneerwell.* I wonder, Sir Benjamin, you never publish anything.
> *Sir Benjamin.* To say truth, ma'am, 'tis very vulgar to print; and, as my little productions are mostly satires and lampoons on particular people, I find they circulate more by giving copies in confidence to the friends of the parties...
> Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The School For Scandal*

Gossip and scandal play key roles in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business,* despite Dunstan Ramsay's repeated and emphatic rejection of such public discourses over the course of his autobiographical narrative. Ramsay's implicit privileging of spiritual/private discourses over social/public ones like gossip is most clearly revealed in his polarization of himself and his "lifelong friend and enemy Percy Boyd Staunton" (13). "You see how it was," Ramsay declares, "to him [Boy] the reality of life lay in external things, whereas for me the only reality was of the spirit" (118). Gossip's relentless conversion of private information into public scandal is made to seem antithetical to a protagonist who also hotly condemns "a woman whose life and interests were entirely external. It was not that she was indifferent to the things of the spirit; she sensed their existence and declared herself their enemy" (244). For Ramsay himself--who is quite vocal about his disdain for scandalmongering--swears allegiance to the old axiom about "loose lips." He insists: "I never passed on gossip if I could help it...I never betrayed a confidence, preferring instead the costive pleasure of being a repository of secrets" (219). Nevertheless, Ramsay's use of binary oppositions to distance himself from "external things" like Denyse Howard's mean political ambitions or the glittering, superficial world of the Stauntons belies his self-conscious and self-serving exploitation of gossip about other people throughout the novel. Far from being marginal discourses, gossip and scandal are pre-eminent among the social practices

which dominate Ramsay's career, his private dealings, and even his identity in *Fifth Business*, both in terms of their pervasiveness and of their dramatic significance.

Significantly, the gossip which pervades Ramsay's own autobiography is not simply associated with "external" concerns, as its author would have it. The fact that "the central theme of gossip lies precisely in [a] tense relationship between a revealed 'first' and a concealed 'second' world" (Bergmann 53) would seem to grant gossip a special significance in a novel which insists upon the Jungian bifurcation of lived experience into a "mundane and rational surface broken through at intervals by the symbols of myth and dream that expresses the hidden powers of the unconscious" (Radford 66), even if such a distinction already privileges a "spiritual history" (Roper 81) at the expense of "mundane" social processes like gossip. Public discourses of scandal--marked as they are by gleeful incredulity and speculation about private affairs--also seem to be intimately connected to the "second," Jungian world of Ramsay's rich inner life--specifically to his seeking after a world of wonders whose "marvels," like those of gossip, "defy all verifiable facts," even as they beg the philosophical question: "are marvels brought into being by their [people's] desire, or is their desire an assurance rising from some deep knowledge, not to be directly experienced and questioned, that the marvellous is indeed an aspect of the real?" (203). The gossip's insatiable desire for spectacle, in other words, seems to correspond with what Ramsay sees in the kneeling petitioners of the Byzantine basilica at Guadalupe, "whose faces had the beauty virtually every face reveals in the presence of the goddess of mercy, the Holy Mother, figure of divine compassion" (203). Such an interdependence between a low discourse like gossip and a transcendent one like religion only seems fatuous if we disregard the already dubious nature of spirituality in a book where, as one recent commentator notes, "a card trick is every bit as good as a tale of saints to put to flight the leaden hours of a Presbyterian Sunday afternoon" (Williams 55).

Otherwise, gossip seems to be the instrument of Ramsay's transcendental aspirations in *Fifth Business*. Consider the scandalous gossip about Mary Dempster which was

originally overheard through the Deptford village grapevine, but which Ramsay retells with a transcendental twist as the history of a saint; the rural scandals which comprise the backdrop to Ramsay's youth--epitomized by Milo Papple's enthusiasm for "the prurient, the humiliating, and the macabre" (109) in his barber-shop gossip--which assume the status of local myth; Boy Staunton's transcendent wish "forever to be a Boy" (266) which leads him to model his own life on "every scrap of gossip" (189) about his idealized image of youth, the Prince of Wales, and which finally lands him in a truly mythological dilemma: "You created a God in your own image, and when you found out he was no good you abolished him," Ramsay tells him, "It's quite a common form of psychological suicide" (245); Boy's own mythological role as gossipy Candaules to Ramsay's receptive Gyges; Ramsay's hagiographic calling which he himself likens to "psychological-mythological gossip" (170); or even the highly publicized scandals and "extraordinary gossip" (260) generated by the mysterious predictions of the Brazen Head of Friar Bacon in Magnus Eisengrim's *Soirée of Illusions*, the world of wonders which satisfies the "concealed longing for romance and marvels" felt by those disenchanted "people who are well fed and know the wonders that lie concealed in the atom" (212, 203). The conflation of myth and marvel, the sacred and the scandalous, inherent in such examples emphatically suggests that Ramsay's letter to the Headmaster, which frames all of these other forms of gossip, constitutes a further form of epistolary gossip in which the writer gets the goods on everyone else without giving up control over his own self-image.

The possibility that Ramsay's letter is merely gossip in another guise finds formal support in the work of Patricia Meyer Spacks who argues that a reader's interest in the publication of private letters is no different from the curiosity of the gossiper. Focussing on letters penned by that eighteenth-century master of gossip, Horace Walpole, Spacks suggests that the circuit of exchange and consumption in letter writing even imitates the structure of the gossip triad: "the dynamics of gossip...create a we-them dichotomy: *we* who talk, *them* whom we discuss; and the dynamics of letter-reading are parallel to those of

gossip" (83). Thus, the epistolary form of Ramsay's autobiography already suggests its affinity to oral forms of gossip. Moreover, the ambiguity of Ramsay's letter, which claims to reject gossip in the very act of passing it on, precisely mirrors the rhetoric of its eighteenth-century model:

> Despite all the gossip he reports, Walpole insists on his distaste for 'scandal' and his contempt for those who promulgate it, partly because he believes them to make no distinction between truth and falsehood. If he acknowledges on occasion the problematic truth of his own narratives, the acknowledgement becomes part of the story; he never (or so he implies) knowingly misleads his reader. (Spacks 79)

Ramsay's own frequent reminders about "the variability of truth" (258) are also double-edged since they caution us about the unreliability of the gossiper, even as they help to establish his own "rhetorical *ethos* with his frankness" (Williams 65), drawing us into his confidence so that his version of the truth seems to carry more authority. He writes, after all, in order to set the record straight. Similarly, Ramsay's apologetic narrative which appeals to an inscribed, internal reader position--the Headmaster who serves as proxy for real readers--mimics Walpole's tactic of shaping his reader's response through a rhetorical style in which "he assumes that his correspondents share his [standard of judgement]" (Spacks 82). Both Ramsay's and Walpole's narrators thus lure the reader into complicity "by expert interpretive description," a tactic which again reminds us that "gossip [is] complicitous in essence" (Spacks 82).

Furthermore, like Walpole, Ramsay often seems to make "talk about other people the subject of his correspondence" (Spacks 78) in order to dramatize his own superiority. The narrator's ostensibly straightforward confession of trysting with Agnes Day, Gloria Mundy, and Libby Doe, for instance, slips into the discourse of gossip as the puns on their names "[make] his women into anonymous jokes" (Radford 76). Ramsay's dismissive caricature of Boy--"He was the quintessence of the Jazz Age, a Scott Fitzgerald character. It was characteristic of Boy throughout his life that he was always the quintessence of something that somebody else had recognized and defined" (118)--is further evidence of self-congratulatory tattling. So, too, is his smug assessment that "the Stauntons rarely

escaped a cliché in any of the essential matters of life" (187), or his opinion about Leola, "I don't think I have ever met such a stupid, nice woman" (159). All of these examples suggest that, for Ramsay, the apparently simple act of telling his own story is inseparable from practices of spreading malicious gossip about others.

Such tattling thus opens a space in which to examine the contradictions of Ramsay's text. For Ramsay's readers find themselves in the same position as those of Horace Walpole: "involve[d] at once gossiping *with* and in effect gossiping *about* the letters' author" (Spacks 84). Spacks's analysis of reading Walpole's letters provides a useful model for reading *Fifth Business* by encouraging us to read against the grain of Ramsay's own self-generating gossip: "[t]he double role of the reader generates a kind of moral security: we can identify with and enjoy Walpole's sense of superiority to much of human kind, a feeling corresponding to a deep narcissistic impulse but one which the laws of civilized behaviour encourage us to suppress or deny; at the same time (or at the next moment), we can contemplate Walpole's moral inadequacies as though we had not shared them, and gain pleasure by judging him" (84). The register of Ramsay's letter, which we receive as *Fifth Business*, produces a split identical to that of published letters, hence allowing us to re-open the channels of gossip which its narrator has pretended to seal off.

In fact, Ramsay's narrative has, from the beginning, been concerned not with spreading gossip but with controlling it, since the letter itself originates as a response to the "patronizing," "dismissive," "idiotic piece" written about him on the occasion of his retirement from Colborne College. "FAREWELL TO THE CORK" is little more than glorified academic gossip about "Corky" Ramsay, the peg-legged history professor. For Ramsay, autobiography is not spontaneous, but polemical, an angry answer to the gossip-column's biographer:

> But why, you will ask, am I writing to you at all? Why, after a professional association of so many years, during which I have been reticent about my personal affairs, am I impelled now to offer you such a statement as this?
>
> It is because I was deeply offended by the idiotic piece that appeared in the *College Chronicle* in the issue of midsummer 1969. It is not merely its illiteracy of

> tone that disgusts me (though I think the quarterly publication of a famous Canadian school ought to do better), but its presentation to the public of a portrait of myself as a typical old schoolmaster doddering into retirement with tears in his eyes and a drop hanging from his nose. (17)

The significance of this initial outrage has often been neglected by Jungian interpreters of the novel who only acknowledge that "At the most immediate level, *Fifth Business* is a memoir...triggered by a farewell article in the college paper which stereotypes him as a Mr. Chips," without considering the implications of this "cheapening of his public image" beyond its disjunction with Ramsay's "inner sense of himself" (Roper 89). A critic like Gordon Roper fails to see the humour in the text's comic juxtaposition of a schoolmaster who claims, on the one hand, to transcend trivial concerns, but who, on the other hand, goes to the extent of writing his own press releases. For he is chagrined that the article about his retirement makes "no mention...[of] my V.C.," or of "my ten books, of which at least one has circulated in six languages and has sold over three-quarters of a million copies and [of which] another exerts a widening influence in the realm of mythic history about which Packer attempts to be jocose," not to mention "the fact that I am the only Protestant contributor to *Analecta Bollandiana*, and have been so for thirty-six years, is ignored, though Hippolyte Delehaye himself thought well of my work and said so in print" (18)! Similarly, Jungian interest in the hidden life of the protagonist ignores the hint of pettiness in the voice that asks: "Does it not reduce me to what Packer unquestionably believes me to be--a senile, former worthy who has stumbled through forty-five years of teaching armed only with a shallow, *Boy's Book of Battles* concept of history, and a bee in his bonnet about myth--whatever the dullard Packer imagines myth to be?" (18).

Ramsay's objection to sophomorish biography, in other words, is rooted in the biographer's usurpation of his right to control public perceptions of his own character--the very problem motivating much of the moral animus directed at oral forms of gossip. Ramsay's fervent desire to maintain a grip on his public persona is already evident from his insistence that Boy concoct a story to cover up the fact that Ramsay's dismissal as Headmaster following the war was due to public pressure about his "queerness" of

character, and not his own decision: "It will be a lie, but I want my face saved" (201). In the case of his letter, Ramsay's decision to tell the story of his hidden life is not only an exercise in public relations, but is also "an indication of how deeply he is still enmeshed in time" (Williams 60): "I am driven to explain myself to you, Headmaster, because you stand at the top of that queer school world in which I seem to have cut such a meagre figure" (19). "The sources from which my larger life was nourished were elsewhere, and it is to write of them that I address this memoir to you, Headmaster, *hoping thereby that when I am dead at least one man will know the truth about me and do me justice*" (122; my emphasis). Thus, Ramsay's "confession" turns out to be more of a legal "will," entrusting the Headmaster to be the executor of Ramsay's public reputation. Even at the level of its production, therefore, Ramsay's narrative seems profoundly self-contradictory since it arises in the context of a desire to legislate gossip about its author, even as it seeks to privilege the mythical and the spiritual above such earthly foibles and vanities.

The ostensible contradiction between transcendental discourses and trivial discourses in Ramsay's autobiography, however, is resolved at a functional level by the effects of his literary gossip. Although it doesn't quite enable him to turn water into wine, St Dunstan's scandal sheet characteristically proceeds by transforming the profane into the sacred. Pointing out "the narrator's version of a magic trick," David Williams has already identified "[n]arrative" as Ramsay's "final work of conjuring a saintly new persona" (80), which is also a gesture toward transcendence. Even his deferral of the letter to the Headmaster--"You will not see this memoir until after my own death" (258)--becomes an effective weapon in the battle for public opinion since it gives Ramsay the last word on his own character, as well as on everyone else's. This tactical delay also means that Ramsay has "removed himself from time by addressing his former Headmaster from beyond the grave...Implicitly, then, his vantage point is not only retrospective, but timeless; he no longer stands within the temporal span of the action he describes" (Williams 59). Gossip, in other words, is not at all at odds with Ramsay's concern to transcend the limits of his

ability to legislate his public image. Rather, it is the very basis of his transcendental authority.

If, as I will argue, gossip is the master discourse of *Fifth Business,* the traditional psychoanalytic approach which remains fixated on "the Jungian bias of the Deptford trilogy" (Radford 66) needs to be reconsidered in order to accommodate the practice and effects of such a cultural strategy on a subject who is already profoundly self-divided with respect to his own discourse. Considering that it usually disregards the significance of the letter as narrative frame, it is hardly surprising that the archetypal approach to *Fifth Business* propounded by critics like Gordon Roper and Marilyn Chapman has yet to account, in any way, for the role of the scandalmonger in the novel. Instead, their approach eschews the metafictional problems of the text in order to dwell upon "the implicit Jungian principles on which *Fifth Business* is based" (Chapman 131). Usually, this has meant a tireless return to the Jungian template on the part of critics who assume the role of detective in the psychological equivalent of a mystery investigation. Deducing the significance of Ramsay's entourage to his personal mythology by matching them to the archetypes they embody for him, the Jungian critic traces the resolution of contradictions within the protagonist's character, assuming that he achieves "some fused inner and outer state of wholeness in the mountains of St. Gall" (Roper 93).

From a Jungian perspective, only Radford's more conservative estimate of Ramsay's spiritual progress has seriously questioned the "wholeness" Ramsay achieves by telling the story of his past. Although he acknowledges that, by the end of the novel, Ramsay "has succeeded in recovering the personal archetypes he had projected on his mother and Mary Dempster," Radford is uncomfortable with the fact that Ramsay's "'Fifth Business' identity...enables him to rationalize his betrayal of Staunton" (78, 75). Radford's reading remains closer to Davies' original vision of *Fifth Business* in which "*Revenge* is the theme of the novel" (Davies, "The Deptford" 7), emphasizing the duplicitous nature of Ramsay's fractured identity which licences his "demonic side" to take a "kind of concealed revenge on

all of those who cause him guilt or envy" (76). "When he tells Boy that the stone-in-the-snowball secret must be revealed," for instance, "because it has been characteristic of Staunton's whole life, we remember that Ramsay has kept the actual stone at the core of his life--apparently waiting for the strategic moment of revenge" (Radford 77). Rather than viewing Ramsay's life as a dialectic in which two opposing forces are ultimately synthesized, Radford concludes that, by the end of the novel, self-division shades into self-deception. Even as Ramsay narrates the story of his life, the autobiographer is "still hiding from full self-knowledge in 'the vital though never glorious role of Fifth Business'" (Radford 78).

Nor has Radford been the only critic to stress Ramsay's problematic self-division. David Williams's analysis of forms of autobiography in *Fifth Business* is also deeply troubled by "[t]he narrator's method of self-justification" which "leads to schizophrenic tensions of form in a 'confession' which is also an apologia for 'poetic self-invention'" (Williams 64). Questioning Ramsay's psychic, as well as his moral "integrity," he notes that "Ramsay's only excuse for betraying Boy Staunton is that Fifth Business made him do it" (64). Fifth Business, in other words, becomes a convenient "alibi" (Williams 65) which protects Ramsay from assuming any real responsibility in "[t]he mysterious death of Boy Staunton" (255). For Williams, this schizophrenic alibi is evidence of the protagonist's lack of self-knowledge, manifested by his lingering "obsession with guilt and his longing for justification" (62).

Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of abjection is similarly interested in the problems of self-division and exclusion like those raised by Ramsay's fractured identity. Examining the ways in which both individuals and larger social groups establish symbolic identities by abjecting impurities and waste, Kristeva describes a fragmented "subject in process" who attests to the impossibility of total psychic integration. Kristeva imagines a subject that is multiple, transgressive, and radically split, an "I" which is "always already haunted by the Other," and yet whose strategies of "rejecting, separating,

repeating/abjecting" involve it in a "violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost" (*Powers* 12, 15). As Elizabeth Gross explains, "Kristeva explores the ways in which the inside and the outside of the body, the spaces between the subject and object, and the self and other become structured and made meaningful through the child's taking up a position in the symbolic order" (86). However, because "'proper' sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence that must be separated from its 'clean and proper' self...[t]he subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, and this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional, and open to breakdown and instability" (Gross 86).

Kristeva's vision of the abject as that which "threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject" because "[i]t calls into question the boundaries upon which they are constituted" (Oliver 56) thus enfranchises a discussion of the problematic relationship of "internal" and "external" forces in *Fifth Business*--such as divisions between private/public, psychological/social, and secrecy/disclosure--in ways that Jung's theory does not. Similarly, her theory of subjectivity, applied to the Jungian hero of *Fifth Business*, challenges the conclusion that Ramsay emerges from the novel as a unified, transcendental subject of discourse. Instead, the dynamic of abjection helps to explain Ramsay's dubious refusal of the gossiper's identity as evidence that he is troubled, from the very beginning, by an identity-crisis which is never finally resolved.

As I will argue, Ramsay's fractured identity is largely a function of his ambiguous relationship to gossip; specifically, his "transformation" from "repository of secrets" to gossipy secret-sharer. Like Kristeva's split subject, he is not unwitting of this transformation: "Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them" (*Powers* 8). But gossip itself serves as the wallpaper which hides the fractures in his own identity as he moves from the position of the gossip recipient to that of the

talebearer. By focussing on the role gossip plays in the novel as "a vortex of summons and repulsion [which] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (Kristeva 1), my approach seeks to chart the "schizophrenic" destabilization of Ramsay's identity as "Fifth Business" in relation to abject models of gossip which operate both at communal and personal levels.

Through an analysis of gossip and secrecy in *Fifth Business*, I will re-examine Jörg Bergmann's structuralist explanation of gossip in addition to addressing the central functionalist argument in gossip theory itself as it was first articulated in the debate between Max Gluckman and Robert Paine. Kristeva's analysis of abjection will be especially useful for suggesting ways in which the social sciences have failed adequately to assess gossip's function as both mechanism of abjection and abject discourse at social and structural levels respectively, even as the problematic gossipers of *Fifth Business* interrogate the binary basis of Kristeva's own model of abjection. For Kristeva, "the simple logic of *excluding filth*" (*Powers* 65) operates equally at the level of individual subject construction and at the level of symbolic systems which guarantee social groups. By maintaining their "correspondence" and by refusing to assign to the speaking subject "some deep or primary causality in the social *symbolic system*" (*Powers* 67), Kristeva proposes an analysis of abjection as a stratified, but non-hierachical phenomenon.

The Deptford gossip thus provides an early model relating gossip to strategies of abjection which helps to illuminate Ramsay's own use of epistolary gossip as a form of self-creation. In fact, the small town proves to be a paradigm, and not just a stereotype, of the social functions of gossip which figures as prominently in Ramsay's narrative as it does more generally in Canadian fiction. At least Davies suggests as much in the opening chapters of *Fifth Business* when Ramsay notes a new popular fascination with country towns in the media. Once nostalgic strongholds of pastoral experience, "places inhabited by laughable, loveable simpletons, unspotted by the worldliness of city life, though occasionally shrewd in rural concerns," rural villages are now portrayed as seedbeds for

scandal, "rotten with vice, and especially sexual vice as Krafft-Ebing might have been surprised to uncover in Vienna; incest, sodomy, bestiality, sadism, and masochism were supposed to rage behind the lace curtains and in the haylofts, while rigid piety was professed in the streets" (20). The Victorian threat of perversion which supposedly lurks behind the country-bumpkin's unassuming demeanor constitutes only one example of the link between small communities and gossip that has been an emergent concern in the social sciences since the turn of the century. Anthropological, sociological, historical, and literary ethnographies--especially Max Gluckman's ground-breaking study, "Gossip and Scandal" (1963)-- have all focused on small societal groupings such as tribes, villages, or urban neighborhoods (see also: Radin 1927; Colson 1953; Wylie 1957; Spacks 1985) to suggest that "gossip is an extraordinarily widespread activity conducted with devotion" (Bergmann 10). Such *apologias* for "scandalmongering" make gossip a central concern of village life by eschewing moral condemnations of "idle talk" in favor of functional explanations which discover, in gossip and scandal, essential mechanisms upon which the identity and survival of small communities depend: "gossip does not have isolated roles in community life, but is part of the very blood and tissue of that life" (Gluckman 308).

Surprisingly, however, explanations of how "gossip, and even scandal, have important positive virtues," in that "they maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups" (Gluckman, "Scandal" 308), eschew an economy of abjection. Instead, Gluckman's recuperative account of gossiping is informed by the claim that "when you gossip about your friends to other mutual friends you are demonstrating that you all belong to one set which has the duty to be interested in one another's vices as well as virtues" (314). For Gluckman, because "[v]illage gossip has the effect of making the villagers conform to ideas of morality and value that are valid in the village," gossiping about someone who has transgressed village "law" or accepted values only reinforces "their mutual membership in a social group and thereby recognize[s] and strengthen[s] the group as a binding social unit" (Bergmann 145). Gossip, Gluckman maintains--whether it be in Trinidad, Plainsville

U.S.A., a Welsh village, or the Makah Indian settlement on Cape Flattery--does not represent division or internal strife so much as it signifies the bonding of a healthy community because it has "the effect of maintaining the village as a village and of preventing it from becoming a collection of houses, like a housing estate" (313). The unity which results from such "cultural techniques" therefore gives social groups a heightened sense of autonomy which can in turn be reinforced by gossip about other social groups. As a recent theorist of gossip suggests, gossip helps to "solidify a group's sense of itself by heightening consciousness of 'outside' (inhabited by those talked about) and 'inside' (the temporarily secure territory of the talkers)" (Spacks 5).

In many ways, Deptford, Ontario seems to epitomize the villages in Gluckman's study. It too is a small and "exclusive group...which has exclusiveness thrust upon it...by isolation of locality" (Gluckman 309):

> It was called Deptford and lay on the Thames River about fifteen miles east of Pittstown, our county town and nearest big place. We had an official population of about five hundred, and the surrounding farms probably brought the district up to eight hundred souls. (*Fifth* 20)

Like the communities described in the ethnographic literature Gluckman cites, Deptford is paradoxically unified by the effects of apparent internal dissent, scandal, and backbiting. In fact, the sense of communality pervading Deptford is most forcefully conveyed by Ramsay's recollections of growing up there--recollections which are themselves inseparable from the language of communal gossip--often appearing to be little more than further iterations of the village gossip he heard as a child. The pervasive role of "the gossip of the town" (56) or the "Deptford gossip" (93), mapping a terrain of transgressions against a grid of social norms in the first section of *Fifth Business,* suggests that gossip performs the same function for the citizens of rural Ontario that it did for the members of a village in a Haitian valley (Gluckman, "Scandal" 307-08).

In other ways too, Deptford seems to suit Gluckman's theory that, once the socially unifying effect of tattling on one's neighbor within the village has been achieved, a

supplementary solidarity is derived from rigorously distinguishing between villages themselves:

> We were serious people, missing nothing in our community and feeling ourselves in no way inferior to larger places. We did, however, look with pitying amusement on Bowles Corners, four miles distant and with a population of one hundred and fifty. To live in Bowles Corners, we felt, was to be rustic beyond redemption. (22)

Thus, Deptford, like all "exclusive groups," obeys the second rule of gossip: "scandal when directed by members of a group against another group is unifying in another, and an obvious, way--it asserts the superiority of the scandalizing group" (Gluckman, "Scandal" 314).

Although Gluckman's account of scandal as a guarantor of the moral norms of a community begins to suggest the significance of gossip in Deptford, it also raises a significant problem. For Gluckman, gossip within communities performs a profoundly conservative and ultimately inclusive function, since, by gossiping about another person, the gossiper always already assumes even a transgressor's membership within the group. In the case of the Makah Indians, for instance--who were targeted for assimilation by The American Indian Service as early as the 1860s--Makah gossip

> becomes vicious scandal, aimed at demonstrating that the other parties are not worthy to be Makah. The different groups and individuals in the tribe fight an unceasing battle to demonstrate their own true Makahship. *But this involves them in a continual process of remaining Makah*, which...gives high importance to the scandalizing itself, as a mechanism for maintaining the Makah as a group encysted in the American nation, whose other members are excluded from this war of scandal. (312; my emphasis)

Robert Paine, however, argues that exclusion, not unification, is the principal function of gossip. In a well-known rebuttal to Gluckman's argument, he reactivates the question, "What Is Gossip About?", by criticizing the hasty anthropologist who would "[make] the community the center of attention instead of the individual" (Paine, "Alternative" 280). Gluckman's determination to debunk the popular idea which associates backbiting with malicious intent or destructive effects, Paine reminds us, blinds him to the fact that "[i]t is the individual and not the community that gossips" (280-81). In Paine's study, gossip

reveals far more about the narcissistic gossiper, who "cast[s] doubt upon the abilities and achievements of other[s]...in order to improve [his or her] own self-interested and competitive claims to moral recognition" (281), than it reveals about the unity of his or her social group.

In fact, viewing gossip as "a cultural device used by the individual to forward his own interests" (Paine 282) problematizes the very notion of a unified social group. For Paine, "[a] 'we' group...usually turns out to be a coterie of rival interest based quasi-groups" (282). We can recognize such rival interests in the five churches of Deptford:

> the Anglican, poor but believed to have some mysterious social supremacy; the Presbyterian, solvent and thought--chiefly by itself--to be intellectual; the Methodist, insolvent and fervent; the Baptist, insolvent and saved; the Roman Catholic, mysterious to most of us but clearly solvent, as it was frequently and, so we thought, quite needlessly repainted. (20)

Paine, in other words, grants to exclusionary gossip, which identifies an outside in addition to an inside, the dignity of first cause on a microscopic level of competition between individuals within a heterogeneous social mass. Gluckman, we recall, saw such exclusions as macroscopic effects of gossip, occurring only between *already homogeneous* social groups. Yet, in light of Paine's argument, such a concession to exclusionary gossip seems at odds with the basic tenets of Gluckman's model. Why should gossip within villages unify through inclusion, yet unify by exclusion between villages?

Paine's "alternative hypothesis" thus furnishes an important critique of Gluckman's failure to address gossip's inherent intentionality. In other ways, however, the severity of its attack upon gossip's effects runs the risk of throwing the baby of communal identity out with the bath water of functional analysis. Between the two poles of this argument a third possibility emerges: a form of gossip whose trajectory disturbs the premise of bipolarity at every level, including those divisions between individual and community, exclusion and unification, subject and object. Like Gluckman's account, this third model of gossip is socially unifying; like Paine's account it makes exclusion its central concern. It would, in other words, insist upon what Paine fails to notice and what Gluckman refuses to

acknowledge: those forms of gossip which strengthen social bonds through acts of ritual exclusion rather than continual reappropriation.

For Julia Kristeva, it is precisely such ritual exclusions, and not reabsorptions, which have "no other goal than the survival of both group and subject" (Kristeva, *Powers* 68). Mapping more than an intramural terrain of transgressions, gossip serves to map an extramural terrain of identity, abjecting inferior groups from its midst. The whole community thus becomes a version of Kristeva's deject: "A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines...constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh" (*Powers* 8). If Gluckman's theory imagines gossip as a cultural mechanism which does not exclude or suggest that "envy, slander and hate are the dominant atmosphere" (Gluckman, "Scandal" 307) of the communities in which it operates, Kristeva's account of social ritual points to very different ways in which gossip's unifying effects depend on the practices of division and exclusion explored by Paine. Whereas Gluckman anticipates a recent theorist who describes gossip as "the voice of 'the world'--the amorphous social organization that enforces its own standards and disciplines those who go astray" (Spacks 7)--Kristeva notes that such a rigorous policing of the social body is typically associated with abjection, the activity of "constructing boundaries and jettisoning the anti-social" by which "every society is founded" (Oliver 56).

Following Mary Douglas, Kristeva elaborates a model of societal abjection, noting that

> In a number of primitive societies, religious rites are purification rites whose function is to separate this or that social, sexual, or age group from another one, by means of prohibiting a filthy, defiling element...It is as if dividing lines were built up between society and a certain nature, as well as within the social aggregate on the basis of the simple logic of *excluding filth*, which, promoted to the ritual level of *defilement*, founded the "self and clean" of each social group if not each subject. (*Powers* 65)

Yet, Kristeva explains, "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (*Powers* 69). On a social level, the abject appears as the other side of

morality, religion, law, and all of those discourses which found the social order, representing everything which cannot be contained by the symbolic system and so must be radically excluded. Rituals become necessary, however, because exclusion is never complete. There is always, as Georges Bataille first noted, an "inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding" (qtd. in Kristeva, *Powers* 64). Consequently, "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (Kristeva, *Powers* 2). Ritual exclusions thus constitute weak but necessary lines of defence against the confusion of boundaries brought about in abjection by functioning as "a 'writing of the real.' They parcel out, demarcate, delineate an order, a framework, a sociality" (Kristeva, *Powers* 74). Because of their flimsiness, however, these ritual reenactments cannot prevent abjection from occurring at junctures between the society and its abjects--a violent confrontation which threatens the very basis of the social and symbolic order, since the abject is precisely "what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers* 4).

As the "voice of the world" for small-town Ontario, gossip in Deptford performs a similar function by mapping the clean and proper social body through a sequence of constant--we might even say, ritualized--diagnoses and amputations. In a village where "hard talk was not always accompanied by hard action" (*Fifth* 30), gossip assumes a privileged role, merging talk with action, thereby making "hard action" unnecessary. Specifically, gossip operates as a mechanism of exclusion, a daily ritual which struggles to maintain the integrity of the village's symbolic order as it emanates from institutional structures like the church and the law. Like the ritual exclusions which attempt to hold the threat of abjection or contamination at bay, Deptford gossip focuses on those instances of transgression where laws and prohibitions collapse in order to strengthen the "unity" of the social group by ostracizing the transgressor. Rewriting Kristeva's maxim that, at a psychological level, "*the abject* [is] *the 'object' of primal repression*" (*Powers* 12), we

might say, in turn, that on a social level, "the abject is the 'object' of the gossiper." Obviously, however, the unity derived from such gossiping is significantly different from what Gluckman proposed, coming as it does with a heavy price for the scapegoat, as Mary Dempster--the principal object of gossip in Deptford--rapidly discovers. Moreover, when evaluated from the perspective of psychoanalysis, the function of abjecting inherent in gossip serves to expel the threat of hybrid menaces to the symbolic system, even as it fails ultimately to enforce those exclusions. Because abjection paradoxically guarantees the system, it can never be dispensed with entirely; rather, it lurks at the borders of society or individual even after it has been banished.

Gossip about Mary Dempster is pre-eminent in Deptford, where "the revelation that Percy Boyd Staunton and Mabel Heighton had been surprised in the sexual act by Mabel's mother" and Mrs. Heighton's blackmail of the wealthy Stauntons for trampling on Mabel's "virtue" "amounted to scandal in high society" (60). As early as her first arrival in Deptford, the relation of a parson's wife to the community is mediated by the village gossip which marks Mary Dempster as a potentially disturbing element: "When Amasa Dempster had brought his little bride to our village the spring before the Christmas of Paul's birth, the opinion had been strong among the women that nothing would ever make a preacher's wife out of that one" (29). These initial suspicions are only compounded by Paul's birth, after which public opinion begins to differentiate his mother from "normal" society. Significantly, gossip about Mrs. Dempster's disturbing presence centers on her role as a mother:

> She now breast-fed him--my mother and all the neighbours had to admit that she did it well--but she lacked the solemnity they expected of a nursing mother; she enjoyed the process, and sometimes when they went into the house there she was, with everything showing, even though her husband was present, just as if she hadn't the sense to pull up her clothes...And thus the opinion grew that Mrs. Dempster was simple. (31)

That gossip as a means of abjection should single out the jouissance of the nursing mother as unsettling is explained by Kristeva's insistence that, "no matter what differences there

may be in societies where religious prohibitions, which are above all behaviour prohibitions, are supposed to afford protection from defilement, one sees everywhere the importance, both social and symbolic of women and particularly the mother" (*Powers* 70).

"The abject confronts us," Kristeva writes, "within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (*Powers* 13). Whereas abjection at the level of the social aggregate threatens those social structures, abjection at the level of personal experience constitutes "a kind of *narcissistic crisis*" in that it "acknowledges [the subject] to be in perpetual danger" (*Powers* 14, 9) by recalling the archaic relationship with the mother's body from which it had once been undifferentiated. Consequently, says Kristeva,

> A whole facet of the sacred...assumes the task of warding off that danger. This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother. (*Powers* 64)

Mary Dempster's conspicuous pleasure at suckling her child only reinforces the fundamentally anti-social dyad of the mother-child by dramatizing maternal authority for the whole village to see. The "solemnity" required of nursing mothers by the symbolic order clearly seeks to disengage the child from the mother, thereby breaking up the dyad which undermines social propagation (the male child must abject the mother if he is to father more children). By flaunting the prohibition, Mary makes herself the object of local gossip which carries out the abjecting responsibility of "rituals of defilement and their derivatives" and alienates her from the community:

> By the time a year had passed since Paul's birth her husband had become 'poor Reverend Dempster' to everybody, a man burdened with a simple-minded wife and a delicate child, and it was a general source of amazement that he could make ends meet.
> ...

> After a year or so most of the women in our village grew tired of pitying the Baptist parson and his wife and began to think that he was as simple as she. Like many ostracized people, they became more marked in their oddity. (32)

Clearly, village gossip has already begun to expel the Dempsters from Deptford society. And yet, as an abject, Mary continues to disturb the boundaries upon which the social order depends by roaming through the streets of the village, "'traipsing' was the word many of the women now used" (48):

> she wanted to give things away and was hurt when neighbours refused these profferings. Her face wore a sweet but woefully un-Deptford expression; it was too clear that she did not know where she was going next, and sometimes she would visit a house more than three times in a morning, to the annoyance of a busy woman who was washing or getting a meal ready for her husband and sons. (48)

Mary's disruption of her neighbours' private and social responsibilities during these wanderings, however, is minor compared to the danger she poses to the community following her disappearance.

When Mary goes missing, the search converges on the gravel pit at the edge of town. As the geographical locus of danger and abjection, it does not merely represent, but *is* the filth jettisoned from the "self and clean" of Deptford:

> Mothers hated it because sometimes little children strayed out into it and were hurt, and big children sneaked into it and met the like of Mabel Heighington. But most of all it was disliked because it was a refuge for the tramps who rode the rods of the railway. Some of these were husky young fellows; others were old men, or men who seemed old, in ragged greatcoats belted with a piece of rope or a strap, wearing hats of terrible dilapidation, and giving off the stench of feet, sweat, faeces, and urine that would have staggered a goat. (50)

The sub-human depiction of the tramps makes them doubly abject because, while they epitomize the abject body which fails to isolate itself from human waste and disease, they are also "feared as lawless men" (50). Lawlessness, as Kristeva indicates, is always abject since "any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject" (32).

In other ways, Ramsay's observation that the gravel pit "was of unusual importance to our village because it completely blocked any normal extension of streets or houses on our western side" (49) further suggests the pit's link with abjection which founds culture through prohibition and blockage, even as its position at the border of the village recalls the

fact that abjection too is "a border...is above all ambiguity" (Kristeva 9). Ramsay would deny this ambiguity when he describes his experience of the pit as the most radical of exclusions. For him, it "had much the character of a Protestant Hell," which he associates with a sermon comparing the gravel pit with Gehenna, "the hateful valley outside the walls of Jerusalem, where outcasts lived, and where their flickering fires, seen from the city walls, may have given rise to the idea of a hell of perpetual burning" (50). Ramsay's imaginative reconstruction of Deptford in the image of the holy city emphasizes his own desire to employ the two-sided logic of gossip for which "filth becomes defilement and founds on the henceforth released side of the 'self and clean' the order that is thus only (and therefore always already) sacred" (Kristeva 65). Public concern and "indignation" (49) about the gravel pit is thus structurally similar to the sacred wall of Jerusalem whose function is to maintain the purity of the inside against the threat of contamination from outside.

Gossip about the scandalous discovery of Mrs. Dempster, the pastor's wife, in the sexual embrace of a tramp in the gravel pit, thus constitutes an example of abjection *par excellence*: "we saw a tramp and a woman in the act of copulation. The tramp rolled over and gaped at us in terror; the woman was Mrs. Dempster" (51). Initially, Ramsay's account focuses on the event itself, implying that Mary had been raped by the tramp. However, the real scandal and source of gossip--the detail which makes the event truly abject--is that no rape occurs:

> "Mary, what made you do it?"
> She looked him honestly in the face and gave him the answer that became famous in Deptford: "He was very civil, 'Masa. And he wanted it so badly." (52)

Indeed, "the answer that became famous in Deptford" suggests the centrality of gossip to the proper functioning of abjection in the social machine. As Radford argues, "Led by Mrs. Ramsay, [the gossips'] hysterical reaction to her free action...follows exactly Freud's definition of the treatment of the taboo-breaker" (67):

> Mrs. Dempster had transgressed in a realm where there could be no shades of right

> and wrong. And the reason she had offered for doing so--!" That was what stuck in the craws of all the good women of Deptford: Mrs. Dempster had not been raped, as a decent woman would have been--no, she had yielded because a man wanted her. The subject was not one that could be freely discussed even among intimates, but it was understood without saying that if women began to yield for such reasons as that, marriage and society would not last long. (54)

Evidently, this "first miracle" of Mary Dempster renders her abject because, through it, she troubles social borders. The lack of free discussion on this topic is deceptive, however, since the agreement about societal norms underpinning such gossip is so strong that they do not even need to be voiced but are "understood without saying." Moreover, Ramsay's account of the expulsion of Amasa Dempster from the church had already illustrated the persistence and power of "the buzzing and humming" in Deptford. When the Baptist parson stepped down from the pulpit the next Sunday,

> A prominent member of the congregation, a baker, took charge and turned the service into a meeting; the baker and a few other men were asking the parson to wait a while, but the majority were against them, especially the women. Not that any of the women spoke; they had done their speaking before church, and their husbands knew the price of peace. So at last the baker and one or two others had to go back into the study and tell Amasa Dempster that his resignation was accepted...There were several men who wanted to do something for him, but the opinion of their wives made it impossible. (53)

Furthermore, such conservative gossip controls internal dissent by threatening to turn on anyone who might question its judgements: "Any man who spoke up for Mary Dempster probably believed in Free Love. Certainly he associated sex with pleasure, and that put him in a class of filthy thinkers like Cece Athelstan" (54).

Within the moral grid maintained by normative gossiping, Ramsay seeks to identify himself with the positive, clean term of the binary. In characterizing his family, for instance, he distinguishes them as "representative of the better sort of life in the village," particularly since the majority of Deptford people "looked to us, the Ramsays, for common sense, prudence, and right opinions on virtually everything" (21-22). All of these right opinions are epitomized in opposition to the filth and decay that are a constant threat in Deptford:

> Cleanliness, for example. My mother was clean--oh but she was clean! Our privy set the sanitary tone of the village...Every house had a privy, and these

> ranked from dilapidated, noisome shacks to some smart edifices of which our own was clearly among the best. There has been much hilarity about privies in the years since they became rarities, but they were not funny buildings, and if they were not to become disgraceful, they needed a lot of care.
>
> As well as this temple of hygiene we had a 'chemical closet' in the house, for use when someone was unwell; it was so capricious and smelly, however, that it merely added a new misery to illness and was rarely set going. (22)

Within a Kristevan framework, the outhouse as "temple of hygiene" assumes its full meaning since the sacred is only ever constituted by abjection. The Dempsters' hygenic sensibilities, in other words, dramatically suggest the same need for rigorous and repeated cleansing that operates in the village gossip.

Ramsay's own desire to be associated with such "good" habits extends to his Freudian desire for Leola Cruikshank who is, like his mother, "a delightful girl, pretty, full of sentimental nonsense, *and clean about her person--she always smelled of fresh ironing*" (69), in contrast to "the pimply Heighington slut" (45). Later, when he is confined to a hospital following World War I, he notes, to his relief, that "there was an open window somewhere, and sweet air--no stink of mud or explosive or corpses *or latrines*--was blowing through it. *I was clean*" (83); "I was out of it at last, and I was happy to take pleasure in security and *cleanliness*, without paying too much attention to what went on" (88; my emphases). Each of these points in Ramsay's narrative, where he invokes cleanliness as a virtue, recalls the attitude which seeks at all costs to avoid confronting abjection, since "refuse...show[s] me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (Kristeva, *Powers* 3).

Ramsay's cleanliness is threatened, however, by the gossip about his continued association with Mary, as well as his discovery of an affinity for the parson's wife who has become known as "hoor" on the streets of the village: "Mrs. Dempster was beginning to fill my whole life, and the stranger her conduct became, and the more the village pitied and dismissed her, the worse my obsession grew" (34). Feeling that he has become "tied to her" (34) by a love "that was far too demanding for my age or experience," Ramsay insists:

"I regarded her as my greatest friend, and the secret league between us as the tap-root that fed my life" (57). Despite such proclamations, however, Ramsay in many ways strives to maintain the fundamental structure of village taboos since his love for Mary Dempster is conditional:

> Close as we grew, however, there was never any moment when I could have asked her about the tramp. I was trying to forget the spectacle, so horrible in my visions, of what I had seen when I first happened on them--those bare buttocks and four legs so strangely opposed. But I could never forget. It was my first encounter with *a particular kind of reality*, which my religion, my upbringing, and the callowly romantic cast of my mind had declared obscene. Therefore there was *an aspect* of Mary Dempster which *was outside my ken*; and being young and unwilling to recognize that there was anything I did not, or could not know, I decided that *this unknown aspect must be called madness.* (57; my emphasis)

As Radford argues, "the root of Ramsay's adult desire to find the myth behind reality" lies in his rejection of his own mother whose "Scottish reserve breaks down in the dionysian beating over the stolen egg" (67). Her possessiveness, which leads Ramsay to conclude "that nobody--not even my mother--was to be trusted in a strange world that showed very little of itself on the surface" (40), has traditionally cast her in the Jungian role of the Terrible Mother "who saps his strength with the poison of secret doubt" (Jung, qtd. in Radford 66). Conversely, he casts Mary Dempster in the role of "the smiling and life-giving mother" (66) who, like the Virgin Mary, lives "by a light that arose from within" (*Fifth* 56), and instructs Ramsay in the secret life of the spirit. As Radford correctly notices, however, such archetypal transpositions are only accomplished by Ramsay's "repression" of the image of the whore defined by the village gossip (Radford 68). Only by radically excluding those "aspects" of Mary Dempster which are not contained by the symbolic system he inhabits, can Ramsay worship her as the Madonna.

Mary Dempster thus assumes the role of Kristeva's "splitting mother" who is significantly different from her Jungian counterparts. Instead of relying on a faith in the archetypes of the collective unconscious, Kristeva points to a physical, material struggle to separate from the mother's body as the foundation of identity. In the process of separation and the mirror stage through which the child's ego is formed and he or she begins to

distinguish between itself as subject and the world as object, the mother "is split in two: the abject and the sublime":

> Making the mother abject allows the child to separate from and become autonomous. But if the mother is only abject, then she becomes the phobic object and the child himself becomes abject...Within the heterosexual narrative, the mother must also be made sublime so that masculine sexuality can take her, a woman, as an object of love. (Oliver 61)

For Ramsay, however, Mary Dempster is the exclusive representative of the sublime, both as the statue of the Virgin he sees in the battlefields of Europe and as a saint in his personal mythology. Thus, as Radford suggests, "his saint is no more allowed full humanity than Staunton's 'whoor [sic]'" (73).

Even in Deptford, however, Ramsay must split Mary Dempster in order to save her:

> Of the disorder and discomfort of that cottage I shall not speak, and though little Paul was loved and cherished by his mother he was in his appearance a pitifully neglected child. So perhaps she was crazy, in part, but it was only in part; the best side of her brought comfort and assurance into my life, which badly needed it. I got so that I did not notice the rope she wore (it was actually a harness that went around her waist and shoulders, with the horse-smelling hemp rope knotted to a ring on one side, so that she could lie down if she wanted to), or the raggedness of her clothes, or the occasional spells when she was not wholly rational. (57)

Despite the fact that he can confirm the "rumour that he [Amasa] kept her tied to a long rope inside the house, so that she could move freely through it but not get out" (55), Ramsay insists that he did not notice it--even though he declares, "I was miserable because of the village talk" (55). Ramsay's private attempts to purify his saint, in other words, depend on his own strategic use of exclusion.

As Ramsay finds himself drawn into the gossip about Mrs. Dempster, he is still troubled by feelings of personal abjection. Milo Papple's humiliating reports about Ramsay's regular visits to "the bughouse," for instance, precipitate Ramsay's own humiliation of the schoolyard clown:

> Nobody said 'bughouse' to me for a long time, but sometimes I could see that they wanted to say it, and *I knew that they said it behind my back. This increased my sense of isolation--of being forced out* of the world I belonged to into the strange and unchancy world of the Dempsters. (36)

Schoolyard gossip about Ramsay's relationship with the Dempsters thus seems to replay in

microcosm the abjecting effects of the Deptford gossip on Mary Dempster--only now it is Ramsay who is abjected. Furthermore, this gossip does not simply function as "voice of the world": an anonymous procedure which abjects the subversive or the disturbing. On a more immediate level, gossip about Ramsay obeys Paine's suggestion that by scandalizing one's opponent, the scandalizer asserts his or her own superiority. Ramsay's marginalization as a target of malicious schoolyard sniggering, however, is recuperated by the adult narrator as a position of unexpected power. As someone who is manifestly denied public forms of power for being caught on the wrong side of the fence in Deptford, Ramsay resorts to more devious methods of self-protection and promotion. For even if the object of gossip is abject, the role of gossiper provides him with a means of converting the margin into a center by rewriting traditional, centered models of heroism. Ramsay's implicit acceptance of the role of gossiper is thus evident in the very form of his autobiography.

In "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), Georges Gusdorf describes the autobiographer as a narcissistic exhibitionist, someone who "gives a sort of relief to his image by reference to the environment with its independent existence; he looks at himself being and delights in being looked at--he calls himself as witness for himself; others he calls as witness for what is irreplaceable in his presence" (29). When Dunstan Ramsay mourns the passing of Mary Dempster, this madwoman whom he has transformed into his own personal saint, his sorrow at losing "one of the fixed stars in my universe" (237) suggests an affinity with Gusdorf's autobiographer. Like a Ptolemaic astronomer looking through a telescope from a fixed center, Ramsay as autobiographer seems, at first, to view himself as the axis upon which the universe of his experience spins. However, in marked contrast to such self-centered narratological models, Ramsay's epistolary Life in *Fifth Business* often seems closer to a Copernican cosmology, in that it appears to subvert the readerly expectation that the autobiographer "think[s] of himself as the center of a living space" (Gusdorf 29). Rather than making himself the hero of traditional autobiography,

Ramsay's letter to the Headmaster charts the trajectory of an author who seems perpetually to seek his own marginalization, finding centers in other people: the *nouveau riche* Stauntons, Boy and Leola; Paul Dempster, reborn as Eisengrim the magician; the demonic Liesl; and Mary Dempster, "hoor" of Deptford, Ontario turned fool-saint. Recounting the story of how "I have been cast by Fate and my own character for the vital though never glorious role of Fifth Business" (19), Ramsay's letter is a catalogue of borderland experiences summed up in his self-justifying warning to the Headmaster: "I am not seeking to posture as a hero in this memoir" (118).

The discomfort Ramsay feels occupying center-stage is nowhere more apparent than when he is awarded the Victoria Cross following his return from World War I. Ramsay's meditation on the nature of "heroism" as he is decorated for a "heroic act" that "was rather a dirty job I did when I was dreadfully frightened; I could just as easily have muddled it and been ingloriously killed" (90), seems implicitly to confirm the suspicion that Ramsay's narrative scorns the egotism of traditional autobiographical forms. Yet, Ramsay's admission remains unvoiced. His ambiguous conclusion that heroes are no more than icons seems to be for his readers' ears only: "But it doesn't much matter, because people seem to need heroes; so long as I don't lose sight of the truth, it might as well be me as anyone else" (90-1). Such an ambivalent response to his moment in the limelight, deferred in a text that will not be seen until after his own death (258), clearly works to Ramsay's advantage. His private comments preserve for his reader the modesty of the unpretentious schoolmaster who refuses to be dazzled by glittering tokens from the king, even as his silence in the dramatic moment permits him to occupy the privileged role of public icon. Accordingly, he concludes with admonitions against speaking ill of public figures:

> I have tried to think charitably of people in prominent positions of one kind or another; we cast them in roles, and it is only right to consider them as players, without trying to discredit them with knowledge of their off-stage life--unless they drag it into the middle of the stage themselves. (90)

Ramsay's posturing here seems somewhat disingenuous since the apologetic form of his

narrative clearly indicates that he has no intention of being discredited. The ambiguous advice to his reader thus allows Ramsay to straddle the otherwise incompatible roles of hero and observer, making his decentering highly suspicious.

Of central importance to his ostensible refusal of heroism is Ramsay's strategy of narrative self-division. David Williams has already suggested the significance of such autobiographical splitting in Ramsay's use of "[t]he hagiographer's model for autobiography, the *Confessions* of St Augustine" in *Fifth Business*, particularly the formal device of "the transcendent location of the narrator" (59). Like Augustine, Ramsay divides himself into a "firmly situated narrator" and a "wandering protagonist" (Spengemann, qtd. in Williams 59), in order to transcend his own earlier limitations. But whereas autobiography has traditionally relied on such a division of its author whose ultimately transcendent point of view fastidiously selects from and imparts meaning to the naïve experiences of an earlier self, laying them into the pattern of a life, Ramsay carries this self-division to unusual extremes. Liesl's accusation that Ramsay, like the stereotype of the gossip, is always "watching life from the sidelines and knowing where all the players go wrong" (226), emphatically suggests the degree to which Ramsay privileges his position as narrator, since, *even as a wandering protagonist,* he already viewed life as "a spectator sport" (*Fifth* 226). Ramsay as gossipy autobiographer, in other words, has always already occupied the off-center position of the watchful gossiper.

If Ramsay's mocking remarks about his "apotheosis" (99) as war hero in "Deptford's version of a Roman Triumph" (99) following his return from the Great War mark an ironic rejection of centered, self-congratulatory models of selfhood and identity, his *real* apotheosis seems to occur later, when Liesl renames him Fifth Business. This second, ironic apotheosis seems also to pave the way for a reversal of Gusdorf's theory of centered, individualistic autobiography by providing a counterpoint to the imperializing self-presence of the Cartesian subject upon which it relies. The "gargoyle" who tells Ramsay, "I think you are Fifth Business" (231), outlines a mythic theory of personality

which seems perfectly suited to one who has insisted all along that he finds his meanings "in psychological truth, not in objective truth" (*Fifth* 181):

> in opera in a permanent company of the kind we keep up in Europe you must have a prima donna--always a soprano, always the heroine, often a fool; and a tenor who always plays the lover to her; and then you must have a contralto, who is a rival to the soprano, or a sorceress or something; and a basso, who is the villain or the rival or whatever threatens the tenor.
>
> So far so good. But you cannot make the plot work without another man, and he is usually a baritone, and he is called in the profession Fifth Business, because he is the odd man out, the person who has no opposite of the other sex. And you must have Fifth Business because he is the one who knows the secret of the hero's birth, or comes to the assistance of the heroine when she thinks all is lost, or keeps the hermitess in her cell, or may even be the cause of somebody's death if that is part of the plot. The prima donna and the tenor, the contralto and the basso, get all the best music and do all the spectacular things, but you cannot manage the plot without Fifth Business! It is not spectacular, but it is a good line of work, I can tell you, and those who play it sometimes have a career that outlasts the golden voices. (231)

Liesl's story transforms the role of the "odd man out" into the integral, though parasitic occupation of Fifth Business--the ultimate confirmation of Ramsay's earlier suspicion that "we all think of ourselves as stars and rarely recognize it when we are indeed mere supporting characters or even supernumeraries" (26). Fifth Business, in other words, epitomizes the subject who is not identical with himself, but whose identity is determined relative to another; he is, in Julia Kristeva's terms, abject, because he cannot locate the borders of his own identity and because he disturbs the premise of a unified, centered subjectivity. By fixing the position of the observer/narrator--the one who knows the hero's secret--the role of Fifth Business decenters the hero of autobiography by pushing him out of the spotlight to loiter about the edges of the stage. The ambiguous fifth position thus transcends hierarchical binaries like center and periphery by foregrounding the marginal figure as the necessary, though not the sufficient, condition of realizing the plot.

Like Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic notion of abjection, Ramsay's strangely positioned alter-ego epitomizes the challenge to a stable, fixed identity which occurs at "the collapse of the border between inside and outside...as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents" (*Powers* 53). The resulting collapse

of the self into the territory of the Other thus interrogates previous theories of subjectivity which would freeze the identity of the autobiographer into the icon of "Narcissus, contemplating his face in the fountain's depth...so fascinated with the apparition that he would die bending toward himself" (Gusdorf 32). Conversely, Kristeva's subject, haunted by abjection, experiences "a kind of *narcissistic crisis,*" since "narcissism never is the wrinkleless image of the Greek youth in a quiet fountain. The conflicts of drives muddle its bed, cloud its water, and bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated with a given system of signs, is abjection for it" (*Powers* 14). In practice, "The ego of primary narcissism is thus uncertain, fragile, threatened, subjected just as much as its non-object to spatial ambivalence (inside/outside uncertainty) and to ambiguity of perception (pleasure/pain)" (*Powers* 62).

In other ways, however, the "marginalization" inherent in the inevitable fifth is deceptive. The promise that "those who play it often have a career that outlasts the golden voices" suggests that the role of Fifth Business does not really collapse binary oppositions, but rather, outlines a strategy of deferral which effects a reversal of the structure of power in favour of the marginal figure. What the role of Fifth Business lacks in the glamour and public authority of a Boy Staunton, it more than makes up for in its promise of good things to those who wait. When viewed from this light, Ramsay's championing of the private "reality of the soul" (178) over the transience of public, political interests seems suspiciously like a red herring designed to divert attention from the patient machinations of a behind-the-scenes power broker who only delays his own gratification, rather than abandoning it entirely.

The promise of power, implicit in Liesl's assurance that Fifth Business will have "a career that outlasts the golden voices," turns out to address what has been Ramsay's concern as a gossiper all along. As a youngster growing up in Deptford, and tormented for his association with Mary Dempster, Ramsay envisioned a revenge on his chief tormentor, Percy Boyd Staunton, the "rich young master" who also shouted "hoor" at Mary Dempster

(264): "not many of the people with whom I went to school liked to say too much to my face; but I knew that they said enough behind my back. Percy Boyd Staunton was one of these" (33). Ramsay's response to the gossip about his being "unofficial watchdog to the Dempster family" (33) is to turn the weapon of gossip back on his attacker:

> I had a good one all ready for Percy, if he ever gave me any trouble. I had heard his mother tell my mother that when he was a dear little fellow, just learning to talk, his best version of his name, Percy Boyd, was Pidgy Boy-Boy, and she still called him that in moments of unbuttoned affection. I knew that I had but once to call him Pidgy Boy-Boy in the school yard and his goose would be cooked; probably suicide would be his only way out. *This knowledge gave me a sense of power in reserve.* (33-34; my emphasis)

Here, the decision not to tell clearly does not constitute a wholesale rejection of gossip. On the contrary, it suggests that secret-keeping and gossiping are intimately intertwined.

As Georg Simmel argues in his sociology of secrets, the fascination with secrecy is directly connected to a desire for power insofar as "The secret gives one a position of exception" (332). "Among children," he suggests, "pride and bragging are often based on a child's being able to say to the other: 'I know something that you don't know'--and to such a degree, that this sentence is uttered as a formal means of boasting and of subordinating the others, even where it is made up and actually refers to no secret" (Simmel 332). Ramsay's use of the secret, however, is more subtle. Instead, his "discretion" in the dramatic moment, which nonetheless anticipates a future disclosure, foregrounds the other side of secrecy. Namely,

> The secret contains a tension that is dissolved in the moment of its revelation. This moment constitutes the acme in the development of the secret; all of its charms are once more gathered in it and brought to a climax--just as the moment of dissipation lets one enjoy with extreme intensity the value of the object: the feeling of power which accompanies the possession of money becomes concentrated for the dissipator, most sensuously, in the very instant in which he lets this power go out of his hands. The secret, too, is full of the consciousness that it *can* be betrayed; that one holds the power of surprises, turns of fate, joy, destruction--if only, perhaps, of self-destruction. (Simmel 334)

Secrecy, in short, is not the opposite of disclosure, but the condition of its emergence and the basis of its power. Ramsay, the "repository of secrets," might therefore be a highly skilled gossiper who appropriates potentially scandalous information for strategic

deployment at a later time in order to maximize its effects. By converting the material of scandal into "power in reserve," the young Ramsay also anticipates the function of gossip in his own narrative which likewise gains its power from deferral.

Moreover, Boy's mysterious "suicide" which constitutes the realization of Ramsay's prophetic childhood wish should give pause to those critics who take Ramsay at his word when he justifies his betrayal of Boy with the secret of the stone-in-the-snowball in the final pages of the novel on altruistic grounds: "I'm simply trying to recover something of the totality of your life. Don't you want to possess it as a whole--the bad with the good?" (268). Ramsay's role as Good Samaritan is chillingly undercut by the actualization of his desire when the gossip about "Pidgy Boy-Boy" is finally exposed--not by Ramsay, but by Paul Dempster, in the conversation that culminates in Boy's midnight drive off the pier. The disturbing symmetry of Ramsay's plan to revenge himself on Boy through the strategic use of gossip, and its final execution, can only leave us wondering at the critic who calls upon us, without a trace of irony, "to emulate the approach of Dunstan Ramsay" since his "quiet acceptance of God elevates his work from philanthropy to religion: it places him under the banner of belief, marshalling him with the saints" (Cude 117). Rather than emulating the approach of Dunstan Ramsay, we might first want to understand precisely what is at stake in his professed refusal to gossip in light of Kristeva's insight that "the epitome of abjection is one who is outwardly beyond reproach...and yet secretly getting away with murder" (Lechte 160).

In order better to understand Ramsay's deferred use of gossip as a technique for "information management" (Paine 282), we might consider a model of gossip which emphasizes fluidity and heterogeneity by identifying the various subject positions within the structure of scandal. As Bergmann argues, there are actually three positions in the gossip triad: 1) the subject of gossip, or "the person about whom one gossips" who is "excluded from the communication of gossip as an active participant" (49); 2) the gossip producer, or "he [who] knows the personal affairs of the absent third party, and...transmits

this information to his conversational partners who are present" (55); 3) and the gossip recipient, or "the last figure of the gossip triad...[who] is by no means merely a passive participant" (67). Gabrielle Taylor, another gossip theorist, simplifies this structure when she says that there are essentially two relationships to be considered in the gossip exchange: "that between gossiper and gossiper, and that between gossiper and gossipee" (39). In the first case, gossip is seen as producing unifying effects: "Given the nature of gossip as 'idle' talk and all that this implies, the relation between gossipers would seem a positive one. They should be relaxed with one another, united by a common interest that makes for a happy personal relationship" (39). In the second case, however, gossip suggests dissent or betrayal: "By contrast, the relationship between gossipers and gossipees seems to be negative...One does not like to be the subject of gossip" (39).

In Taylor's analysis, the gossip triad is reduced to a line with only two points; Bergmann's scheme of gossiper-receiver-gossipee is replaced by a simplified dyad consisting only of gossipers and gossipees. This elision of the receiver in Taylor's analysis is significant because it points to the ambiguity of the "receiver" term in Bergmann's account of gossip. Certainly, the defensiveness of his introduction suggests that Bergmann himself is aware of the confusion associated with this third term: "The last figure of the gossip triad, the gossip recipient, is by no means merely a passive participant whose presence--or more exactly willingness to listen--is necessary for communication but who otherwise has no special significance for the specific communicative process of gossip" (67). Yet, despite these assurances, Bergmann is unable to explain this special significance beyond suggesting that an element of mutual acquaintanceship between gossiper and recipient is important, since "[n]ot all communication partners are suitable, as gossip recipients, to be a conversational participant who is ready to disseminate information" (67). More telling is the slippage of his argument as it reverts back to Taylor's two-term structure in which gossiper and recipient merge: "The relationship between gossip producer and gossip recipient is not least of all determined by the

expectation that the gossip recipient at the moment he acquires morally contaminated information can then appear as a gossip producer himself within other contexts" (Bergmann 68). Of all the positions in the gossip triad, the gossip recipient is therefore the most unstable and the most troubling. It is, to stay with Kristeva's words, a "composite," "ambiguous" term which does not respect the borders or identities of the positions laid out within the structure of gossip.

Of course, the position of gossip receiver is not the only one to threaten identity. The very structure of all three positions is built on the shaky foundations of abjection. As Kristeva says, it is "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order" (*Powers* 4). Because anyone may employ gossip about anyone else at any time--in fact, as Gluckman argues, is expected to do so--all of the "identities" associated with the terms of the gossip triad are of necessity fluid and self-contradictory. As Kristeva says of abjection, "corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance" (16). Bergmann's analysis of gossip as "discreet indiscretion" further suggests that abjection is inherent in the gossip triangle since he finds a "contradictory, indeed paradoxical loyalty structure of friendship and acquaintanceship that counts as the main source of energy for the equivocal nature as well as the lasting success of the communicative genre 'gossip'" (151). In other words, the gossiper is always caught in the double-bind of choosing secrecy or disclosure:

> Anyone who has information about the personal affairs of a friend is, on the one hand, obligated to discretion toward this friend. And as a rule he honors this obligation insofar as he does not disseminate this information indiscriminately or pass it on to the general public. On the other hand, however, anyone who possesses this indiscreet information is obligated by loyalty to his other friends, which as a rule means not to conceal or to withhold from them information in which they are interested. It is precisely in this contradictory situation that the communicative genre 'gossip' has developed and established itself. (Bergmann 151)

For Bergmann, such contradictions and transgressions explain the extraordinarily abject nature of the gossiper's utterance:

> It is precise and detailed and remains, however, vague and allusive. Authentic

> presentations are suddenly transformed into exaggerations. Indecency is mixed with decent restraint. Indignation about transgressions is paired with amusement. Disgust with compassion, disapproval with understanding. Morally contaminated information is presented in an innocent wrapper. Ingenuous sociability is mixed with calculated backbiting. Shameful affectation and coyness interchanges [sic] with shameless directness. Gossip is like a moral balancing act, a boundary crossing that is undone with the next step. (Bergmann 149)

What is perhaps most startling about Bergmann's litany against gossip is the precision with which it seems to echo the contradictory language of Kristeva's own litany about abjection that begins *Powers of Horror*:

> The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior...He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law--rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you... (Kristeva 4)

Each term within the gossip triad is thus profoundly implicated in the dynamics of abjection. If the abject gossiper is the friend that stabs you, and the gossipee is rendered abject through the mechanism of gossip, the gossip receiver is only slightly more abject than the other two terms because instability is built into its very definition. The recipient function is evidently doubled, since he or she must not only listen to the gossiper but is expected to occupy a second position as a gossiper to aid in the dissemination of gossip information, much like the doubled role of the reader in Spacks's analysis of Walpole's letters. Thus, as Simmel suggests, the "recipient" of the secret is never a recipient only, because even when it is concealed, the secret "creates the tempting challenge to break through it, by gossip or confession--and this challenge accompanies its psychology like a constant overtone" (334).

Ramsay himself favors this ambiguous position above all others, refusing the abject roles of either the subject of gossip or the gossip producer in order to justify his "Manichaean" divisions, so that, "without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections [he] is not at all unaware of them" (Kristeva, *Powers* 8). The adaptation of his schoolyard technique of "getting off a good one" to the more sophisticated model which

relies on splitting the role of receiver through strategic deferral of revelation, however, constitutes a further abjection of his abject discourse. If the village gossip which Dunstan overhears as a boy unites the gossip producer and the gossip recipient against the subject of gossip who is abjected, Ramsay nonetheless shifts the border of abjection within the previously unifying relationship of the gossipers--even within the abject role of the recipient--in order to isolate himself altogether from the process of gossip production. By becoming receiver only--and not an accomplice to dissemination--Ramsay abjects the role of gossiper from his identity. Adapting Kristeva, we could say that Ramsay is a "splitting gossip" since he founds his identity on the conviction that the dissemination of private information is an abject activity, although the retention of secrets is sublime. Against the framework Bergmann lays out, Ramsay confirms his own identity as confidence-man by refusing to gossip: "Almost from the earliest days of my childhood I had been closed mouthed; I never passed on gossip if I could help it, *though I had no objection to hearing it*; I never betrayed a confidence, preferring instead the costive pleasure of being a repository of secrets" (219; my emphasis). Like Robert Paine's description of the self-interested gossip, Ramsay "has 'long ears' and part of his art lies in arranging a constant flow of information to himself" (Paine 283). Thus, as a pure receptacle of information, Ramsay claims to arrest the flow of gossip, even as his deferred revelations belie his discretion and suggest that he actually seeks to transform gossip into a transcendent art which will allow him to exercise control from beyond the grave.

At a psychological level, Ramsay's decisive opposition of gossip and secrecy seems to instantiate the practice of abjection in Kristeva's account of identity-formation. That is, Ramsay's pretensions to discretion are not only the basis of his public identity, but are also a metaphor for the self-protecting "I" whose constitution depends on making rigid binary distinctions between inside and outside, self and other. Secrecy, according to Simmel, serves precisely such a purpose, since one of "the attractions and values of the secret" is that "the strongly emphasized exclusion of all outsiders makes for a correspondingly strong

feeling of possession" (332). Simmel's observation that "the secret is a first-rate element of individualization" (334) thus acquires a new currency within a Kristevan framework of individualization, wherein psyches turn out to depend on secrets--in the form of repression or abjection. For as Gross notes, "The expulsion of the abject is one of the preconditions for the symbolic; and it is also the by-product or excessive residue let untapped by symbolic functioning. It is, as it were, *the unspoken* of a stable speaking position, an abyss at the very borders of the subject's identity, a hole into which the subject may fall" (87; my emphasis). The abject, in other words, is the secret which the subject must keep from himself, but which he finds impossible to forget because, unlike Freud's explanation of uncanniness as the return of the repressed, in abjection, "[t]he 'unconscious' contents remain here *excluded* but in a strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a *position* to be established" (Kristeva, *Powers* 7).

This ambiguous "position" means that self-deception is never absolute, especially for Ramsay, given the abject nature of secrecy itself: "the secret is surrounded by the possibility and the temptation of betrayal; and the external danger of being discovered is interwoven with *the internal danger, which is like the fascination of an abyss, of giving oneself away*" (Simmel 334; my emphasis). From a Kristevan point of view, Ramsay's self-construction as secret-keeper is therefore deeply ironic. For the fundamental precariousness of the secret means that Ramsay's establishment of a "clean and proper" self by abjecting gossip production is necessarily "provisional, and open to breakdown and instability" (Gross 86). As we have seen, however, Ramsay is not determined by such a psychoanalytic theory, but appropriates its logic for his own ends, turning the noble role of confidant into an alibi for the deliberate transgressions of the malicious gossiper.

Ramsay's purposive and complex splitting of the role of gossip receiver is apparent in a series of incidents in which he experiences a constant flow of information with no risk to himself. His desire to become a polymath, or a "know-all," by reading the 1888 edition of

Chambers' Encyclopaedia in the village library, for example, is an early attempt by Ramsay to mould an identity based on being an information receiver (57-58). Significantly, the birth of the polymath follows upon the heels of Ramsay's failure to become "a master of sleight-of-hand, a matchless *prestidigitateur*" (38). Finding himself unsuited to performance, Ramsay says, "I set to work to become a polymath with the same enthusiasm that I had once laboured to become a conjurer" (58). The role of information gatherer, in other words, becomes a substitute for the power of the magician--a public, performative power, which Ramsay is unable to master. Of course, it is ultimately Paul, not Ramsay, who assumes the role of conjurer "to be wondered at" (212). Yet, the polymath is a sort of wonder-worker too, as Ramsay's implicit equation of scandal and miracle during his time in Guadalupe suggests. Liesl's remark that "every magician has an autobiography" thus seems to include Ramsay as well: a more private, but perhaps no less powerful, version of the conjurer.

The polymath is not only interested in trivia gleaned from books, however, since his identity as receiver is nowhere more apparent than in relation to the gossip about Mrs. Dempster and the premature birth of her son Paul, for which Ramsay holds himself and Boy Staunton accountable. Following the notorious snowball fight, Ramsay appears as the secret participant in a gossip conversation by eavesdropping on his parents' discussion:

> I learned all the gynecological and obstetrical details as they were imparted piecemeal to my father; the difference was that he sat comfortably beside the living-room stove, opposite my mother, while I stood barefoot and in my nightshirt beside the stovepipe upstairs, guilt-ridden and sometimes nauseated as I heard things that were new and terrible to my ears. (23)

As an eavesdropper who overhears the material of gossip, Ramsay dramatically subverts the expectation for the gossip receiver to repeat the information by removing himself from the circuit of exchange altogether.

As an adult, Ramsay comes closest to perfecting the discourse of secrecy in his dealings with Boy Staunton, who chooses him as a confidant in his disappointing marriage to Leola Cruikshank:

> When we met we usually ended up talking about Leola...I knew from his confidences that they went in for what the euphemism of the day called 'heavy petting'--mutual masturbation would be the bleak term for it... (119)
>
> I would have given much for the strength of mind to tell him I had no opinions on such matters, but I could not resist the bittersweet, prurient pleasure of listening. (120)
>
> I was the only person to whom he could talk frankly about Leola. She was trying hard, but she could not keep pace with Boy's social advancement. (155)
>
> I enjoyed my role as Friend of the Family, though I was unlike the smart, rich, determinedly youthful people who were their 'set.' It was some time before I tumbled to the fact that Boy needed me as someone in whose presence he could think aloud, and that a lot of his thinking was about the inadequacy of the wife he had chosen to share his destiny. (157)

Boy makes Leola the object of gossip in another way as well, in the "art studies" of Leola he passes on to Ramsay to develop: "Leola, lying on cushions, peeping through veils, sitting at her make-up table, kneeling in front of an open fire, wagging her finger at a Teddy Bear, choosing a chocolate from a large ribboned box--every sentimental posture approved by the taste of the day for 'cutie' photographs, and in every one of them she was stark naked" (160). Although this time, Boy's gossip about his bride is not oral, the circuit of exchange followed by the photographs perfectly reproduces the flow of information in the gossip triangle, including the absence of the person who is gossiped about. Not only is Ramsay once again gossip recipient, his response to being deemed "palace eunuch" seems designed to increase the already considerable flow of private information in his direction: "My solution was typical of me. I developed all the pictures as carefully as I could, enlarged the best ones (all those of Leola), returned them without a word, *and waited to see what would happen*" (160; my emphasis).

In keeping with Bergmann's argument that the gossip recipient is never merely a passive listener, Ramsay also assumes an active interest in Boy's private affairs. As he becomes "even more caught up in the life of the Stauntons" (185), Ramsay exploits his own marginal status in the Staunton household in order to gain greater access to gossip about the family and Boy, even if it means virtually removing himself from the realm of human contact:

> Boy liked to have me around much as he liked to have valuable pictures and handsome rugs; I gave the right tone to the place. By that I mean that it put him in a position of

> advantage with his friends to have someone often in his house who was from a different world, and when he introduced me as a Writer I could hear the capital letter.
> ...
> Having me in the dining-room was almost the equivalent of having a Raeburn on the walls; I was classy, I was heavily varnished, and I offended nobody.
> Why did I accept a place that I now describe in such terms? Because I was tirelessly concerned to see how Boy was getting on...If his social life interested me, his private life fascinated me. (185-86)

Boy's gossipy tales of marital problems and extra-marital dalliance, combined with Ramsay's active pursuit of information about his friend's private life, thus cement the bond between the two men even though Ramsay strives to distance his own avowedly spiritual interests from Boy's physical pursuits and external concerns.

Such a distinction which he is eager to maintain recalls the contradictory logic of the secret upon which gossip's possibility as a violation of the integrity of the public/private spheres depends. For Simmel defends the secret as "one of man's greatest achievements. In comparison with the childish stage in which every conception is expressed at once, and every undertaking is accessible to the eyes of all, the secret produces an immense enlargement of life: numerous contents of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity. The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former" (Simmel 330). This "second world," according to Bergmann, is precisely what makes gossip possible, since gossip "draws an essential part of its energy from the tension between what a person does publicly and what he or she seeks to keep secret as his or her private affair" (53). In other words, if Ramsay seeks to equate gossip with public affairs and external concerns while insisting on a connection between the inner world of the spirit and the secret "second world" revealed to the gossiper's accomplice, then his relationship with Boy allows him to have the best of both "worlds." In his carefully constructed role as gossip recipient, Ramsay can indulge in the prurient interest of the gossip without compromising his "true self" by promising not to tell: "Much of my intimacy with Boy Staunton rested on the fact that he could be sure I would not repeat anything I was told in confidence, and extremely little that was not so regarded. My pleasure depended on what I knew, not on what I could tell" (219).

Even on a professional level, Ramsay maintains his role as gossip recipient in the first of his

"annual journeys...saint-hunting, saint-identifying, and saint describing...This time I was after big game, a saint never satisfactorily described and occurring in a variety of forms whose secret I hoped to discover" (146). In fact, the materials he examines in order to uncover the secret lives of saints make hagiography sound very much like a gossiping since the hagiographer, too, "puzzl[es] over records of lives strange as fairy tales, written by people with no sense of history, and yet...cannot rid [him]self of the notion that [he is] well occupied" (172). The "psychological-mythological gossip" of the hagiographer thus allows Ramsay a legitimate outlet, not only for gathering information about saints, but for disseminating it as well, in "my book *A Hundred Saints for Travellers*, still in print in six languages and a lively seller, to say nothing of my nine other books, and my occasional articles" (146). For a polymath who once pored over such meagre fare as *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*, the opportunity to join the Bollandists provides him with the possibility of being on the other side of the page, without sacrificing the pleasure of secrets. The Bollandists, he reminds us, "are a group of Jesuits whose special task is to record all available information about saints in their great *Acta Sanctorum*, upon which they have been at work (with breaks for civil or religious uproar) since John van Bolland began in 1643; they have been pegging away with comparatively few interruptions since 1837..." (168). Through his written publications, as well as his contribution to encyclopaedic gossip-mongering, Ramsay reopens the sluice gates which have supposedly kept him silent; could the gossip in Ramsay's extensive publications about the lives of saints be anything but a rehearsal for the gossip in his last publication, the autobiography of St. Dunstan? If so, the role of hagiographer might be seen as the first of many masks Ramsay assumes in order to gossip without appearing to compromise his identity as a "repository of secrets."

Ramsay's study of saints challenges his reduction of gossip to an act of listening in another important way as well. His relationship with Padre Blazon turns out to be crucial to his education as a gossip producer since telling scandalous stories about saints brings the typical Bollandist's academic gossip about saints down to the level of earthier discourse. As Blazon tells Ramsay,

> Joseph is history's most celebrated cuckold. Did not God usurp Joseph's function,

> reputedly by impregnating his wife through her ear? Do not nasty little seminarians still refer to the woman's *sine qua non* as *auricula*--the ear? And is not Joseph known throughout Italy as Tio Pepe--Uncle Joe--and invoked by husbands who are getting worried? St Joseph hears more prayers about cuckoldry than he does about house-hunting or confectionery, I can assure you. Indeed, in the underworld hagiography of which I have promised to tell you, it is whispered that the Virgin herself, who was born to Joachim and Anna through God's personal intervention, was a divine daughter as well as a divine mate; the Greeks could hardly improve on that, could they? (176)

Ramsay seems, at first, to repeat his usual position as silent listener to Blazon's stories from the underworld of hagiography, since the theatrical priest's rules insist that his audience treat him to a free meal, and, in exchange, "'I shall be happy to recompense you with information about the saints you will certainly not find in our library. If, on the contrary, you insist that I should take my turn as host, I shall expect you to divert me--and I am not an easy man to amuse, Monsieur Ramezay. As a host I am exigent, rebarbative, unaccommodating. As a guest--ah, quite another set of false teeth, I assure you..' So I was always the host" (175).

In other ways, however, Blazon becomes Ramsay's first advisor in gossip--a role that Dunstan himself assigns to Liesl. Blazon's blasphemies turn out to be an elaborate justification of gossip, anticipating Liesl's Jungian advice nearly term for term:

> But all this terrible talk about the saints is not disrespect, Ramezay. Far from it! It is faith! It is love! It takes the saint to the heart by supplying the other side of his character that history and legend has suppressed--that he may very well have suppressed himself in his struggle toward sainthood. The saint triumphs over sin. Yes, but most of us cannot do that, and because we love the saint and want him to be like ourselves, we attribute some imperfection to him...Mankind cannot endure perfection; it stifles him. (176)

The conflation of gossip and saint-building in this scene is particularly striking as it suggests that Ramsay's own desire for transcendence is directly related to unleashing what he himself has suppressed. The lesson of the "learned chatterbox" (177), in other words, is that Ramsay, like the saints he studies, must also face his shadow--in Kristeva's terms, that role of gossip producer he has sought to abject. Indeed, Blazon's advice turns out to be prophetic since Ramsay, too, becomes "a chatterbox" (222) upon meeting Liesl at the *Soirée of Illusions.*

As Ramsay's involvement with the Bollandists begins to suggest, his abjection of gossiping from his identity is ultimately unsuccessful. Having made himself master of the secret in the various roles of polymath, eavesdropper, confidant, and hagiographer, Ramsay seems to have

forgotten the dangers inherent in such an identity--dangers he first discovered as a child afraid of being claimed by the Devil after the snowball fight which leaves Mrs. Dempster simple and which occasions Paul's premature birth:

> Ah, if dying were all there was to it! Hell and torment at once; but *at least you know where you stand.* It is living with these guilty secrets that exacts the price. (29; my emphasis)

The secret is dangerous, precisely because it disturbs the identity of the bearer; Ramsay's decision to keep the secret that the stone in the snowball Boy threw was actually meant for him, ultimately results not in the consolidation of Ramsay's identity as secret-keeper (as he claims), but in the return of the abject in Ramsay's gossip at the end of the novel. For, ironically, the decision not to tell heralds the resurgence of the threat of abjection that it was designed to avoid. Ramsay thus finds that the gossip recipient who withholds the secret is in serious danger because his identity is based on a blockage that threatens to back up on him.

As it turns out, his guilty secrets do precipitate the Devil's intervention, but not in the form Ramsay expects. It is not, after all, the fiery demon of a Presbyterian childhood, but "an extremely ugly woman" (253), Liselotte Vitzliputzli, who embodies the return of the abject, rather late in Ramsay's narrative. Initially, it is Liesl's appearance which provides the most substantial clues to her connection with abjection. Her ambiguous blurring of categories of gender, as well as her unnerving combination of stereotypes of primitive exoticism with savvy and European intellectual authority, are especially significant as they suggest that her character is rooted in contradiction. As Ramsay describes his first meeting with Liesl:

> The person who was speaking to me from the last step of the stairs that led up into the theatre was probably a woman but she wore man's dress, had short hair, and was certainly the ugliest creature I had ever seen. Not that she was misshapen; she was tall, straight, and obviously very strong, but she had big hands and feet, a huge, jutting jaw, and a heaviness of bone over the eyes that seemed to confine them to small, very deep caverns. However, her voice was beautiful and her utterance was an educated speech of some foreign flavour. (209)

Such a transgression of boundaries clearly identifies Ramsay's "devil" as an agent of abjection, "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," but also, "the traitor" and "the liar" (Kristeva, *Powers* 4). Furthermore, Ramsay's obsessive relation, throughout his account of his stay with

Eisengrim's magic show, of the details of "the deformed ugliness of her face" (211), which makes her "such a gargoyle!" (231), reminds us that Liesl, like the abject, "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire" (Kristeva, *Powers* 1).

All of these overt signs of abjection are supplemented by Liesl's highly developed relationship to ambiguity and contradiction in her own discourse. Noting the ways in which Liesl "does magic with moral problems," Williams is deeply suspicious of those readers who "take Liesl at face value" when she seems to offer Ramsay "an educative program which leads back to some form of *anamnesis* or recollection of the past" (62). Instead, he takes "Liesl's proposal to play [Ramsay's] 'personal devil'" seriously, arguing that "Liesl, not the author, is the source of any confusion in the novel" (66, 65). The gaps and glaring contradictions in her rhetoric, like those of Milton's Satan, as well as her "schizophrenic influence" on Ramsay which is not limited to supplying him with "his alibi as Fifth Business" (65), all reinforce her ties to abjection. Williams, however, ultimately argues that Ramsay's devil is not so different from his saint, particularly since his entanglement with Liesl follows upon the loss of Mary Dempster who dies, urging him "to think again about his identity": "Forced to be his mother's child again, he regresses to a point where he would lose entirely his self-possession were it not for another female guarantor of his faith in self-creation" (77). In Ramsay's quest for self-creation, as Williams tells it, the devil is an acceptable substitute for the saint who had been a substitute for the mother--the original abject who comes back to haunt him in frightening dreams, "in some of which my mother figured in terrible forms" (248). From a Kristevan perspective, Liesl's role as devil emphasizes her difference, not her similarity to Mary Dempster's saintly identity. Descriptions of Liesl as a nearly sub-human beast, which recall the fact that "abjection confronts us...with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*" (Kristeva, *Powers* 12), dramatically invert Mary's purity in her role as divine mother. Together, therefore, the two women embody Kristeva's model of "the two-faced mother" who "is split in two" (Kristeva, *Powers* 157) by the child in order to escape the threat of being consumed by her.

Of particular significance to Liesl's role in orchestrating Ramsay's development from detached

recipient to active producer of gossip, is her own identity as the scandalmonger, or crone. Ramsay's fascination with her "huge, jutting jaw" (209)--which he also describes as "her dreadfully enlarged jaw" (213)--and her "beautiful," "charming" voice (209, 211), suggests that abjection is implicitly connected to oral communication. In fact, Liesl's voice is an integral part of her symbolic function as a master-gossip, even preceding her actual appearance in the novel as Ramsay hears someone behind him say, "Are you Mr. Dunstan Ramsay?" (209). Later, as the voice of the Brazen Head of Friar Bacon in the *Soirée of Illusions*--the illusion which "gave messages to three members of the audience, chosen apparently at random, *relating to their personal affairs*" (217; my emphasis)--she makes gossip the centerpiece of Eisengrim's performance. In Liesl's hands, the Brazen Head thus becomes an icon of gossip in the text, even as its pivotal role in the magic show reaffirms Ramsay's implicit childhood connection of gossip and conjuring:

> Because of a message the Brazen Head gave a beautiful lady in the very first audience before it was shown, a duel was fought the next day between a well-known Mexican lawyer and a dentist who fancied himself as a Don Juan. Nothing could have been better publicity, and all sorts of people offered large sums to be permitted to consult the Brazen Head privately. Eisengrim had a perfectionist's capacity for worry, was fearful that such revelations would keep people out of the theatre, but Liesl was confident and exultant; she said they would come to hear what was said about other people, and they did. (217)

Liesl's instincts about the appeal of gossip for the patrons of the *Soirée* also inform her assessment of Ramsay's "irrational ideal of secrecy" (221). Secrets, she chides him, are unnatural and destructive. Painting Ramsay a picture of himself that is reminiscent of Kristeva's notion of the deject, "the one by whom the abject exists," Liesl dwells on his role as "a deviser of territories" who "never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines--for they are constituted by a non-object, the abject--constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh" (Kristeva, *Powers* 8). His constant vigilance about maintaining the inside and the outside of his clean, proper, and intensely private self thus causes him to appear "grim-mouthed," "buttoned-up," "hard-eyed," and "cruel" (221). Nevertheless, Ramsay is shocked to find himself "chattering like a magpie, telling things that had never before passed my lips, and to Liesl, who did not look to me like a respecter of confidences" (219):

> I heard myself rattling on about Deptford, and the Dempsters, and Paul's premature birth, though I did not tell all I knew of that; I even told her about the sad business in the pit, and what came of it, and how Paul ran away; to my dismay I found that I had told her about Willie, about Surgeoner, and even about the little Madonna. I lay awake the whole night after this last piece of blethering, and got her alone as soon as I could the next day, and begged her not to tell anyone. (221)

Rather than agree to guard Ramsay's secrets about the Deptford gossip, however, Liesl urges him to embrace gossip as a virtue and to reconsider the price of abjecting gossip from the duplicitous role of gossip recipient:

> "No, Ramsay, I won't promise anything of the sort," said she. "You are too old a man to believe in secrets. There is really no such thing as a secret; everybody likes to tell, and everybody does tell. Oh, there are men like priests and lawyers and doctors who are supposed not to tell what they know, but they do--usually they do. If they don't, they grow very queer indeed; they pay a high price for their secrecy. You have paid such a high price, and you look like a man full of secrets--grim-mouthed and buttoned-up and hard-eyed and cruel, because you are cruel to yourself. It has done you good to tell what you know; you look much more human already." (221)

Her argument strains the credulity of even the most patient logician, rooting itself in desire rather than reason ("everybody likes to tell"), and reducing itself to the tautology that Ramsay should not keep secrets because "there is really no such thing as a secret." Liesl's justification of indiscretion is thus very similar to those psychoanalytic approaches to gossip theory which see gossip as a form of psychotherapy. G. Medini and E. H. Rosenburg, for example, even sound distinctly Jungian when they argue that gossip's pervasive historical presence points to its fulfillment of fundamental human needs. Not only does gossip contain "the issues of the human condition, the human community, issues of secrecy, self-esteem, pride, voyeurism, intimacy and search for security," but it also fulfills the psychotherapist's function (as Liesl herself purports to do): "Placing a patient's impulses, thought, or behaviour into understandable human context" (Medini and Rosenburg; qtd. in Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi 182).

Liesl's advice takes an overtly psychoanalytic form when she suggests that gossip, having been abjected, is never far away, but threatens to return like the repressed:

> "But you--there is a whole great piece of your life that is unlived, denied, set aside. That is why at fifty you can't bear it any longer and fly all to pieces and pour your heart out to the first really intelligent woman you have met--me, that's to say--and get into a schoolboy yearning for a girl who is as far from you as if she lived on the moon. This is the revenge of the unlived life, Ramsay. Suddenly it makes a fool of you." (230)

The revenge of the unlived life thus brings the trajectory of abjection full circle. Liesl's advice to Ramsay is barely different from Kristeva's account of the ways in which individuals cope with the confrontation with the abject through the act of cathartic, poetic purification. Following Aristotle, Kristeva argues that

> The abject, mimed through sound and meaning, is *repeated*. Getting rid of it is out of the question--the final Platonic lesson has been understood, one does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity. It is a repetition through rhythm and song, therefore through what is not yet, or no longer is 'meaning,' but arranges, defers, differentiates and organizes, harmonizes pathos, bile, warmth, and enthusiasm. (*Powers* 28)

Liesl, in turn, tells Ramsay to return to the abject, to refigure it: "You should take a look at this side of your life you have not lived....[E]very man has a devil, and a man of unusual quality, like yourself, Ramsay, has an unusual devil. You must get to know your personal devil" (230). Liesl's insistence that Ramsay "shake hands with [his] devil" (230), seems to be a manifesto for confronting abjection--a way of purifying gossip by turning it into the art of story-telling.

Liesl's view of Ramsay as a "temperamental secret-keeper" (221) and "a man who needs talk" (225) leads to the expected conclusion: "I think you are Fifth Business" (231). For as we have seen, Fifth Business epitomizes the qualities of abjection in Ramsay's character. Yet, the mask of Fifth Business also serves to legitimate Ramsay's covert role as gossip recipient since Fifth Business is entitled to know, among other dramatically significant things, "the secret of the hero's birth." Ramsay's new name is thus appropriately ambivalent since it glorifies the role of gossip producer, as the climax of Liesl's narrative about his "unlived life," without requiring that Ramsay ever be anything other than the observer who judges others from the sidelines at no risk to himself. Fifth Business thus seems to expand Ramsay's role from gossip receiver to gossip producer, even as it continues to justify the former. In fact, it is Ramsay who makes the connection when Boy tells him about the pitfalls of wooing a woman with "masculinity of mind" (240) like Denyse Hornick: "Matters between us were still as they had been for thirty years, and the only difference was that Liesl had taught me that confidences were not wrung from him against his will but gushed like oil from a well, and that I as Fifth Business was the logical

confidant" (241).

At the time, however, Ramsay does not see Liesl's counsel as a redemption of the gossiper. If Ramsay's account of his quarrel with Liesl seems at times heavy-handed, it is only because Ramsay has made a refusal to gossip the cornerstone of his identity. Consequently, his reduction to "a chatterbox" can be seen as nothing less than a "breakdown of character" (222). Quite early on in his association with the *Soirée*, for example, Ramsay reports that his self-destruction is directly linked to an overflow of suppressed discourse:

> Working on these illusions was delightful but destructive of my character. I was aware that I was recapturing the best of my childhood; my imagination had never known such glorious freedom; but as well as liberty and wonder I was regaining the untruthfulness, the lack of scruple, and the absorbing egotism of a child. I heard myself talking boastfully, lying shamelessly. I blushed but could not control myself...I had become a dangerously indiscreet talker. (219)

Ramsay's own responsibility for the fact "that something was terribly wrong with Dunstan Ramsay" (219) is mitigated, however, by his contention that circumstances are beyond his control. Turning gossip into a melodrama of moral erosion, Ramsay's story in effect turns him into the victim of a demonic, controlling "woman who could draw out confidences" (220-21). By holding off the story of his lapse into gossiping until his meeting with Liesl, Ramsay's narrative engineers yet another "extreme evasion of responsibility" (Williams 64)--insisting, in effect, that the devil made him gossip.

Yet, Ramsay's "breakdown" is not nearly as abrupt, nor does it happen so late in his life, as he leads us to believe. In fact, was it not his persuasiveness and expertise as a gossip *producer*, not as a gossip recipient, that brought him to the attention of Eisengrim and Liesl in the first place? Liesl's request that Ramsay be "the ghost" to write Eisengrim's "autobiography" not only recalls the decentered position of the gossiper in relation to his subject, it also suggests his active participation in creating literary gossip that "must be very good, yet popular, persuasive, and written with style" (214). As a literary gossiper who has already "written so persuasively about the saints--slipping under the guard of the skeptics with a candour that is brilliantly disingenuous, treating marvels with the seriousness of fact," Liesl tell him, "you are the man for us" (215).

Given Ramsay's credentials, it is hardly surprising that he produces a volume so rich with implied scandal, "full of romance and marvels, with a quiet but sufficient undertone of eroticism and sadism," that "it sold like hotcakes," not only in the theatre, but also "in places where they offer lively, sensational reading" (233). Fifth Business is thus not the first, but the second mask which Liesl provides for Ramsay in order to disguise or legitimate his role of gossip producer--to say nothing of the mask he constructed for himself as hagiographer.

Ramsay's real talent for gossiping, however, is not fully apparent until he reveals the secret behind "The mysterious death of Boy Staunton" which is thoroughly linked, throughout his account, to the discourse of gossip. The death, we are told,

> was a nine days' wonder, and people who delight in unsolved crimes--for they were certain it must have been a crime--still talk of it. You recall most of the details, Headmaster, I am sure: at about four o'clock on the morning of Monday, November 4, 1968, his Cadillac convertible was recovered from the waters of Toronto harbour, into which it had been driven at a speed great enough to carry it, as it sank, about twenty feet from the concrete pier. His body was in the driver's seat, the hands gripping the wheel so tightly that it was difficult for the police to remove him from the car. The windows and the roof were closed, so that some time must have elapsed driving over the edge and the filling of the car with water. But the most curious fact of all was that in Boy's mouth the police found a stone--an ordinary piece of pinkish granite about the size of a small egg--which could not possibly have been where it was unless he himself, or someone unknown, had put it there. (255-56)

Not only is Boy's death first announced in the style of tabloid journalism, but the surprising abruptness of Ramsay's delivery of the information within the text itself dramatically transforms the reader into an implicit gossip receiver. Ramsay's description of the lurid details of Boy's death heighten the readerly gossip's desire to hear more, and to speculate on the reasons why "it must have been a crime." The newspapers' barrage of questions--"Was it murder? But who would murder a well-known philanthropist, a man whose great gifts as an organizer had been of incalculable value to the nation during the war years?...Was it suicide? Why would the President of the Alpha Corporation, a man notably youthful in appearance and outlook, and one of the two or three richest men in Canada, want to kill himself?"--further serve to imbue Ramsay's own report with the air of scandal and mystery that attends significant gossip. Moreover, the fact that Boy's death became "a nine days' wonder" reaffirms Ramsay's longstanding idea that scandals

and wonders are cut from the same cloth.

It is entirely appropriate that gossip should figure so prominently in the report of Boy's death, since it also seemed to determine so much of his life. When, as a young man on the rise, Boy was "casting around for an ideal upon which he could model himself," he settled upon "Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David, the Prince of Wales," a public figure who was, even then, the subject of journalistic gossip about "rumours of high old times with jolly girls when he had visited Canada in 1919." In fact,

> [t]he papers were full of the Prince at that time...he danced and was reputed to be a devil with the girls; he had a quarrel with his father (my King, the man with the Navy torpedo beard) about matters of dress; he was photographed smoking a pipe with a distinctive apple-shaped bowl. He had romance and mystery, for over his puzzled brow hung that shadow of the Crown; how would such a dashing youth ever settle himself into the duties of kingship? (115)

Boy's choice of "mould for his outward man" (115) thus seems already to implicate Boy himself in the dynamics of gossip.

While "no breath of financial scandal ever came near him" as he matured, Boy put gossip to work for him by building on "his association with the Prince of Wales...though in hard fact it did not amount to more than the reception of a monogrammed Christmas card once a year it bulked substantially, though never quite to the point of absurdity, in his conversation" (155). Boy, in other words, relies on inciting gossip in others who are charged with speculating on his inferences in order to increase his own reputation. To this end, Boy "reported every bit of gossip that came his way" (189):

> "He isn't joining them at Sandringham this year," he would say as Christmas drew near; "pretty stuffy I suppose." And somehow this suggested that he had inside information--perhaps a personal letter--though everybody who read the newspapers knew as much. All Boy's friends had to be pretty spry at knowing who 'he' was, or they ceased to be his friends. (155)

Later, however, "[w]hen the black month of November came," Boy still "snatched at every scrap of gossip" he could overhear on the radio, but with a desperation that leads Ramsay to fear for his friend's reason (189). As radio news reported "the sad broadcast of Abdication on 11 December," Boy's own fate seemed to hinge on the gossip about his idol, leading him into

drunken, "dreadful tirades against all the repressive forces that worked against true love and the expression of a man's real self" (189-90).

Ultimately, Boy's final hours are also determined by gossip--this time it is Ramsay's ambiguous decision to "do something inexplicable, irrational, at the devil's bidding, and just for the hell of it" (230), as Liesl suggested, which precipitates Boy's mysterious death. Even before he exposes the secret of Paul's birth, however, Ramsay observes the reunion between Paul and Boy with the same fascination he experienced earlier when he contrived to perpetuate the drama of Boy's "art studies" of Leola. Now, as then, Ramsay says, "*I watched to see what would happen*, and my appetite was given the special zest of knowing who Eisengrim really was, which Boy did not, and perhaps would never learn" (261; my emphasis). Of course, Boy does learn Eisengrim's identity very shortly, but Paul is not the only one to be unmasked; Eisengrim also exposes Ramsay's own self-deception in his attack on Boy:

> "I chose a Wolf's name. You have chosen forever to be a Boy. Was it because your mother used to call you Pidgy Boy-Boy, even when you were old enough to call my mother 'hoor'?"
>
> "How in God's name did you know that? Nobody in the world now living knows that!"
>
> "Oh yes, two people know it--myself and Ramsay. He told me, many years ago, under an oath of secrecy."
>
> "I never did any such thing!" I shouted, outraged. Yet, even as I shouted, a doubt assailed me.
>
> "But you did, or how would I know? You told me that to comfort me once, when the Rich Young Ruler and some of his gang had been shouting at my mother. We all forget many of the things we do, especially when they do not fit the character we have chosen for ourselves. You see yourself as the man of confidences, Ramsay. It would not do for you to remember a time when you told a secret." (266)

The abject is finally and fully exposed at the center of Ramsay's identity. The gossip receiver has been a gossip producer all along.

So why is Ramsay not confronted with the fear or horror which accompanies the recognition of "the impossibility of the identity of either subject or object, and yet the necessary dependence of each on the other" (Gross 87)? Because when Liesl offered Ramsay recourse to an alter-ego, Fifth Business, she furnished him with the power to evade the position of Kristeva's pulverized subject who experiences the abjection of self: "weary of fruitless attempts to identify with

something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject" (5). Thus, when Ramsay finally confesses all he knows, his discourse undergoes a peculiar slippage:

> Here it was. Either I spoke now or I kept silence forever. Dunstan Ramsay counselled against revelation, but Fifth Business would not hear.
> "Yes, guilt. Staunton and I robbed your mother of her sanity." And I told them the story of the snowball. (267)

Radford is only slightly less pointed than David Williams when he notes that Fifth Business is Ramsay's "demonic side" "that enables him to rationalize his betrayal of Staunton" (Radford 76, 75). For Williams, this passage is profoundly disturbing due to the rhetorical contortions which the narrator must undergo in order to acquit himself of any wrongdoing. "Ramsay's only excuse for betraying Boy to Eisengrim," he says, "is that Fifth Business made him do it...Ironically, he must split himself into two people to spare his 'real' self any blame. In an extreme evasion of responsibility, his apologia strains towards schizophrenia" (Williams 64). Surely here Ramsay's gossip has achieved an apotheosis of abjection, fulfilling Kristeva's oracular prediction that the abject is "the friend who stabs you," even though his entire narrative has been directed toward convincing his reader that he is not "a false friend, exploiting a frank and talented youth" (118). Fifth Business is demonic precisely because he is the gossip who "would not hear," preferring instead to speak. By abjecting the gossip producer from his "true" role as gossip recipient, Ramsay maintains a "stable," "pure" identity, all the while getting away with murder.

Finally, then, the role of gossip in *Fifth Business* begs the question, who is narrating? Dunstan Ramsay, or Fifth Business? In that decisive moment, we are told that Fifth Business tells the story of the snowball--itself an emblem of abjection--even as the narrator insists, "And *I* told them the story of the snowball." Does this not suggest that Fifth Business is the "real" narrator of *Fifth Business*? As I have argued, Ramsay's narrative is his final, and most sophisticated piece of gossip. If Ramsay "saves" his "true" self at the climax of the novel, he could not then go on to write a novel which sustains the tone and structure of gossip without passing the pen along to his alter-ego, Fifth Business. In light

of the fact that the narrative itself is powered by deferral, the narrator's apparently restrictive admonition to the Headmaster--"You will not see this memoir until after my own death, and you will surely keep what you know to yourself. After all, you cannot prove anything against anyone"--actually *depends* on the fact that "the gossip producer has very little influence over what the gossip recipient does with the information entrusted to him" (Bergmann 69). "St Dunstan...a bad old saint who peeps" (223), finally tries to turn gossip into a transcendent art by writing his own autobiography in a bid to control perceptions of his life from beyond the grave.

The ways in which Kristeva's model of abjection illuminates the differences between Ramsay's private use of scandal in pursuit of transcendence and the social use of gossip in Deptford to expel disturbances from the social body, in turn, sheds light on the differing reception of gossip by "moral" and by "scientific" discourses respectively. In effect, the difference between Ramsay's gossip and the Deptford gossip is the difference between the horrifying encounter with abjection and the foundational act of abjecting. On the one hand, the social sciences' generally upbeat assessment of gossip's virtues rarely addresses the enormous body of literature and law which is directed toward exterminating the gossiper. So glaring an omission is explained at a psychological level, however, by the fact that the social sciences' emphasis on gossip's functional advantages to the symbolic (social) system recalls the essential role of ritual--religious or literary--by which the "clean and proper" borders of the self and of society are maintained. Gossip's abjecting function, in this case, is thus an important mechanism for survival.

On the other hand, Ramsay's profoundly disturbing use of gossip and the logic of abjection recalls the distress and the anxiety with which his prototype has met in traditional attacks on backbiting. In this context, Ramsay epitomizes the gossip's violation of private space through public scandalizing--a movement which relies on the secret as "a form which constantly receives and releases contents: what originally was manifest becomes secret, and what once was hidden later sheds its concealment" (Simmel 335). This perpetual act of

translation makes the figure of the gossiper a boundary-crosser; his is a profoundly disturbing position because it threatens, rather than supports, symbolic identity. Thus, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the gossiper is abject, and hence a source of horror and anxiety for representatives of the symbolic order.

As Ronald de Sousa suggests, such terror is equally reserved for the gossiper as for the Saint. In a fascinating paper entitled, "In Praise of Gossip: Indiscretion as a Saintly Virtue," de Sousa virtually recapitulates the central themes of *Fifth Business*, from Liesl's programme of scandal, to Ramsay's quest to become St. Dunstan by gossiping. Seeing gossip as an antidote to "self-deception and hypocrisy," de Sousa argues that "the dissemination of private information may make some people uncomfortable, [but] its importance must, as a matter of public policy, be deemed to outweigh that discomfort" (30). He sees, in gossip's assault on the idea of a private sphere, a crucial gambit in the progress of culture:

> Unlike ordinary virtue, saintly virtue is not justified by its immediate consequences. On the Kantian schema, what justifies a practice is the consistency and desirability of a possible world in which it were universalized. The practice of saintly virtue, then, does not pretend to be crassly pragmatic. Heroes and saints are not supposed to be utilitarians. Their virtues challenge and enrich our understanding of moral possibilities. Thus it is that heroes and saints, however revered from afar, are detested close up, and generally end up drawn and quartered or burned at the stake. I suggest that the indiscretion of the gossip is, in a small way, a saintly virtue.
> (de Sousa 31)

If St. Dunstan is the patron saint of gossips, however, he is not the "maverick" envisioned by de Sousa, even if he does reproduce his abject transgression of privacy. For if anyone is "crassly pragmatic," or a fool-saint in *Fifth Business*, it is Ramsay, whose radical self-deception, through the doubling of his identity, and his insistence on telling everybody's secrets but his own, dramatically ironizes his "transcendence."

In other ways, however, Ramsay's abject duplicity as a gossip brings to light a profoundly disturbing aspect of abjection, closely allied to Kristeva's account. As we have seen, Ramsay's identity as a confidence man serves as the public face of someone who has been an expert gossiper all along, whether it be as a meticulous observer and eavesdropper

gathering the material of scandal for later use, as hagiographer spreading mythological gossip, as Eisengrim's "autobiographer," as scriptor for the Brazen Head, or as malicious backbiter who engages in more than idle character assasination. Ultimately, his calculated self-abjection--which has made Fifth Business alone into the malicious gossiper, thereby protecting "Dunstan Ramsay" from charges of slander (or worse)--licences further gossiping in the form of autobiographical confession. Gossip is not only related to self-justification in Ramsay's text, but also to self-creation. As Williams argues, Ramsay's autobiography "lets him gather up his earlier forms of justification into an autonomous text where the self becomes synonymous with the thing it creates" (*Confessional* 82). But before he can recreate himself, using borrowed scandals as raw material, Ramsay must first engage in "a preliminary work of decreation" (Williams, *Confessional* 62), which would liberate him from his ties to family and to history.

For the narrator of *Fifth Business*, such decreation is accomplished primarily by gossiping maliciously about the mother. Only by rejecting and discrediting maternal authority in an extreme display of "gynophobia" (Williams, *Confessional* 73) can Ramsay's narrative succeed in securing a space in which the narrator can claim a fully self-made identity. For Ramsay, Kristeva's account of identity formation on the basis of maternal negation becomes a matter of abjecting the mother in order to usurp her generative function. Ramsay's theft of his mother's egg to practice magic tricks, for example, clearly "mocks her reproductive power" (Williams, *Confessional* 72), but the real assault on maternal authority occurs later, in Ramsay's gossip about the "screeching fury" who, he says, "pursued me around the kitchen with a whip, flogging me until she was gorged with --what? Vengeance?," and who later compounds his humiliation by demanding an apology: "This I had to do on my knees, repeating a formula improvised by my father, which included a pledge that I would always love my mother, to whom I owed the great gift of life, and that I begged her--and secondarily God--to forgive me, knowing full well that I was unworthy of such clemency" (40). Ramsay's utter lack of power in the face of a

domineering mother is compensated for by the power of the retrospective gossiper who undoes her authority through "his sneer about the pecking order in which first his mother must be placated 'and [then] secondarily God.' For his mother, he insists, is the one who is playing God, who really holds herself highest on the list of creators whom he has offended" (Williams, *Confessional* 73). Gossip thus assumes a pivotal role in accomplishing the autobiographer's abjection of the mother by undermining her authority, and eventually reducing her to the caricature of "mock-modesty as the mother of a hero, the very womb and matrix of bravery, in consequence of my three years of degradation in the Flanders mud" (85-86).

Ramsay's use of autobiographical gossip in response to his gynophobia is actually very similar to Kristeva's contention that "The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs" (*Powers* 38). According to Kristeva, the phobic's fear is also a form of abjection related to a failure to separate from the mother which in turn results in the "failure of language to provide a symbolization (object) to contain drive activity" (Lechte 161): "The paternal agency alone, to the extent that it introduces the symbolic dimension between 'subject' (child) and 'object' (mother), can generate...a strict object relation. Otherwise, what is called 'narcissism,' without always or necessarily being conservative, becomes the unleashing of drive as such, without object, threatening all identity, including that of the subject itself" (Kristeva, *Powers* 44). Insofar as Ramsay's fear of his mother as the woman who "had eaten [his] father" and whom he had "to fight...to keep her from eating" himself as well (85), embodies the subject's horror when faced with abjection, his mastery of his origins through writing and gossip replicates the mastery of abjection through language and metaphor. In other words, even from a Kristevan point of view, the gossiper's rejection of the mother is authorized by the Freudian logic of Oedipalization because her account of abjection is really just a "*prefigured* oedipal situation [which] operates between the child (the narcissistic subject), the abject mother (the mother's body),

and the imaginary father (the mother's love)...Although these terms operate prior to the oedipal complex and, in one sense, prior to the onset of the Symbolic, their functions prefigure those of the three terms in the oedipal situation" (Oliver 15).

This is because the Oedipal triangle serves, in many ways, as a prototype of the gossip triangle. As Kristeva says, in Freud's formulation of the Oedipus myth, "the father is the mainstay of the law and the mother the prototype of the object. Toward the mother there is convergence not only of survival needs but of first mimetic yearnings. She is the other subject, an object that guarantees my being as a subject" (*Powers* 32). In this scheme, the child is separated from a primary relationship with the mother by the stern Law of the Father, an entry into language in which signification alone compensates for the loss of the mother. Freud first understood this substitution by watching a child's game of Fort/Da: "When the child's mother is absent, the child invents a game where it throws a reel out of its cot and says something that Freud interprets as the German word for 'gone' (*fort*). Then the child pulls in the reel and says something that Freud interprets as the German word for 'here' (*da*). Freud claims that the reel stands in for the child's mother; through language the child can control its mother's absence" (Oliver 44). Jacques Lacan took this formulation one step further by suggesting that, "in this phoematic opposition [*Fort/Da*], the child transcends, brings on to the symbolic plane, the phenomenon of presence and absence. He renders himself master of the thing, *precisely insofar as he destroys it*" (qtd. in Oliver 44; my emphasis). But gossip, too, is a manner of mastering absence through the use of language. Glancing at the Oedipal configuration, we can see that all the necessary players are there: the child who exchanges language for the missing mother is the prototype of the apprentice gossiper who gains mastery over his objects by reducing them to signifiers; the father who presides over the onset of the child's entry into language constitutes the child's first gossip partner and is himself an expert gossiper, having fully mastered the symbolic system; finally, the mother who is substituted for the symbol becomes the child's first gossip object which, like Ramsay's objects, guarantees the child's

identity.

Kristeva's anticipation of this triangle within the maternal function suggests that the mother supplies a law before the law in "a real *deprivation* of the breast, an imaginary *frustration* of the gift of maternal relation, and...a symbolic *castration* inscribed in the Oedipus complex" (*Powers* 32-33). Her reinterpretation of the Fort/Da game thus concentrates on the child's physical throwing and retrieving of the reel: "For her, this bodily act is as important to the onset of signification as the '*fort*' and the '*da.*' Negativity is primarily material, even gestural, in the case of the Fort/Da game" (Oliver 44). But such a refinement of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis does not alter the structure necessitating the mother's abjection so much as make her an accomplice to it. By founding identity upon abjection, Kristeva's theory of subjectivity naturalizes and implicitly justifies malice as integral to the foundation of identity. Matricide, in the form of malicious gossip, thus becomes the characteristic practice of identity-formation. Abject models of gossiping in *Fifth Business*, therefore, ultimately cut both ways. Although Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a suggestive framework in which to understand the function of gossip, both at the level of subject and at the level of society, Ramsay's use of gossip as an instrument of decreation raises new questions and suggests ways in which the valence of interrogation needs to be reversed. In light of Ramsay's autobiographical self-construction, malicious gossip indicates the need for a critique of psychoanalytic assumptions about the necessary rejection of the mother in subject formation.

Finally, however, Ramsay's abjection of his mother (in all her guises) returns us to questions of gossip and gender. From a certain perspective, the malicious gossip of a male protagonist in *Fifth Business* would seem to counteract the stereotype of the Crone which so pervaded the representation of women's talk in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Perhaps, since both genders are equally accounted for, Ramsay and Liesl's examples are meant to undo essentialist opinions about gossip which see it as an inherently female use of language. Yet, the Kristevan scheme followed by Ramsay's gossip doesn't really seem to

challenge the sexist stereotype of female prattle. Instead, it seems to naturalize the ideological construction of women's talk as babble. Elizabeth Gross finds, in the theory that woman "is paradoxically precluded from representing or speaking maternity and femininity" because of her failure to enter fully into symbolic identity (Gross 98)--a profound problem with Kristeva's work. For Kristeva's insistence that "only certain men--that is, those who are prepared to put their symbolic positions at risk by summoning up the archaic traces of their repressed semiotic and maternal (prehistory)--are able to evoke, to name, to re-inscribe this maternal space-time and pleasure in the production and transgression of textuality" (Gross 98-99), leaves women little option but to engage in "idle" (that is to say, wasted) talk. The Kristevan woman who speaks only in tongues, like the woman who speaks with a "loose tongue," seems thus to remain ever excluded--from knowledge, from self-expression, from solidarity, from politics.

Chapter Three

The Politics of Disclosure:

The Death and Return of the Gossip in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The pen is mightier than the sword.
Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, *Richelieu*

The tongue is the sword of a woman, and she never lets it become rusty.
Chinese proverb

The appearance of a new discourse of gossip, originating in anthropological and sociological studies conducted since the early 1960s, has played a major role in recent reappraisals of gossip's bad reputation. *Good Gossip* (1994), a collection of essays edited by Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, takes stock of this discursive shift through an examination of "the primary tension between the functional approach, which tends to vindicate it, and the moral perspective, which emphasizes the fact that [gossip] remains a morally problematic form of behaviour"(Goodman 4). Because so much of the traditional moraliser's animus towards gossiping has stereotyped women's talk as inherently "idle" or "malicious," feminist defences of gossip have been particularly anxious to jump on the functionalist bandwagon. In "Gossip: A Feminist Defence," for example, Louise Collins defends gossip as a means of female "self-discovery" because it "involves talking and interacting with others whose experiences and values overlap ours by greater or lesser degrees" (114). Lorraine Code is similarly optimistic that gossip provides an alternative to "male" modes of understanding, through which "women achieve a solidarity, a community, that is at once strong, vulnerable, and committed to a course of action that contests the adequacy of the social order" (101).

Such defences of gossip, based on the view that it "fulfill[s] certain important personal and social functions" (Goodman 1), have long been inscribed within a far-reaching and

contradictory socio-anthropological debate. As Robert Paine argues, functionalism splits into two radically different fields of inquiry: "1) how constraints are put on individuals...producing recognizable social and cultural forms and institutions; and 2) how individuals attempt--and then either fail or succeed to accommodate themselves to constraints and/or to change them for others" ("Transaction" 307). Insofar as this debate impinges on gossip theory, it begs the following questions: is gossip's function primarily a matter of insulating the social machine from the pressures and destructive impulses of individual gossipers, which would make it a form of social control? Or, conversely, is gossip's function immanent in its own structure as a transactional system based on the exchange of information, and therefore essentially instrumental? By and large, feminist theories of gossip have steered clear of this debate. Perhaps their silence is due in part to the fact that this division within functionalist explanations of gossip--as it was first spelled out in a sequence of disputes between Max Gluckman and Robert Paine in *Current Anthropology* and *Man* --is not ultimately reconcilable with a feminist theory of political resistance since it seems to threaten individual agency, on the one hand, and collective action on the other.

Only Patricia Meyer Spacks' study, *Gossip* (1985), which focuses on literary gossip and on the interillumination of gossip and literary forms themselves, seems to escape this double-bind. Her eschewal of the usual functionalist explanations in favour of more "'intuitive' defences of gossip, occurring in imaginative literature," on the grounds that "I am myself interested in possibilities that do not interest the social scientists" (Spacks 34), is in itself telling. At the very least it hints at a fundamental incompatibility between functionalist theory and feminist politics. Even though she does not address such theories in any detail as she lays the groundwork for a feminist theory of gossip politics, her *implicitly* ambivalent response to functionalist models of both types provides further clues to their limitations. Moreover, her examination of the analogy between gossip and fiction generally, and between the gossiper and the author in particular, suggests that literary

theories of authorship may provide a crucial context from which the functionalist discourses of gossip need to be rethought.

As I will argue, Spacks's theory that "gossip empowers the subordinated into liberated discourse" (262) depends on a construction of the gossip as "author"--a term which has itself been called into question both by Russian formalism and by poststructuralist theories of language and subjectivity. Adapting Spacks's view of gossip as a dialogic counter-discourse to a more detailed reading of the links between gossip and Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque as well as of Jacques Derrida's explanation of iterability, my approach will explore the intersection of authority, intentionality, and gender in two competing models of gossip in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*--a novel which also constructs gossip as a form of personal and political resistance. For the Handmaids who are reduced to silence by an institutionalized system of biological slavery, gossip is an unlikely but welcome instrument of solidarity and resistance, a means of "authoring" parodic texts which subvert the dehumanizing message of the official language. A second model of gossiping is dramatized by the academics who dissect Offred's *Tale* in the "historical notes" which conclude Atwood's novel. In this setting, gossip proves to be an instrument of oppression, based on an anti-authorial reading practice which amounts to a substitution of the critic/gossiper for the author/gossipee. By locating gossip in *The Handmaid's Tale* in relation to the status of the author and the role of intentionality in the competing linguistic assumptions of Bakhtin and Derrida, I will attempt to show ways in which their theories provide suggestive models for structuring the workings of gossip and, in turn, how Atwood's treatment of gossip might itself furnish a valuable model for interrogating "the death of the author" in poststructuralist thought.

In many ways, Spacks's thesis that gossip engenders and sustains a potentially subversive female community might be seen as a feminist re-vision of the well-established position within social anthropology that gossip and scandal "have important positive values" since they "maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups" (Gluckman,

"Scandal" 308). Anthropologist Max Gluckman's influential article, "Gossip and Scandal" (1963), which focuses on the stabilizing function of gossip based on its reinforcement of moral norms, has made Gluckman himself into gossip's central apologist. Tacitly rejecting the traditional notion that gossip is simply empty chatter, Gluckman argues that gossip is a principal factor in defining and sustaining distinct social groups within larger communities precisely because of its nature as an exclusivist discourse. Like Bakhtin's sociolinguistics, Gluckman's notion of discourse is informed by the shared assumptions that "generate a community of value judgments" ("Discourse" 397). Rather than reinforcing universal norms, or more accurately, those of the dominant ideology, gossip always orients itself around the codes of a specific social group, binding it together in the process. Although Gluckman's interests lie elsewhere, the implications of his argument for a feminist treatment of gossip are not hard to see.

Building on Gluckman's conclusions about gossip as a mechanism of group preservation, Spacks extrapolates a gendered theory of gossip that is explicitly motivated towards a consideration of women's discourse. Through her study of gossip in the Anglo-American novelistic tradition, Spacks identifies a continuum of intent on which different kinds of gossip are provisionally defined. At one end, gossip appears motivated by pure malice, generating in the gossiper "an immediately satisfying sense of power" (4); poised at the center, "idle talk" operates "[w]ithout purposeful intent" except to protect the gossipers from serious engagement with one another (5). At the other pole lies what Spacks calls "serious gossip," "which exists only as a function of intimacy" (5). As Spacks explains, this latter type of gossip is not concerned with informational content, but rather is solely focussed on "the relationship such gossip expresses and sustains" through its very form as intimate, dialogic conversation. In an attempt to resuscitate gossip's originary etymological sense, from the Old English *godsibb*, and the positive associations of bonding, community, and shared experience that it implies, Spacks concentrates her study on this "serious" pole of her "crude taxonomy" (6) while she simultaneously insists that "even

malicious gossip may possess a positive value" (34). For Spacks, that value originates in the personal since gossip "releas[es] people from the prison of their own thoughts" (43), but inevitably moves outward to embrace the concerns of a larger social community: "Gossip, of course, demands a process of relatedness among its participants; its *I*'s inevitably turn into a *we*" (261). Aligning her argument that gossip often works to empower subordinate groups with Deborah Jones's notion of a "speech community" that is "a key to the female subculture" (Jones 248), Spacks exposes the moral attack on gossip as the dominant (male) discourse's attempt to contain the circulation of potentially subversive ideologies. For Spacks, as for many other feminist writers, "malice" is relative, and gossip "embodies an alternative discourse to that of public life and a discourse potentially challenging to public assumptions; it provides language for an alternative culture...A rhetoric of inquiry, gossip questions the established" (46).

By locating herself within the province of communal rhetoric, however, Spacks leaves her argument open to the same kinds of criticism that have plagued Gluckman himself. As Robert Paine argues in his rebuttal to Gluckman's theory, "What Is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis" (1967), "[i]t is the individual and not the community that gossips" (281). By shifting his emphasis away from the community that Gluckman prizes, Paine suggests the importance of surveying the motives of gossip production from the ground floor, recognizing that an individual's discourse is always directed towards his or her own self-interests before those of the group. Gluckman's argument is thus seen to "commit[ ] a category mistake that is typical of functionalist explanations because it implicitly foists its determination of the latent function of gossip on the gossipers as a goal" (Bergmann 145). Consequently, Gluckman must completely ignore gossip's social disrepute, treating it only as "an erroneous opinion...that needs to be disproved" (Bergmann 144), lest the essential contradiction between gossip's simultaneously destructive and preservative powers undermine the premise of his argument. In much the same way, Spacks attempts to salvage the "positive" aspects of gossip by circumscribing her subject: concentrating her

discussion on the socially productive mode of "serious gossip" even as she acknowledges that "to take a positive view involves suspending consciousness of gossip's destructive force and considering what besides animus against others it may involve" (34). Like Gluckman, Spacks excuses gossip's often malicious content by insisting that, "[r]educed to means rather than ends, aggression serves alliance" (57).

It would be a mistake, however, simply to subsume Spacks's theory of gossip under the rubric of structural functionalism. Consider her assertion that

> History testifies to the persistence and power of gossip as a social mode. Moralizers have taken gossip seriously even when they declared its lack of seriousness. It supplies a weapon for outsiders--a weapon appropriately directed at the façade of reputation people construct around themselves. And the weapon can be converted to a bond; a means of alliance, a way of feeling united as insiders. (45)

Such revolutionary politics are quite alien to the determinism of a theory for which "[f]orms of gossip and its rules constrain every individual, in that there are both pressures on him to join in the gossip, whether he wishes to or not, and in that rules restrain him by determining what he may say, and to whom he may say what, and how he can say anything" (Gluckman, "Psychological" 29). Gluckman clearly hears no call to arms in the whispers of detraction. Although their themes are deceptively similar, Gluckman's analysis of gossip *within* small groups as an *internal* system of regulation, stressing the unifying potential of backbiting, is seriously at odds with Spacks's discussion of female bonding as the basis for subversion. To begin with, Gluckman's concept of associating gossipers with the values of specific social groups is a little too neat. As he would have it, "gossip cells" could be divided into three distinct sets: 1) "the professional group...whose gossip is built into technical discussion"; 2) the group with "high social status from which it wishes to exclude parvenus"; 3) the exclusive group "which has exclusiveness thrust upon it--either by being a minority, by isolation of locality, or by other distinguishing criterion [sic] which the members cannot overcome" ("Scandal" 309). But such an idealization is problematic because it distorts the fact that real gossipers often have

ambivalent relationships to supposedly "exclusive" groups, and may even be members of multiple groups. Moreover, such a scheme does not adequately account for the hierarchization of such groups within larger social structures, or for the power relations between them--an oversight which has particularly dire consequences for the female gossiper.

For the Handmaids of Atwood's novel, for example, group identity is not easily defined. Although their "habits" mark them as a distinct social class, such anxious institutional signifiers belie the profound ambivalence of their actual position within Gileadean society generally, and within the family in particular. Such anxiety stems from the ambivalence of the Biblical story of Rachel and Leah which authorizes a patriarchal system, but cannot do so without foregrounding the dependence of phallic power on female generativity. As the embodiment of such a contradiction, the Handmaid is both revered and repressed. On the one hand, the Handmaid is central to the state, and occupies an ostensibly privileged position. As Aunt Lydia tells them, "A thing is valued...only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls...Think of yourselves as pearls" (107). On the other hand, such "privilege" determines the Handmaids' objectification by the state and enslavement to it. As Offred recognizes while fantasizing about insubordination, "We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives. I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit. This is what I will tell Moira, later; if I can" (108). She is not fooled by the binary logic of the party line which offers the Handmaid an exclusive, but impotent position: "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or" (8). Offred knows, as well as any angel in the house, that privilege and prison are closely related. Similarly, the elaborate bodily symbolism of The Ceremony seeks to mystify the "spoiled" Handmaid who enjoys a "position of honour" (84, 13), even though there is no confusion about who is really in charge: "My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product" (88).

And the controlling Wife is only a metonym for the Commander and finally for the patriarchal state which identifies the Handmaids as a necessary but potentially disruptive means to an end, requiring scrupulous controls. Such fundamental ambivalence thus positions the Handmaid on the threshold of social identity and alienation, as Offred learns upon meeting Serena Joy:

> So, you're the new one, she said. She didn't step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so. There is push and shove, these days, over such things...The threshold of a new house is a lonely place. (13)

The Handmaid is thus at once wife/not wife, mother/not mother, of the family but outside of it.

Gluckman's approach to gossip is not troubled by such contradictory identities, or their implication in systems of domination and control. Although he never mentions her, the female gossiper can be identified with Gluckman's third "cell," since her gender determines her exclusiveness as "a distinguishing criterion *which members cannot overcome*"--at least, not within the self-confirming ideology of patriarchy in which woman's *de facto* subordination is presented as a *de jure* situation. According to Gluckman's model, her gossip about her peers should reinforce the unity of her female group and even mobilize it to take action against other groups (such as "patriarchy"). But this is precisely what does not happen. Already, the female gossiper is caught in a double bind. On the one hand, gossip about a companion's "transgressions" links her discourse to the regulative role of gossip in patriarchy, since female transgression is always a matter of breaking paternal law. Consequently, women's gossip about women will not result in solidarity as Gluckman supposes, but only reinforce the "norm" of male superiority and the related values of a system which denigrates all women's talk as idle chatter.

On the other hand, this problem is not solved by gossiping "outside" of one's own social group, because the ambivalent position of the female gossiper ensures that she is never entirely "outside" of patriarchy. To the contrary, she occupies a secondary position within

a masculinist hierarchy whose heterogeneity only confirms Gluckman's observation that "no groups are completely undifferentiated" ("Scandal" 313). This means that she is not really free to criticize, but is only part of a "clique" whose struggles "for status and prestige...*have to be kept within bounds, while the general values of the group are asserted, if the group is to survive*" (Gluckman, "Scandal" 313; my emphasis). In other words, the potential for a politically constituted, oppositional unity, which is implied by Gluckman's claim that "scandal when directed by members of a group against another group is unifying" because "it asserts the superiority of the scandalizing group" ("Scandal" 314), does not apply in the case of women's gossip. Her discourse is always already inscribed within the repressive values of the society it seeks to scandalize. In particular, her gossip about men is structurally contained, in Gluckman's theory, by the mechanisms designed to reinforce the power of the dominant voices; there is nothing subversive about dissent when "differences of opinion are fought out in behind-the-back tattle, gossip and scandal, so that many villagers who are actually at loggerheads, can outwardly maintain a show of harmony and friendship" (Gluckman, "Scandal" 312).

In Gilead, the Aunts charged with educating the Handmaids epitomize the double-bind of women in Gluckman's study who are complicit in their own defeminization. Aunt Lydia, for example, secures her own status as an authority figure by offering tenuous justifications for patriarchal order based on the scandals of history: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (24). Although Aunt Lydia reverses their sequence of a prior utopian order and a current state of chaos (because she is justifying rather than calling for the imposition of strong phallic rule), her rhetoric and function are virtually identical to those of the gossips in the seventeenth-century *Caquet de l'acouchée* who bemoaned that "Today, everything is permitted and tolerated," and sought "[t]o counteract this widespread confusion and to recreate the old idealized order" by advocating "the rule of law, urging archers, the police, courts, and the

parlement to survey and punish, 'to prevent disorder'" (Stanton 257). Like the *caqueteux*, Aunt Lydia appears to be "a superordinate man in drag," embodying the most insidious aspect of fascism whereby "[t]he threatening, disorderly other is brought in from the margins, and used to bolster the dominant discourse, becoming the spokesman for repressive phallic rule" (Stanton 258).

Moreover, gossip is an integral part of the way in which the Aunts become co-participants in the oppressive state and mouth-pieces for the dominant ideology. Aunt Lydia's screenings of the most lurid and scandalous vestiges of misogyny, for example, provide the substance of her apology for current domination for-your-own-good:

> Sometimes the movie she showed would be an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out.
>
> Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation. (112)

Because she is already mortgaged to the system, even Aunt Lydia's gossip about the men directly supports patriarchal rule, rather than challenging it. Whereas the Aunts intend such pornography to incite further speculation on the part of the Handmaids, videos of feminist activism furnish a greater challenge to Aunt Lydia's institutional appropriation of gossip-mongering because they offer more potential for sympathetic identification. Rather than becoming the objects of gossip, the tapes might reverse the polarity of the gossip-network, so that the Aunts and the state become the targets of virtual gossip between the televised Unwomen and the Handmaids themselves. For this reason, "[t]hey don't play the soundtrack, on movies like these, though they do on the porno films. They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once, but they don't want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying" (113). But some gossip does get through since, as the "camera pans up we

see the writing, in paint on what must have been a bedsheet: TAKE BACK THE NIGHT. This hasn't been blacked out, even though we aren't supposed to be reading. The women around me breathe in, there's a stirring in the room, like wind over grass. Is this an oversight, have we gotten away with something?" (113).

The Aunt's view of gossip as both a tool for indoctrination and as something which is to be strictly regulated among the Handmaids emphatically endorses Gluckman's stated thesis that gossip is a form of social control, as well as his implicit thesis that it is allied with partriarchal rule. As Lynne Marks argues, such institutional appropriations of "railing, tattling, general rumour, and common fame" were characteristic of church regulation in Upper Canada in the nineteenth century. Especially during a period when "institutions of the state were only gradually gaining legitimacy," as they were in Gilead, gossip and rumour were an important form of supervision for parishioners and "a means of identifying cases of apparent sin." In the practice of Testifying, Aunt Helena demonstrates the most harrowing way in which gossip can be enlisted to serve the interests of power by reinforcing misogyny. Thus, the scandal of Janine's testimony "about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion" is made into the object of a public, highly ritualized confrontation which nevertheless appropriates the form and style of malicious gossipping:

> But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.
> *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.
> *Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.
> *She* did. *She* did. *She* did.
> Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?
> Teach her a *lesson.* Teach her a *lesson.* Teach her a *lesson.* (67)

Here is Gluckman's idea writ large of the "duty" to gossip ("Scandal" 314). By prescribing a regimen of verbal complicity in patriarchal values, such official gossip anticipates more material forms of enforced complicity in the equally ritualized Salvaging ceremony. Boiling down malicious gossip to its barest components and organizing them within a rigid discursive structure of formulaic questions and responses, Testifying epitomizes the institutional value of gossip and its dangers for the female subject:

> Last week, Janine burst into tears...She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her.
>
> Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby.
>
> We meant it, which is the bad part.
>
> I used to think well of myself. I didn't then.
>
> That was last week. This week Janine didn't wait for us to jeer at her. It was my fault, she says. It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain.
>
> Very good, Janine, says Aunt Lydia. You are an example. (68)

Such an "example" thus dramatizes the theory that "gossip functions as a means of social control because--as the mere threat of sanction--it pre-emptively ensures conformative behaviour...The anxiety that accompanies the knowledge that people can gossip about one is enough to prevent people from acting deviantly" (Bergmann 143). The Handmaid's fear of occupying Janine's abject position replicates the paranoia associated with being objectified, and seems to reinforce what Ruth Benedict calls a shame culture (qtd. in Bergmann 143).

Like Gluckman's *laissez-faire* view of gossip's functions, the Aunts' use of gossip relies on and reinforces the values of the dominant ideology. Unlike Gluckman's gossip, however, state-sanctioned gossip in Gilead is highly self-conscious and proceeds *through manipulation, appropriation, and control.* The ambivalent position of women within patriarchy that Gluckman's theory does not consider, as well as the Aunts' institutional use of gossip to encourage complicity, are illuminated by Paul Smith's distinction between actors and agents. As he says, "a person is not simply an *actor* who follows ideological scripts, but is also an *agent* who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them--or not" (cited in Sidonie Smith 22). Because it eliminates the agency of the female gossiper to challenge the structures of oppression, reducing her to the status of "actor," Gluckman's estimate of gossip is extremely conservative and implicitly sexist: its function, with respect to the efficient running of a pre-existing (masculinist) society, is essentially custodial. Likewise, the Aunts, who follow "ideological scripts" to the letter, are identified with the role of "actor."

Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, citing a paper by Bert F. Hoselitz, clearly outlines the

dangers posed by such an uncritical position for the feminist critic who wishes to critique the very structure which marginalizes and silences her--a structure which functionalism itself purports, dispassionately, to "describe." "Structural Functionalism?" she asks, "Where 'integration' is 'social control [which] denies and *enforces...a degree of solidarity*'?...Structural functionalism takes a 'disinterested' stance on society as functioning structure. Its implicit interest is to applaud a system...because it functions" (Spivak, "French" 134). However, the degree to which the Aunts encourage certain types of gossip while inhibiting others, and turn gossip from a loose, semi-private site of talk about others to an intensely ritualized, public defamation of character, suggests that gossip does not automatically support state interests. Gossip as a tool which supports the status quo must be crafted by someone.

Spacks's view of the gossiper as an agent who wields gossip as a weapon, like the Aunts' gossip which was a weapon of the state, would thus seem to depend more upon Paine's instrumental account of gossiping which seeks to question "'when?', 'how?' and 'why?' unity is sought or avoided," and to investigate "the implications that unity will have for the circulation or repression of information and hence for the availability of possible courses of action open to an actor" ("Transaction" 307). But here again, Spacks's relation to her precursor is ambivalent. At one level, the privileged role of the individual gossiper as an author of transgressive social texts accounts for much of her argument's political force and accords with the Painean critique. Unlike Paine, however, Spacks does not linger on the figure of the calculating gossiper, and with good reason. Paine's explanation of gossip as "information-management" does not lend itself to collective resistance since the "purposes" of his gossipers all bear the same, distinctly Hobbesian, stamp. For Paine insists that gossip is primarily "a cultural device used by the individual to further his own interests" (282). "Intentionality," so reduced to narcissism, thus subverts the possibility of politicized gossiping directed toward purposive social critique, since "[a] 'we' group, in fact, usually turns out to be a coterie of rival interest-based quasi-groups," and "the

individual participants in these quasi-groups have ties and interests beyond the boundary of their 'we' group" (Paine 282). In other words, Paine's alternative to the functionalist neutralization of personal agency turns out to be an alienating return to deterministic social theory in the guise of instrumentality. Such a slippage between agency and selfish interest is particularly dangerous for a consideration of women's gossip since it fulfills patriarchal functions more than anything else, soothing masculine anxiety about female gossip as contestatory practice by reinforcing the reassuring misogynist stereotype that women are "tattlers" and "backstabbers," incapable of establishing real bonds of friendship or solidarity between themselves.

Such a genealogy of Spacks's view that gossip is a tool for the oppressed suggests that the construction of a "good gossip" has depended all along on a tactical reduction of the gossiper's agency. It is as if functionalism, under the weight of centuries-old dogma and conjecture about the essentially malicious nature of slander, felt that gossip could only be saved if it were divorced from the category of intention altogether. Accordingly, Gluckman negates, and Paine seriously limits, the creative role of the gossiper in order to display gossip's functional advantages. Spacks's implicit critique of the conservative politics of such theories, however, re-opens questions of intentionality and individual agency by "rais[ing] the question of purpose," differentiating gossip according to the "real rather than the announced goals" of the gossipers (6). It is, therefore, directly opposed to the functionalist dictum that "we engage in gossip because we delight in and value the activity itself and not its results" (Ben-Ze'ev 16). As she argues, "distinctions of purpose" are essential to understanding the way gossip works, "because conventional assumptions about [the frivolity of] gossip obscure them" (6).

This is especially true in the case of women's talk for which "idleness" or lack of intention has been the usual excuse for its dimissal. A study of gossip which includes the category of intent subverts this formulation in two ways: first, by showing that even idle talk, which proceeds, seemingly, "[w]ithout purposeful intent, [as] gossipers bandy words

and anecdotes about other people, thus protecting themselves from serious engagement with one another," already conceals a will to privacy whose ostensibly disinterested chatter is no less intentional than "destructiveness at one extreme" or "intimacy and moral investigation at the 'serious' end of the spectrum" (Spacks 6). Secondly, an analysis of intention in women's gossip exposes the ideological basis of the *a priori* rejection of all women's talk as "idle" by identifying in "gossip" a range of meaningful dissenting voices, contestatory practices and transactions. In the absence of intention, politically-interested gossip would not be conceivable. As Spacks herself implies, when she says that "gossip...supplies a form analogizing the exchange between narrator and reader: the novel's basic economy" (21), gossips are authors, not merely anonymous collectivities or the purveyors of mindless chit-chat. The renewed focus on the intentionality and agency of individual gossipers, upon which Spacks's theory of political resistance depends, thereby makes a strong case for preserving the "author's" authority in the gossip of subordinate groups.

Atwood makes a similar case for the agency of the gossiper by suggesting that the Handmaids' will to privacy becomes public contestation once they are on the Underground Femaleroad. To begin with, as the principal gossiper in the novel, Offred is identified with a familiar discourse of idleness:

> There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for--the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound. If only I could embroider. Weave, knit, something to do with my hands. I want a cigarette. I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom.
>
> But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men. (65)

As soon as Offred evokes it, however, the image of the idle woman--whom the state identifies as "lazy" and a "slut" (107)--is interrogated and the ideological basis of its

eroticism is unmasked. Like Spacks, Offred is uneasy with male representations of women as idle creatures because such representations are designed to undermine female agency. The harems she remembers are themselves profoundly ambivalent sites where the role of agency is always in question. On the one hand, they situate women within a patriarchal system of ownership in which female agency is a non sequitur; on the other, they are overly-determined female spaces in which women's talk may potentially flourish in uncontrollable ways. By eroticizing the women's boredom, the gaze of the male artist thus performs the same feat as the male narrator of the seventeenth-century *caquets* who "symbolically avenges the excluded male," who fears becoming an object of idle talk, by eavesdropping on the gathering of women and rewriting their narrative for male consumption.

In place of "long parentheses of nothing" (an image which suggests the absence of gossip, since it is most often associated with the marginal and the non-essential), Offred imagines productivity as weaving or knitting--activities which locate her in a very different domain of gossip. Offred's desire to weave recalls the story of the mortal Arachne, who was both a weaver and a gossip in Ovid's version of the story. Like modern constructions of the female gossiper, Arachne challenges the monologic order of official discourse in two ways: first by boasting that she can weave tapestries superior in quality even to those of Athena; and second, by constructing a scandalous tableau of "those crimes of heaven" (Ovid 125) which parody the "Twelve great gods,/Jove in their midst" who "sit there on lofty thrones,/Grave and august" (Ovid 123), in Athena's tapestry. Arachne's subversion of Jove's high seriousness through her gossipy textile turns out to be so threatening that Athena, in her fury, changes her into a spider. The metamorphosis thus ensures Arachne's continuous "spinning" of narrative and serves as a suggestive metaphor for the gossip as author, even as it mocks the hypocrisy of the official power which is the target of slander. As we shall see, Offred herself assumes the mantle of Arachne by gossiping about those in power and transforming herself into an author. Her politically subversive gossip, which

exposes "those crimes of Gilead," recorded during or after her escape on the Underground Femaleroad, attests to the revolutionary agency of the gossiper/author.

It is precisely this idea of authorship which is challenged, however, by current literary and philosophical discourses which vilify the author as a dusty bugbear of logocentrism. In many ways, the Gluckman-Paine opposition from which Spacks extricates a feminist theory of gossip resembles, and may even depend upon, this other, equally polarized, debate surrounding "the death of the author." On the one hand, Paine's individualistic gossip theory resembles the biographical criticism of the nineteenth century in that it seems unremittingly *auteurist,* insisting that we can determine "what gossip is about" in terms of the intentions of its "author." Paine's gossiper, like the totalitarian author described by Roland Barthes who produces "a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" ("Death" 146), fully masters a language that is both immediately transparent and fully sufficient to his purposes. Paine's search for the gossiper would thus seem to reproduce the tedious task of the traditional critic: "the task of discovering the Author...beneath the work" (Barthes, "Death" 147). His instrumental explanation of "gossip as purely purposive behaviour" is thus fundamentally an attack on a model of gossiping which, on the other hand, by "offering a functional explanation, or an explanation by implication" (Paine, "Alternative" 278, 282), implicitly privileges an "authorless" structure.

Gluckman's theory is "authorless" precisely because the intentions of the gossiper are unrelated to the "meaning" of his gossip which "is demonstrated as integrative to the structure...and may then be regarded, by the analyst, solely in respect of this implication" (Paine, "Alternative" 282). Barthes, too, was anxious to subordinate the subject to a structure (this time to a structure of language) which exceeded him at every turn. As he says, "it is language which speaks, not the author" ("Death" 143). In fact, Gluckman asserts, with an impertinence reminiscent of Derridean deconstruction, that the effects of gossiping (which are unifying) *are precisely the opposite* of the intentions of individual

gossipers (which are divisive). "The death of the Gossip" in structural anthropology thus anticipates poststructuralism's more radical anti-authorialism in Barthes's formulation of the birth of the reader, or in Jacques Derrida's claim that "The names of authors...have...no substantial value. They indicate neither identities nor causes" (*Of Gram* 99).

Spacks's formulation of the "serious gossiper," however, who seeks equally "a crucial means of self-expression, [and] a crucial form of solidarity" (5) from her gossip, is not taken in by the binary logic inherent in Barthes's argument. Her politicized gossiper can therefore hardly be identified with poststructuralism's dead author who is awash on a sea of discursivity. Yet, she cannot be identified with the self-sufficient, sovereign consciousness of the classical author either, since gossip is, above all, a social performance. In his writing on oppression, Peter Hitchcock summarizes this dilemma with penetrating clarity. If one is to see

> the subject as an agent and agency itself as a means of social transformation...one must...be vigilant to avoid overprivileging what has become the new badge of academic political inertia, the fetish of the decentered subject because, in its least stable forms, it appears to be unable to change anything. Somewhere between the undivided "I," the sacred certitude of metaphysical ideology, and the stasis of a certain uncertain poststructuralist schizophrenic there is, perhaps, a subject who is nominally, if marginally, a product and producer of social relations. (9)

"The Death of the Author," like the terrain of functionalist debate, renders such a subject nearly invisible. Nevertheless, she can at least be glimpsed between the cracks of Barthes's provocative announcement: "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." As Seán Burke wryly observes, "[s]uch radical and vatic statements have resulted in 'The Death of the Author' becoming the center of a controversy. What it has not become, though, is the centre of a debate or discussion" (21). Burke himself takes important steps toward opening such a discussion in his study of *The Death and Return of the Author* (1992) in which he interrogates "authorial disappearance...as an article of faith" in poststructural discourse (17). His reading of Barthes argues that one of

the principal reasons the essay has been so persuasive and so impervious to engaged debate is that "the *auteurist* position which Barthes takes arms against is itself largely hypostasised" (26). Barthes's construction of an omnipotent author of the kind enshrined in nineteenth-century psycho-biographical criticism, he says, is not related to the essay's vague claims that "the *author* still reigns in histories of literature," or that "the *explanation* of a work *is always* [my emphasis] sought in the man or woman who produced it" (143). Rather, it is symptomatic of the origins of modern anti-authorialism in

> the epistemological upheaval in Western thought which the theorists of the 1960s believed to be underway in the linguistic decomposition of subject-centered philosophies. Where philosophy and the human sciences had registered man, or the subject as the necessary beginning and end of knowledge, knowledge and the subject are seen to be fictive emanations of a language and a writing which endlessly subvert all attempts by the human agent to assert any degree of mastery or control over their workings. (Burke 15)

Clearly, this marks a profound break from the kinder, gentler anti-authorialism of Russian Formalism and the New Criticism, for whom "[t]he *death* or *disappearance* of the author was not at issue but rather the incompatibility of authorial categories with immanent analyses" (Burke 16)--theories which Barthes, in this essay, studiously ignores. Because he sees the death of the author in terms of the deaths of God and man in continental philosophy, Barthes's author must not simply be an author, but an "Author-God" whose demise "liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases--reason, science, law" (Barthes 147). As Burke argues, such a conflation of divine and human authority profoundly exaggerates the degree to which authors were assumed to control their texts in literary theory contemporaneous with his own writing. Most notably:

> we can, without contradiction, conceive of authors who do not issue 'single theological messages', who do not hold a univocal mastery over their texts. There are indeed even conceptions of authorship that are determinedly anti-theological. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic author, for example, is constructed precisely in opposition to the univocality of epic monologism. (Burke 25)

In fact, the Bakhtinian definition of "double-voiced discourse" actually confirms that

authorial intention is built into "anti-theological" practices of textual production and consumption, since heteroglossia "is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (*Dialogic* 324).

Burke thus demonstrates that the Barthesian polemic has been based on a false set of alternatives all along. The real choice is not between a tyrannical author and a liberated reader, but rather, between a dialogic author and an anarchic reader unhampered by any restraints or responsibility. Just as Bakhtinian dialogics interrupts Barthes's compulsion to polarize his argument, so too it breaks the stalemate between structure- and subject-oriented functionalisms. At the midpoint between self and structure, dialogism restores the subject to a community without robbing her of agency. Spacks's theory of gossip favours just such a dialogic approach since, although it is important, intentionality is not a master-concept for her as it is for Barthes's version of the classical author. Rather, the authorial voice of the gossiper in her theory takes its place within a social structure of dialogic relations. Her assertion that gossip's "*I's* inevitably turn into a *we*" (Spacks 261) is a virtual paraphrase of Bakhtin's idea that "'I' can realize itself verbally only on the basis of 'we'" ("Discourse" 397).

Spacks identifies a similar dynamic in the novel form itself when she suggests that gossip "supplies a form of analogizing the exchange between narrator and reader: the novel's basic economy" (21). Citing Bakhtin's account of dialogue, Spacks shows how "the implicit presence of a listener--or by extension a reader--would affect the dynamics of language even in the process of composition" (21). As Bakhtin himself argues, "the listener as an immanent participant in the artistic event...has [a] determinative effect on the form of the work from within" ("Discourse" 408). According to this model of discourse, founded on the recognition that "every conscious act is already a social act, an act of communication" ("Discourse" 408), writing and speech can not be totally divorced from agency or intention. Like gossip, story too is intimately linked to notions of purposeful communication. For Bakhtin, the regulative role of the listener in artistic creation, who, as

"the bearer of the value judgements of the social group to which the 'conscious' person belongs" ("Discourse" 408), ensures the inherently dialogic nature of the text, since his "constant coparticipa[tion] in all our conscious acts determines not only the content of consciousness but also...the very *selection* of the content, the selection of what precisely we become conscious of, and thus determines also those evaluations which permeate consciousness" ("Discourse" 409).

On the other hand, functionalist theories of gossip curtailed the possibility of political subversion through a reduction of the gossiper's agency--either by alienating the gossiper from her community or by making her the product of a socio-institutional framework. A theory of gossip modeled on the Bakhtinian author overcomes both of these problems because, in dialogism, "the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*" (Holquist 18), but is not entirely determined by it. Like the dialogic author, Spacks's gossiper is "not to be conceived as a transcendent, annunciative being, but rather as that voice amongst the many which holds together the polyphonic strands of the text's composition, an author who 'resides within the controlling center constituted by the intersection of the surfaces'" (Burke 48). The dialogic gossiper is thus located between the twin poles of functionalism; a position which restores her agency and opens the door to resistance.

By reconnecting the gossiper to society as an author of contestatory social narratives, Spacks implicitly subscribes to a subversive view of dialogism, even if she does not spell it out in precisely those terms. As we have seen, her use of Bakhtin is primarily, at the level of structure, a way of repositioning her gossiper as a kind of secret agent whose "[d]iscourse lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (Bakhtin, cited in Spacks 21). Yet, this suggestive account of Bakhtinian gossip does not go nearly far enough. We might expand Spacks's discussion of "serious gossip" by investigating its links to that corner of Bakhtinian criticism which is the most non-serious: Rabelais and the carnival tradition. Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque in

Rabelais and his World, as the celebration of "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order...mark[ing] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (*Rabelais* 10), illuminates a feminist discourse on gossip in several important ways.

In the first place, gossip and carnival are pre-eminently social practices. As Bakhtin says, "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators...Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live it" (*Rabelais* 7). Similarly, gossip is not a performance seen from a distance, but a spontaneous social utterance in which categories like actor/spectator are blurred as the boundaries between gossipers, recipients, and even objects remain fluid and shifting. Secondly, carnival's techniques for reversing social hierarchies through "the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (à l'envers), of the 'turnabout', of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 11), provide important resources for the subversive gossiper. And thirdly, Bakhtin's account of carnival laughter and the thematics of grotesque realism perfectly describes the disturbing ambivalence of the "serious" gossiper. "The laughter of the carnival," as Kristeva says, "is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is *serious.* This is the only way that it can avoid becoming either the scene of the law or the scene of its parody, in order to become the scene of its *other*" (*Desire* 80). Whereas a parody only strengthens the law through ritual reaffirmation, Bakhtin's notion of carnival is marked by "murderous, cynical, and revolutionary" laughter--laughter which is, above all, "a social and political protest" (Kristeva, *Desire* 80, 65).

Even in such a preliminary sketch, the parallels between gossip and carnival are striking. Considering Bakhtin's own interest in "low" discourses, it is surprising that he did not perceive the connection between gossip and the carnivalesque himself. The closest he comes is in his analysis of the *Caquet de l'acouchée* (*Cackle of the confined woman),* a

seventeenth-century genre, noted for its representation of "female chatter" (*Rabelais* 105), especially that which occurs at female gatherings around the bed of a woman in her confinement. Traditionally, he says, such gatherings "were marked by abundant food and frank conversation, at which social conventions were dropped. The acts of procreation and eating predetermined the role of the material bodily lower stratum and the theme of these conversations" (*Rabelais* 105). Such is not the case in the *Caquet*, however, where

> the author eavesdrops on the women's chatter while hiding behind a curtain...[I]n the conversation that follows, the theme of the bodily lower stratum (for instance, the Rabelasian topic of swabs) is transferred to private manners. *This female cackle is nothing but gossip and tittle-tattle.* The popular frankness of the marketplace with its grotesque ambivalent lower stratum is replaced by chamber intimacies of private life, heard from behind a curtain. (*Rabelais* 105; my emphasis)

As the opposite of "frank conversation," "gossip and tittle-tattle" in Bakhtin's text are denied any subversive or carnivalizing power. Since the *Caquet* is meant to exemplify Bakhtin's master-narrative of the enfeeblement and eventual suppression of grotesque realism by a bourgeois culture of manners, the women's slippage from carnival to cackle falls into place as the seventeenth century's "preparation [for] the 'alcove realism' of private life, a realism of eavesdropping and peeping which reached its climax in the nineteenth century" (*Rabelais* 106).

Domna C. Stanton's reappraisal of women's gossip in the context of the seventeenth-century *querelles des femmes*, however, suggests that "[f]ar from being a trivially private text, as Bakhtin claims, the male-narrated *Recueil général des caquets de l'accouchée* recuperates the 'loose talk' of women at the lying-in, and then uses it as a screen to denounce social disorder and to proclaim the cure of rigid, patriarchal rule" (251). In other words, Bakhtin's assessment that "female cackle is nothing but gossip and tittle-tattle," (the term *caquet* itself denotes "the hen's clucking when she lays an egg"), fails to see the gender politics at stake in the re-presentation of exclusive female gossip "through the male gaze [which] frames, controls, degrades the gathering and loose bantering around fertile women" (Stanton 250). Far from reinforcing the frivolity of female talk, the voyeuristic

narrator's mocking report, as well as his transformation of the gossip into a plea for phallic order, dramatizes tremendous male anxiety about the power of female gossip, since "women's license--discursive and/as political--threatens male rule(s)" (Stanton 251).

Bakhtin himself, Stanton argues, "symptomatically reproduces the phallocentric views of the voyeuristic narrator" in several ways: 1) in his derision of "female cackle"; 2) in his omission of the *Essais de Mathurine*, "the most 'Rabelaisian' of the caquets and anti-caquets," purportedly composed by a mad female jester in the court of Marie de Médici, which "derides *Le caquet de l'acouchée* as the fiction of a sex-starved 'rapacious bird'...who is rejected by the Rabelaisian number of females he pursues and who knows no women's secrets" (260-61); and 3) in his failure to see "the ideological implications of identifying females only with the material body" (249). Despite such criticisms, however, Stanton's view that women's "gossip," like "the grotesque realism of the carnival...subverts dominant beliefs and affirms the devalued or denied," does not dismiss the value of Bakhtin's poetics, but only insists that "the gendered inflection and self-interest of his own discourse" be acknowledged (247, 261). As she herself concedes, the author(s) of the *caquets* "promoted the kind of order that Bakhtin systematically opposes and aims to subvert" (261). The carnivalesque tradition, contrary to Bakhtin's own claims, still seems to inform the idea of women's gossip as a discourse with a calculated disrespect for patriarchal order. Stanton's essay thus stages its own recuperation of the *caquets*, exchanging the clucking of hens for the laugh of the medusa.

Clearly the *caquets* provide an important context for Atwood's novel which is similarly focussed on gossip at gatherings of fertile women. Because the Birth Day is central to both the social and political livelihood of Gilead, however, it is also rife with highly formalized gestures and patterns of speech which inhibit the possibility of subversive talk. Gossip is forestalled as Offred notices that "The women's voices rise around me, a soft chant that is still too loud for me, after the days and days of silence...'Breathe, breathe,' we chant, as we have been taught. 'Hold, hold. Expel, expel, expel.' We chant to the count of five"

(116). Subsequently, however, the *caquet* takes place in a dispersed fashion between Offred and Ofglen:

> "It was no good, you know," Ofglen says near the side of my head. "It was a shredder after all."
>
> She means Janine's baby, the baby that passed through Janine on its way to somewhere else. The baby Angela. It was wrong, to name her too soon. I feel an illness, in the pit of my stomach. Not an illness, an emptiness. I don't want to know what was wrong with it. "My God," I say. To go through all that for nothing. Worse than nothing.
>
> "It's her second," Ofglen says, "Not counting her own, before. She had an eighth-month miscarriage, didn't you know?"
>
> ...
>
> "She thinks it's her fault," Ofglen whispers. "Two in a row. For being sinful. She used a doctor, they say, it wasn't her Commander's at all." (202)

In contrast to Dr. Johnson's definition of the gossip as "one who runs about tattling like women at a lying in," the Handmaids' talk is far from trivial, for it uses the tropes of gossip in order to mock the cuckolded Commander. By suggesting the impotence of the representative of phallic rule, the *caquet* in *The Handmaid's Tale* thus begins to turn the official world upside down.

A more serious problem with the analogy between subversive gossiping and carnival emerges in the dearth of recent skepticism concerning the "politics" of transgression. Terry Eagleton, for instance, reminds us that "carnival, after all, is a *licenced* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a confined popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art" (cited in Stallybrass and White 13). If carnival actually supports rather than subverts the status quo, as Eagleton suggests, then a carnivalesque model of women's gossip would be self-defeating. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's analysis of this position in their study of *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* even cites Gluckman's "classic formulation" of this idea that, while "rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order...they are intended to preserve and strengthen the established order" (13). "And yet," as Hitchcock notes, "whatever the degree of staging, whatever carnival's production as a reflection of a dominant group's fascination with excess, there is always something in excess of

authority's desire" (6). Moreover, as we have seen, Gluckman's model of gossip, hinging on gossip's complicity with authority, does not take the taboos surrounding gossiping into account. For him, gossip is not even a *licensed* transgression, like carnival, because the very idea that gossip transgresses norms of decorum falls away; he treats it as a socially acceptable discourse. Historically, however, gossip has been a locus of struggle and the target of a vigorous and vocal opposition. We need only glance at the plenitude of discourses--moral, religious, philosophical, juridical--calling for the end of gossip, to see that this is the case. Gossip survives, not because of official discourses, but in spite of them.

This means that, even if "there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression," subversive gossip is nevertheless infused with carnival associations because, "given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle*" (Stallybrass and White 16, 14). A classic example of this is found in the Renaissance, at which time

> Carnivals, fairs, popular games and festivals were very swiftly "politicized" by the very attempts made on the part of local authorities to eliminate them. The dialectic of antagonism frequently *turned* rituals into resistance at the moment of intervention by the higher powers, even when no overt oppositional element had been present before. (Stallybrass and White 16)

By the nineteenth century, the suppression of carnivals and fairs and the suppression of gossip were conducted in nearly identical terms. Just as magistrates invoked the key distinction between a fair which was economically useful and a "mere" pleasure fair, marked by "idleness, dissipation, disorder" (Stallybrass and White 34), so critics of gossip dwelt on the merits of "real talk," which was recommended on practical, utilitarian, or spiritual grounds, as opposed to "idle talk" which was pursued only for pleasure. For the female gossiper, whose every utterance in the absence of male authority is construed as "idle," such attempts to still completely the wagging tongues of dissent make gossip into a site supercharged with political significance. For as Elizabeth Bott puts it, "no gossip, no companionship" (cited in Bergmann 70). But no "gossip" for women also means no voice.

By locating the politics of carnival in relation to real instances of suppression and struggle *at the level of the materiality of discourse, and not simply its thematics*, Stallybrass and White open the door to a study of women's gossip as more than seemingly symbolic transgression. As the survivors of the regime who live to tell their stories by escaping on the Femaleroad suggest, women's gossip in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in addition to being a site of struggle, is also a transgression with "real," not just symbolic, effects. By escaping the material conditions of her subordination, the unlicensed gossiper threatens the state by gossiping about the scandals she has endured and witnessed. Her "gossip" about state secrets gives new significance to Spacks's claim that gossip "incorporates the possibility that people utterly lacking in public power may affect the views of figures who make things happen in the public sphere" (7).

Appealing as it is, such a scheme still is not sufficient to account for the most pressing difference between gossip and carnival. Although both are located "outside" official language and culture, one is characterized by the open, public atmosphere of the marketplace; the other, by the cloistered, private congress of intimates. In a sense, the exclusiveness of female gossip could be said to recuperate the form and language of its (Stanton argues, patriarchal) public counterpart, and to bring it indoors:

> Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and are still conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability. These elements of freedom, if present in sufficient numbers and with a precise intention, exercise a strong influence on the entire elements of speech, transferring it to another sphere beyond the limits of conventional language. *Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally.* The marketplace crowd is such a collectivity,especially the festive, carnivalesque crowd at the fair. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 187-88; my emphasis)

The gathering of gossips seems to be a private version of such a collectivity. Stallybrass and White's analysis of the repression and return of carnival material in Freud's case-studies of "hysterics," following the disappearance of actual carnivals at the end of the nineteenth century, provides a suggestive explanation for this privatization. Traditionally,

they argue, "social historians treat the attack on carnival as a victory over popular culture, first by the Absolutist state, then by the middle classes, a process which is viewed as the more or less complete destruction of popular festivity: the end of carnival" (177). Apocalyptic conclusions of this sort, however, do not take stock of carnival's "*displacements* into bourgeois discourses like art and psychoanalysis" (178). According to Stallybrass and White, the "demonization and the exclusion of the carnivalesque," and especially the "relentless attack on the 'grotesque body' of carnival by the emergent and professional classes from the Renaissance onwards," led to their internalization and repression by the bourgeois subject (176).

Consequently, "[i]n the *Studies on Hysteria* many of the images and symbols which were once the focus of various pleasures in European carnival have become transformed into the morbid symptoms of private terror":

> Again and again these patients suffer acute attacks of disgust, literally vomiting out horrors and obsessions which look surprisingly like the rotted residue of traditional carnival practices. At the same time the patients seem to be reaching out, in their highly stylized gestures and discourses, toward a repertoire of carnival material *as both expression and support. They attempt to mediate their terrors by enacting private, made-up carnivals. In the absence of social forms they attempt to produce their own pastiche and parody in an effort to embody semiotically their distress.* (Stallybrass and White 174; my emphasis)

Evidently, not all of the bourgeoisie ended up on Freud's couch, pantomiming their way towards good psychic health. If Stallybrass and White overemphasize the degree to which the sublimation of carnival resulted in self-abjection, however, what becomes of the dangerous excess that threatens to back up on the subject? Where does it go? How is it displaced? The discovery of "the forms, symbols, rituals and structures of carnival...in the aesthetics of modernism" does not quite solve the puzzle at the level of the subject who incorporates carnival material into "a negative, individualist framework" (176), as her need for private forms of carnival production (and not only reception) in psychoanalytic discourse suggests.

The answer lies, at least in part, in the fact that the "repression" of carnival has never

been total because there has never been a total "absence of social forms" through which individuals could "produce their own pastiche and parody." As Spacks notes, gossip constitutes just such a social form whose function is "releasing people from the prison of their own thoughts" (43). Thus, carnivalizing gossip does turn out to provide an "escape valve"--not for "social pressures" this time, but for the individual subject. The sublimation of carnival as pathology is displaced or forestalled by the active gossiper who, like the modernist author, finds in the carnivalesque the source and images of her discourse. This is not to reduce gossip to a bourgeois invention, or to make the ridiculous claim that gossip appears only when real carnivals dissipate. No doubt, gossip and carnival co-exist quite amicably. However, the gossiper has a special significance when overtly public forms of resistance to dominant culture are silenced or eliminated. In such cases, gossip takes on the form and significance of an underground carnival. The gossiper assumes the mantle of secret agent.

As Atwood demonstrates in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the institutionalization of interdictions against women's talk means that such a suppression is always in effect for the female "gossiper." Accordingly, gossip in the novel between the Handmaids, who already constitute a distinct social group, united by issues of gender and class towards a common goal of emancipation, seems to function along precisely the same lines as those laid out by Spacks in her thesis. Representing their gossip as the discourse of a women's subculture, Atwood shows how gossip "provides a resource for the subordinated...a crucial means of self expression, a crucial form of solidarity" (Spacks 5) in the context of the paradigmatically oppressive Gileadean state. The images of confinement that Roberta Rubenstein describes as characterizing the Handmaids' experience, such as "the physically confining rooms, walls and other actual boundaries of the Republic of Gilead [which] corroborate the condition of reproductive 'confinement' to which the Handmaids are subject" (103), might also be expanded to include their confining silence; in which case, gossip itself is transformed into a crucial balm for isolation. As Lucy M. Freibert

observes, the state carries its surveillance to the most microscopic level, since "[t]he formulaic speech patterns imposed on the Handmaids, 'Blessed be the fruit', 'May the Lord open', 'Praise be' [9]..., serve to perpetuate the religious nature of their role and *to prevent practical conversation*" (284; my emphasis). The suppression of practical conversation in Gilead, like the dominant ideology's suppression of gossip in Spacks's study, thus seems to reflect "the justifiable anxiety of the dominant about the aggressive impulses of the submissive" (Spacks 30). More importantly, however, for the rigidly monitored Handmaids, whose prescribed and ritualized actions and speech constantly serve to isolate them from their own social group and to enforce their silence, gossip represents the almost unimaginable possibility of social contact. Offred's yearning for precisely this kind of community is apparent in her desire to gossip with the Marthas, Rita and Cora:

> ...and we would sit at Rita's kitchen table, which is not Rita's any more than my table is mine, and we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it. We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries; gently we would complain, our voices soft and minor-key and mournful as pigeons in eaves troughs. *I know what you mean*, we'd say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people: *I hear where you're coming from*, as if the voice itself were a traveller, arriving from a distant place. Which it would be, which it is.
>
> How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange of sorts. (10-11)

Offred's emphasis on mutual exchange, on the quality of voice itself, "soft and minor-key and mournful as pigeons in eaves troughs" and on the choral support, "*I know what you mean*," "*I hear where you're coming from*," betrays her desire for human contact as a goal of the utterance itself that will validate her personal experience and locate her within a social group that is distinctly her own. As the focus of this passage suggests, the domestic gossip that she longs for, what Deborah Jones calls "chatting," is prized not for its content, but for the intimate relationship it expresses, for the "continuous chorus and commentary on the incidents of women's daily lives" it provides "in an evaluative process that also provides emotional support" (Jones 248). Significantly, Offred positions her current

longings for mutual disclosure against her own former derision of "such talk" and the entire tradition of moral censure that it implies. Offred's nostalgia for this kind of gossip about the old quotidian (ours), in which women's bodies might be seen as something other than "walking wombs," emphatically suggests that Atwood, like Jones and Spacks, is taking a revisionist stance by proposing to focus on the "positive" value of gossip as a social bonding agent.

For Offred, the new significance of gossip in Gilead as a vehicle of solidarity and strength is brought home in the secret communication she discovers while exploring the confines of her room:

> I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.* I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. I thought it might be Latin, but I didn't know any Latin. Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next. (49)

The fact that the "taboo message" (50) is unreadable only highlights the structural benefits of gossip: "It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman" (49). Content in this case is subordinated to the connection it establishes between Offred and the Handmaid who came before her. Moreover, the exchange which results when her curiosity about the note spurs her to question Rita about her predecessor emphasizes both the implicitly political nature of the message and its kinship with gossip:

> You knew her? Rita asked, more suspicious than ever.
> I knew her before, I lied. I heard she was here.
> Rita accepted this. She knows there must be a grapevine, an underground of sorts. (50)

Subsequently, after the undecipherable message becomes Offred's prayer for community, imagined as "the face of Moira" (86), the revelation that the nameless Handmaid appropriated the phrase from their Commander heightens its parodic significance:

> "That's not real Latin," he says. "That's just a joke."
> "A joke?" I say, bewildered now. It can't only be a joke. Have I risked this, made a grab at knowledge, for a mere joke? "What sort of a joke?" (174)

The secret of the schoolboy's joke, "Don't let the bastards get you down," is hidden in an old textbook in which "the Venus de Milo, in a black-and-white photo with a moustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair drawn clumsily on her," epitomizes the fundamental paradox about the classical woman's body: "even as her body is revealed to be aesthetically beautiful, it is corrupt and grotesque" (Smith 16). But the joke turns out to be on the Commander after all since its translation both establishes the doubly subversive nature of its message (it represents the pen Offred envies and longs to steal--174--and explicitly delivers tidings of solidarity), as well as allowing the absent Handmaid to gossip, posthumously, with Offred about the Commander:

> I force a smile, but it's all before me now. I can see why she wrote that, on the wall of the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it here, in this room. Where else? She was never a schoolboy. With him, during some previous period of boyhood reminiscence, of confidences exchanged. I have not been the first then. (175)

Gossip's functional value as both a mechanism for sustaining social groups and a political challenge to oppression attains its ultimate form in the Mayday underground's institutionalization of gossip in the nefarious "grapevine." Transformed by the radicalization of late twentieth-century contexts in Gileadean society, the grapevine, once a synonym for the anonymous movement of gossip itself, takes on a central role in the Mayday underground as a network of information acquisition and dissemination. Although functionally similar to "chatting," Mayday's grapevine literalizes gossip's latent ability to define a coherent social group in the form of a password that confirms or denies individual membership:

> "Who told you?" I say. There's no one near, we can speak more freely, but out of habit we keep our voices low.
> "The grapevine," she says. She pauses, looks sideways at me, I sense the blur of white as her wings move. "There's a password," she says.
> "A password?" I ask. "What for?"
> "So you can tell," she says. "Who is and who isn't." (190)

Significantly, even the password itself, "Mayday," points to a community of mutual

assistance and support. For Offred, the password takes on the value of its acoustic equivalent, "M'aidez" (42), the polite French second-person plural which literally means, "*you* (plural), help *me*." By speaking the password, a member invokes an entire community of support. However, the value of gossip for the Mayday resistance is not simply the solidarity it provides. In fact, Offred's realization--"There is an *us* then, there's a *we*. I knew it" (158)--prompted by her introduction to the Mayday organization, is largely a side-effect--a function--of this gossip's explicitly political agenda. As the language of the (un)official political resistance, the grapevine is emblematic of gossip's transgressive potential; in Offred's words, "subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one" (158).

In a similar way, Offred imagines the subversive possibilities for the language of an alternative ideology even in everyday gossip, since it too can be a conduit of forbidden knowledge:

> The Marthas know things, they talk amongst themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house. Like me, they listen at doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted. I've heard them at it sometimes, caught whiffs of their private conversations. *Stillborn, it was.* Or, *stabbed with a knitting needle, right in the belly. Jealousy, it must have been, eating her up.* Or, tantalizingly, *It was toilet cleaner she used. Worked like a charm, though you'd think he'd of tasted it. Must've been that drunk; but they found her out all right.* (11)

Like chatting, gossip about the private lives of social superiors does promote alliance among the gossipers in that it identifies them as belonging to the same social sub-group. This unofficial news, "passed from house to house," serves the same function as the women's lip-read names exchanged "from bed to bed" (4); the sugar packets stolen to comfort Moira, "hand[ed] from bed to bed" (87) after she is tortured; questions about a Handmaid's abduction, "whispered from bed to bed" (68); or the story of Moira's escape "passed among us that night, in the semi-darkness, under our breath, from bed to bed" (125) at the Rachel and Leah Center. Gossip traveling from house to house or bed to bed is an image of alliance, solidarity, and resistance that defines and sustains a distinct social

'we'.

Like the Mayday grapevine, however, the Marthas' gossip is valuable not simply for the purpose of alliance it serves, but for the way in which it undercuts the representative figures of the dominant ideology. Gossip about a Wife overcome by jealousy and a Commander slain by toilet bowl cleaner works subversively to deflate the power of those in charge, even as it ostensibly reinscribes the dominant morality: "*but they found her out all right.*" Rather than signalling a retreat to established values, the ambivalence of the Marthas' gossip might be seen in the context of Paine's suggestion that "gossipers always pursue the goal of exploiting the values and moral ideas to which they implicitly or explicitly refer in their information in order to promote their own interests" (Bergmann 147). In this way, the Marthas can reap the benefits of empowerment inherent in subversive gossip without placing themselves at risk in a landscape populated by ears and Eyes.

Significantly, the scatological discourse of the toilet is central to these exchanges. Like the carnivalizing gesture of "besmirch[ing] with excrement and urine," the Handmaids' gossip often debases its objects by covert "mudslinging"--the modern euphemism derived from grotesque debasement (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 147). We have already been privy to the many uses of toilet cleaner, but the scatological theme is enlisted again and again as a weapon of the lower orders. One of the most subversive instances of such besmirching in the text is the well-travelled story of Moira's escape from the Red Center, which, as Offred explains, has a complex and winding genealogy typical of gossip: "Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia. There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances. This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another" (121). The positive alliance derived from this gossiping is not only a function of the story's repetition or even of its plot, but also, and most significantly, of its travestying narrative which begins as a routine trip to the washroom:

> After a moment Moira called to Aunt Elizabeth: the toilet was overflowing, could Aunt Elizabeth come and fix it?...Aunt Elizabeth, suspecting no harm, went into the washroom...Moira was not lying, water was running over the floor and several pieces of disintegrating fecal matter...Moira stood politely aside, and Aunt Elizabeth hurried into the cubicle Moira had indicated, and bent over the back of the toilet. She intended to lift off the porcelain lid and fiddle with the arrangement of bulb and plug inside. She had both hands on the lid when she felt something hard and sharp and possibly metallic jab her ribs from behind. Don't move, said Moira, or I'll stick it all the way in, I know where, I'll puncture your lung.
>
> They found out afterwards that she'd dismantled the inside of one of the toilets and taken out the long thin pointed lever, the part that attaches to the handle at one end and the chain at the other. (123)

The overflowing toilet, with its carnival theme of the lower bodily stratum, is instrumental in degrading the dignity of official power. Moira's assault with a deadly piece of the dismantled toilet symbolically dramatizes how the low discourses of "filthy talk" are useful weapons of character assassination. As Offred later notices, the "loose talk" about Moira's escape from the Center whittles away at the power of the establishment: "Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was a loose woman...In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked" (125).

The centrality of the bathroom in Moira's story is not accidental, but part of a larger pattern within the text of associating both the bonding and the carnivalizing potential of the toilet with gossip and scandal. In the Red Center, for example, the bathroom is the locus of gossip, alliance, and transgression because it is the last vestige of private space built into the architecture of the school itself. In the bathroom, surveillance breaks down, if only slightly: "the stalls are wooden, some kind of chipboard...Of course there are no longer any locks. In the wood there's a small hole, at the back, next to the wall, about waist height, souvenir of some previous vandalism or legacy of an ancient voyeur. Everyone in the Centre knows about this hole in the woodwork; everyone except the Aunts" (69). For Offred and Moira, the hole between the stalls presents a valuable opportunity for talk and connection. Whether she's listening to Moira's plots to escape (84-85) or her trivial yearning for a smoke, Offred "feel[s] ridiculously happy" (69). Such happiness often

depends more on the connection than the content: "You in there. Time's up, said the voice of Aunt Elizabeth, from the door way. I stood up, flushed the toilet. Two of Moira's fingers appeared through the hole in the wall. It was only large enough for two fingers. I touched my own fingers to them, quickly, held on. Let go" (85). The image of the women's fingers grasping each other through the hole which Offred has put her "mouth to" (69) in order to speak--and which exchanges the misogynist symbol of "the hole in woman's face" (Smith 15) for the site of productive gossip--thus concretizes the implicit function of the Handmaids' gossip. Such exchanges, in turn, work to reclaim the "Ladies Room" as a site of meaningful discourse and to reevaluate the negative stereotype of women going to the bathroom *en masse* to gossip.

In other ways, as well, Atwood's return to gossiping in the bathroom enlists the discourse of the grotesque body as a subversive strategy. Since, "[i]n Bakhtin the 'classical body' denotes the inherent *form* of the high official culture and suggests that the shape and plasticity of the human body is indissociable from the shape and plasticity of discursive material and social norm in a collectivity," the Republic of Gilead is identified with the "classical body" which, like "the classical statue has no openings or orifices" and, like the Cartesian subject, is in a sense "disembodied" (Stallybrass and White 21, 22). The grotesque body, by contrast, is threatening because its "orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and...lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) [are] given priority over its upper regions (head, 'spirit', reason)" (Stallybrass and White 9). Scatological gossip engages with this description of grotesque realism on many levels, as we have seen. It is Offred, however, after she speaks with Moira for one last time in the bathroom at the government's version of a "licensed carnival" for the elite, who puts the subversive power of the grotesque, and hence of gossip, most succinctly: "There is something reassuring about the toilets. Bodily functions at least remain democratic. Everybody shits, as Moira would say" (235).

The value of the grotesque body as a parodic tool for the oppressed (for whom biology

is destiny) is a preeminent theme in the gossip between Moira and Offred at the Rachel and Leah Centre:

> What we're aiming for, says Aunt Lydia, is a spirit of camaraderie among women. We must all pull together.
>
> Camaraderie, shit, says Moira through the hole in the toilet cubicle. Right fucking on, Aunt Lydia, as they used to say. How much do you want to bet she's got Janine down on her knees? What do you think they get up to in that office of hers? I bet she's got her working away on that dried-up, hairy old withered--
>
> Moira! I say.
>
> Moira what? she whispers. You know you've thought it.
>
> It doesn't do any good to talk like that, I say, feeling nevertheless the impulse to giggle. (208)

Rachel M. Brownstein has noted that "Gossip, like novels, is a way of turning life into story. Good gossip approximates good art" (quoted in Spacks 13). Moira's parodic appropriation of Aunt Lydia's rhetoric of "camaraderie" ("we must all pull together") reintroduces the democratizing function of the grotesque body even as it suggests that gossip and novels are linked in a more subtle way.

As Bakhtin argues, "parodic travestying 'mimicry'...rips the word away from its object, disunifies the two, shows that a given straightforward generic word," in this case Aunt Lydia's patriotic and implicitly suppressive rhetoric, "is one-sided, bounded, incapable of exhausting the object; the process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given genre or style. Parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sidedness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre" (*Dialogic* 55). In its travestying mimicry of Aunt Lydia's seriousness, Moira's gossip rejects the one-sidedness of Gilead's communal rhetoric as ludicrous propaganda, asserting instead the primacy of her own experience. At the same time, she suggests something of gossip's power to perpetuate "the permanent corrective of laughter," much like Spacks's "rhetoric of inquiry" that "questions the established." Even Offred herself, the reluctant auditor of Moira's parodic verbal performance who stifles a

giggle, eventually embraces the power of gossip as she admits, "It does so do good. It does"; "There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It's like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with" (208).

In fact, the magic which Offred recognizes is gossip's power to subvert the authority of the elite by objectifying and appropriating their life and language as story. The spell to which she refers recalls the idea that gossip's appeal is based in "the ancient belief in the magic of language," and the notion that "telling stories takes possession of others' experience" (Spacks 11). For defenders of the *status quo*, the power afforded by such gossip represents a serious threat to their own authority. What, then, are we to make of Roland Barthes's scathing indictment that "Gossip reduces the other to *he/she*, and this reduction is intolerable to me...The third-person pronoun is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the non-person, it absents, it annuls" (*Lover's* 185)? If Barthes's fear of the loss of autonomy--of being made an object of gossip--is the reflex of power that fears the loss of its own authority, the author would seem either to have been resurrected in his text, or never really to have left. At least, Burke argues, he never died but only took an extended vacation--the philosophical version of a rest-cure which allowed him to return, revived, in a new form.

In one guise, the author is a "logothete" or a "founder of language" like Sade, Fourier, or Loyola who achieves a "'meta-authorial' perspective," characterizing "certain authors as having exceeded the parameters of conventional author-text relations" (Burke 35); in another, the author is a "biographeme," which escapes the teleology inherent in traditional, sequential biography and allows Barthes to read the author's life and work as an oeuvre in which "the oeuvre becomes an arena or ellipse in which everything is rhapsodic, nothing sequential, in which themes, passages, ideas twist round upon each other in the manner of leitmotivs" (36); or, in the writerly text, he is "an author of ...'a writing without referent'"

(48). Such preliminary authorial incursions anticipate the implications of Barthes's position on gossiping which suggests that the threatening babel of gossiping readers' voices at the end of "The Death of the Author" must ultimately be contained by the reinstatement of the author as critic: "the birth of the reader is not achieved at the cost of the death of the author, but rather at that of showing how the critic *too* becomes an author" (Burke 61). In other words, the birth of the reader has not been a populist revolt at all, but a coup in which the new elite consolidates its power by admonishing the masses against dissent. For Offred, however, gossip that deflates authority by objectifying it in language, reducing it to a manageable fiction, is an essential coping device and a testament to gossip's almost supernatural power.

Nancy M. Freibert would likewise attribute enormous power to the story-teller in *The Handmaid's Tale*. "Although forced into complicity by fear during her three postings," says Freibert, "Offred, once freed, threatens the system by telling her tale." And again, "Atwood demonstrates through Offred that women, able to take risks and tell stories may transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices and reconstruct the social order" (285). These claims for the power of language sound suspiciously like those made by Spacks herself when she calls gossip "a weapon for outsiders" that "incorporates the possibility that people utterly lacking in social power may affect the views of figures who make things happen in the public sphere" (Spacks 45, 7). Although Freibert does not name it as such, her own argument bears heavily on the function of story as gossip. Not only is it the epitome of Spacks's discourse for an alternative culture, but on the most fundamental level, Offred's story approximates gossip in its oral mode since "Offred literally tells her story, recording it on tape instead of writing it down" (Freibert 286). Moreover, like the Mayday password, Offred's telling creates its own auditor in true dialogic fashion: "if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*,

without a name...*You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands" (37-38). Or again: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (251).

Such a rewriting of the *cogito* in gossip is inherent in Bakhtin's own rejection of tautological understandings of the self. Julia Kristeva notes precisely this move away from the universal subject in her explanation of how, "[b]y the very act of narrating, the subject of narration addresses an other; narration is structured in relation to this other. (On the strength of such a communication, Francis Ponge offers his own version of 'I think therefore I am': 'I speak and you hear me, therefore we are.' He thus postulates a shift from subjectivism to ambivalence)" (*Desire* 74). Offred's story-telling postulates a similar shift, producing a sense of community that has, in the novel, only been available through gossip. Moreover, as many feminist critics have pointed out, such a dismantling of the self-present, "universal subject" implied by the *cogito* has been the necessary first step for female practices of autobiography like Offred's. This is because Descartes defines the self in terms of pure, disembodied consciousness, thus abjecting a "supplementary body" and enshrining in its place "what M. M. Bakhtin calls the 'classical' body," which in turn "encourages the process whereby others whose bodies are identified as culturally 'grotesque' become more fully body" (Smith 6-7).

Tracing the mutually constituting histories of "universal subjectivity" and "embodied subjectivity," Sidonie Smith points out that the resulting "surrender of woman's reason to embodiment...contaminates her relationship to the word. Allying her speech with the seduction of Eve and the serpent and with the forces of cultural unruliness, gender ideologies of the early nineteenth century reaffirmed the association of the hole in woman's face with the contaminations of sex" (15). If Eve, the first gossip, were to set down her autobiography, she would already have begun the process of disrupting the official subject defined by the *cogito* because, "when these subjects enter the scene of autobiographical

writing, they engage dialogically with the cacophonous voices of cultural discourses, what Bakhtin calls productive and unpredictable heteroglossia" (Smith 21). Gossip, by delegitimating the singularity of the phallic "I," offers just such a way of sabotaging the imperializing universal subject at the level of everyday social production.

If Offred's autobiography represents the ultimate form of productive gossip in the novel, then Freibert's incredible claims would make its teller--and gossip itself--nearly omnipotent. As we have seen, the work of the gossiper as "secret agent" is to make public the private "affairs" of the state, and to open up to public view the inner workings of the most "sacred" institution of Gilead, the "private" family. However, while the subversive qualities of gossip as it is presented in the Handmaid's discourse might be seen as a form of power, the conclusions of Atwood's novel are alert to Spivak's sobering observation that, "even if one knows how to undo identities, one does not necessarily escape the historical determinations of sexism" ("French" 144). Although the Handmaids' gossip can be emotionally empowering as it is for Offred who finds herself "so excited [she] can hardly breathe" (158), its power to liberate the individual gossiper from such "historical determinations" often proves to be illusory. Indeed, to paraphrase Stallybrass and White's reservations about the carnivalesque, "it would be wrong to associate the exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords with any necessary or automatic political progressiveness" (201). Consider Offred's emotional defeat just prior to her miraculous rescue: "I resign my body freely to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power" (268); or Moira's resignation to a life at Jezebel's (234); or the increasing pressure of the Mayday organization whose monologic demands for information prove to be as oppressive for Offred as those of the state itself (255). All of these examples suggest ways in which Atwood's novel resists a romantic identification of discursive transgression with total political upheaval.

This is not to fall back on either Eagleton's pessimism about carnival or on Gluckman's dubious "vindication" of gossip. Clearly, the significance of gossip cannot be reduced to

the clever tool of fascistic power. Nor, however, does it seem likely that, as Kristeva would have it, "Carnivalesque discourse breaks through the laws of the language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law" (*Desire* 65). As Stallybrass and White argue, such fantastic claims have little basis in historical fact. On the contrary, Kristeva's reading of Bakhtin "confuses the projection of bourgeois desire with the destruction of class identity" (Stallybrass and White 201). Nevertheless, Kristeva's discursive radicalism should not obscure the real significance of the underground carnival. Even if "strategies of language use, conscious or otherwise, are not in themselves the means to transform society...there is no reason to suspect that they cannot facilitate such change" (Hitchcock 8).

Some of the most conservative institutional uses of gossip have already been suggested by the Aunts who co-opted strategies culled from gossiping to enforce the interests of the state. In other ways, however, biographical and autobiographical gossip constitute profoundly subversive challenges to such social controls and forge new "institutional" alliances. For example, even as Offred's telling falters because "there is so much else getting in the way, so much whispering, so much speculation about others, so much gossip that cannot be verified, so many unsaid words, so much creeping about and secrecy" (251), gossip continues to function politically, binding the Handmaids together against complacency or resignation. Aunt Lydia's announcement before the Salvaging is a telling comment on the real dangers such gossip poses to the avenues of power:

> "In the past," says Aunt Lydia, "it has been the custom to precede the actual Salvagings with a detailed account of the crimes of which the prisoners stand convicted. However, we have found that such a public account, especially when televised, is invariably followed by a rash, if I may call it that, an outbreak I should say, of exactly similar crimes. So we have decided in the best interests of all to discontinue this practice. The Salvagings will proceed without further ado."
>
> A collective murmur goes up from us. The crimes of others *are a secret language among us*. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all. This is not a popular announcement. (259; my emphasis)

As Michel Foucault points out in his historical account of the penal system, the scene of

a public execution is a profoundly ambivalent space because, even though its "aim was to make an example...by making the people aware that the slightest offence was likely to be punished [and] by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person," it was also the scene of "small, but innumerable 'disturbances around the scaffold'" (*Discipline* 58, 60). Characteristically, "if the crowd gathered round the scaffold, it was not simply to witness the sufferings of the condemned man or to excite the anger of the executioner: it was also to hear an individual who had nothing more to lose curse the judges, the laws, the government and religion. The public execution allowed the luxury of these momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or punish...In these executions, which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince, *there was a whole aspect of carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes*" (Foucault, *Discipline* 60, 61). At the Salvaging, "Ofcharles," who winks at the camera as she is led on stage to be executed, embodies such a carnivalizing release in a gesture of defiance which makes a mockery of the proceedings. Such skirmishes between criminal and executioner helped to make the area around the scaffold a locus for the development of the "solidarity of a whole section of the population" (Foucault, *Discipline* 63). Similarly, the Handmaids' gossip, by celebrating the biographies of criminals into "a secret language" of transgressive precedents, thus creates an oral version of the broadsheet which "formed part of the basic reading of lower classes," not only because "people found in them...memoirs, but also precedents; the interest of 'curiosity' is also political interest" (Foucault , *Discipline* 68). The transformation of criminality into heroism or sainthood which is inherent in such "double-voiced" practices, moreover, demonstrates the threat of carnivalizing discourses to the dominant order.

Although such solidarity-building, as occurs around the scaffold, represents an important stage in the political consciousness of the Handmaids, Offred's own autobiography, as well as other survivors' stories, like "The A.B. Memoirs" and "The Diary of P." (283), constitute practices of political resistance with still farther-reaching

effects. For the Quakers who run the Underground Femaleroad ensure that some of the scandalous stories and their bearers reach beyond the walls of Gilead to expose its secrets. Similar martyrologies, like John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs,* "used as government propaganda" (Hill 13), demonstrated the adaptability of techniques of gossip to institutional use and had a powerful political influence in the English Revolution. As Christopher Hill argues in a chapter entitled, "The Radical Underground," Foxe's accounts of Catholic brutality were part of a "popular heretical culture, which rejected the ideas both of court and established church, and of orthodox Puritanism" and which, like the gossip about Gilead, "is difficult to identify, because its records are normally unwritten: our evidence comes from hostile accounts of church courts prosecuting heretics, of unorthodox spokesmen denouncing them" (69). Adapting the practice of scandalizing to "textual" forms of autobiographical gossip, Offred and others ultimately point to gossip as a crucial means of contesting the social order and, ultimately, as an avenue to liberation.

Thus, despite the Kristevan speculation of Nancy Freibert that Offred's tale "precipitate[s] the action that will bring Gilead to an end" (289), the "Historical Notes" that follow the tale emphatically suggest that, while the political Republic of Gilead may have fallen, the seeds that produced it are comfortably gestating in the hearts of the scholars in attendance at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. As David Cowart notices, the latent misogyny present in the jokes of Pieixoto and the scholarly community about the "Underground Frailroad" and "enjoying" the chair, "[c]oming as they do after such a horrendous story...set the teeth on edge" (108). Considering the scholars' academic awareness that "no new system can impose itself on a previous one without incorporating many of the elements found in the latter" (287), their running sexist commentary on Offred's story of a political system rooted in misogyny and its effects on her own life reveals in the historians an appalling lack of self-consciousness. Sherrill Grace is likewise attuned to the significance of Pieixoto's "joking, sexist language, his punctilious search for evidence about the Commanders and the State, his impatience with the personal, private

bias of the female autobiographer, his authoritarian condescending discourse," all of which "hold up to ridicule the entire edifice of traditional patriarchal scholarship...To be told that we know little about the woman called Offred and that 'many gaps remain' should jolt us into questioning the validity and authority of those discourses that insist upon a single truth, a predetermined genre, a seamless narrative and a conclusion" (199). In effect, Atwood's scathing satire of the academics in this section presents the conference as a Gilead in microcosm--patriarchal, univocal, monologic--even as it projects readers back to their own time, warning that "American society at the end of the twentieth century may be at a terrible historical turning point" (Cowart 108). If the Gileadean ethos persists in this way even after Offred's supposedly cataclysmic telling, an argument like Freibert's would seem to miss the point.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* seems ultimately sceptical of gossip's power to alter the social order as Spacks implies it might, Pieixoto's "little chat" at the IHAC presents yet another way of viewing gossip in Atwood's novel. Even more than Offred's own telling, Pieixoto's iteration of her tale might be considered in terms of its functional relation to gossip communication. As a meta-text, Pieixoto's "Historical Notes" comprise the academic complement to gossip that is itself "a kind of meta-communication...a communication about communication" (Rosnow and Fine 84). Furthermore, the casual atmosphere of the Conference, punctuated by further jokes about missing lunch; the relaxed nature of Pieixoto's talk--"Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*"--which he describes as "my little chat" (282); the frequent laughter, applause or indulgent groans in response to Pieixoto's presentation which act as affirmations of community values; as well as the speculative nature of his comments--"This is our guesswork" (292)--all contribute to the sense that the Conference may present itself as the locus of a kind of academic gossip, a place for speculation on the lives of those radically, as well as grammatologically, absent. However, Pieixoto's academic gossip appears to be altogether different from that of the Handmaids presented earlier. Aside from its incidental

function of sustaining academia, that is to say the critic's social group, Pieixoto's appropriation of Offred's story is ultimately self-reflexive and self-constituting.

The extent to which Pieixoto usurps Offred's tale for his own purposes is evidenced by the fact that Offred herself is barely present in the historian's comments which focus almost entirely on discovering the identity of her Commander. The disturbing misogyny that David Cowart sees in the final section clearly extends beyond the "sexist jokes" (Cowart 108) of Pieixoto's introductory remarks to inform the proceedings of the entire Conference. In similar fashion, Pieixoto's naming of the text itself suggests how fully he has made the text his own:

> Strictly speaking, it was not a manuscript at all when first discovered, and bore no title. The superscription "The Handmaid's Tale" was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (*Laughter, applause.*) (281-83)

While the inappropriateness of locating a story of female resistance to oppression under the banner of "the great Geoffrey Chaucer," the "*Father* of English Literature," goes unnoticed by the participants of the Conference, its irony is emblematic of the extent to which Offred's story has been ripped from its original context and relocated to furnish a new meaning. More importantly, in the act of naming her story "The Handmaid's *Tale*" (283; my emphasis), literally as a story, Pieixoto himself reduces her life to a manageable fiction, that is to say, to a "text." Clearly, in Pieixoto's recontextualization of her story in terms of his own academic project, the integrity of Offred's "tail" (both of them) is on the line.

To posit a correlation between gossip and Pieixoto's historical meta-text, as I have done, is ultimately to suggest that both function in similar ways for similar reasons. Moreover, the status of the author in Pieixoto's gossipy historiography suggests that both might be related to a Derridean understanding of textuality. As Pieixoto laments:

> This is our guesswork. Supposing it to be correct--supposing, that is, that Waterford was indeed the "Commander"--many gaps remain. Some of them could

> have been filled by *our anonymous author* had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has designed to vouchsafe us. (292; my emphasis)

To Atwood's reader, Pieixoto is reduced to a buffoon who cannot see the cookie for the crumbs. For the members of the conference, however, his assessment is justified by his "non-judgemental" credo:

> If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (*Applause.*) (284)

Gayatri Spivak has already alerted us to the dangers of this naïve position: "Unless one is aware that one cannot avoid taking a stand, unwitting stands get taken" ("French" 147). Pieixoto's snide crack at the idle "Goddess of History," who was too busy gossiping to record any really valuable information, exposes the ideological basis of his "objectivity," reinscribing, as it does, the misogynist reduction of women's discourse dramatically subverted by Offred's own narrative. Such an incredible reversal would not be plausible were it not for the methodological as well as the literal anonymity of the author Pieixoto posits. Only in her absence can the intentions of Offred's text be so flagrantly overlooked. The literal death of the author in *The Handmaid's Tale* thus replays, at a material level, the "anonymity" of textual composition in Derrida's attack on logocentrism, the foundational principle of the metaphysics of presence.

In fact, Pieixoto's dissolution of the author into the voice of history itself ("Our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was part" (287)) virtually repeats Derrida's methodology in *Of Grammatology* when he relieves Rousseau of any individual responsibility for his own writing in order to make him the bearer of an entire episteme. For Derrida's insistence that "The names of authors or of doctrines have no substantial value. They indicate neither

identities nor causes. It would be frivolous to think that 'Descartes,' 'Leibniz,' 'Rousseau,' 'Hegel,' etc., are names of authors, of the authors of movements or displacements that we thus designate," is a precondition to his thesis that "Rousseau is undoubtedly the only one or the first one to make a theme or a system of the reduction of writing *profoundly implied by the entire age*" (99, 98). Furthermore, Pieixoto's ability to appropriate Offred's *oral* text would seem to confirm the thesis of the *Grammatology* that

> The usual notion of writing in the narrow sense does contain the elements of the structure of writing in general: the absence of the "author" and of the "subject-matter," interpretability...We "recognize" all this in writing in the narrow sense and "repress" it; this allows us to ignore that everything else is also inhabited by the structure of writing in general, that 'the thing itself always escapes.' Derrida's choice of the words 'writing' or 'arche-writing' is thus not fortuitous. Indeed...no rigorous distinction between writing in the narrow and general senses can be made. (Spivak, Preface lxix)

The dispersion of Offred's intention, even in the supposedly "pneumatological" media of "voice" and "breath" (Derrida, *Of Gram.* 17), seems to exemplify the logic of the trace, rather than to perpetuate the favorite humanist illusion of self-presence. From this perspective, Derrida's idea of arche-writing thus provides a basis for justifying gossip as the inevitable play of meaning which results from the absence of a transcendental anchor, grounding the "intended" meaning of an utterance to its speaker.

As a purely textual trace, whether oral or written, of one who is grammatologically absent, Offred's tale is cut off from its original meaning and "can," as Derrida would argue, "be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable." As Derrida goes on to explain, "This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring" (*Limited* 12). With no authorial center, Offred's text ceases to be "hers" the moment it is uttered. In a similar fashion, gossip, by reducing others lives (or one's own) to story, breaks with life contexts and assures its own iterability. The movement of gossip along a metonymic chain (the grapevine), in which gossipers are

substituted for recipients who in turn become new gossipers, is a perfect illustration of the journey of the signifier through multiple iterations and contextual substitutions. In fact, Jonathan Culler sounds very much like a defensive gossiper when he explains the "foundational" relevance of iterability: "in order for a sequence of sounds to function as a signifier...[i]t must be possible for me to repeat to a third party what someone said. A speech sequence is not a sign sequence unless it can be quoted and put into circulation among those who have no knowledge of the 'original' speaker and his signifying intentions" (102).

Derrida, better than anyone, should know that the tactics of gossip are not foreign to deconstruction. In "Limited Inc a b c...," Derrida shows that he himself is not above a little malicious gossiping at an opponent's expense. The "intemperately polemical tone" (Burke 140) and "perverse...extra-textualist gambits" of this infamous paper--the last word in an argument between Derrida and John Searle over the relative merits of Austinian speech-act theory--has, for many opponents of deconstruction, "acquired [the] reputation as the *ne plus ultra* of Derridean sophistical 'freeplay,' as opposed to the plain good sense and sobriety of Searle's corrective intervention" (Norris 142, 143). It is also a seductive performance of academic gossip, sustaining the structure, tone, language, and themes of idle talk throughout.

At a structural level, Derrida's essay conspicuously inscribes his "debate" with Searle within the parameters of gossip by rigorously excluding Searle from the circuit of exchange. It rapidly becomes clear that "Limited Inc" is only ostensibly addressed as a question to Searle: "I address it to Searle. But where is he? Do I know him? He may never even read this question. If he does, *it will be after many others, myself included*, and perhaps without understanding it" (29; my emphasis). Within the context of the gossip triad consisting of gossiper, recipient, and object, Derrida eliminates Searle as a potential recipient of his discourse by dramatizing his absence and questioning his identity. Moreover, by inscribing the deferral of his opponent's reception of the essay into the very

body of his text, Derrida ensures that, like the victim of malicious gossip, Searle will be the last to know of his own humiliation. He appears in the essay only as a citation to be mocked (in fact, his essay, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," is cited in full by Derrida), an object of ridicule and derision. Searle's absence from the essay is especially evident in Derrida's freeplay with Searle's name as he wonders, "how can I be absolutely sure that John R. Searle himself (who is it?) is in fact the author? Perhaps it is a member of his family, his secretary, his lawyer, his financial advisor, the 'managing editor' of the journal, a joker or a namesake" (31).

Rather than engage in further speculation or ironic rumor-mongering of this sort, Derrida proposes an expedient (and strategic) substitution for "the entire, more or less anonymous tradition of a code, a heritage, a reservoir of arguments to which both he and I are indebted" which constitutes the "three + n authors" of Searle's "Reply":

> I decide here and from this moment on to give the presumed collective author of the *Reply* the French name "Société à responsabilité limitée"--literally, "Society with Limited Responsibility" (or Limited Liability)--which is normally abbreviated to *Sarl*...I hope that the bearer of proper names will not be wounded by this technical or scientific device. For it will have the supplementary advantage of enabling me to avoid offending individuals or proper names in the course of an argument that they might now and then consider, wrongly, to be polemical. And should they, perchance, see this transformation as an injurious or ironic alteration, they can at least join me in acknowledging the importance of the desires and fantasms that are at stake in a proper name, a copyright, or a signature. (36)

The ironic tone of Derrida's mock-concern gives him both an alibi for snidely gossiping about his opponent and a structure to bar Searle from the text as potential addressee. When and if Searle reads it, "Limited Inc" has already denied him the dignity of direct confrontation or genuine dialogue because the text is no longer addressed to him, but to his alter ego, *Sarl.* The debate has already taken place, behind his back, between Sarl and Derrida--figures who are themselves "nothing more than 'prête-noms,' 'borrowed names,' straw men" (Derrida, *Limited* 37).

But what, precisely, is at stake in such a concession? What does the "straw man" behind "Limited Inc" really risk if, in the debate between "Sarl and Derrida," Searle becomes Sarl,

but Derrida remains Derrida? Derrida's act of unnaming Searle suggests that the death of the author in high poststructuralism is less of a statement of fact about the nature of language than a methodology germane to a gossip-governed style of reading. Adapting Austin, we might say that "the death of the author" is not constative, but performative. For Sarl is not the name of "the definite origin, the true person responsible for the *Reply*," but a position within an "anonymous tradition" (Derrida, *Limited* 36). By effacing the proper name, Derrida thus seems to repeat the strategy of the monolithic state in Atwood's novel which oversees its own tradition of anonymity. In Gilead, the practice of renaming still-fertile women patronymically, using "the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question," guarantees a social hierarchy, divided on the basis of those who name and those others who are named, respective of their value to the system: "Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it" (*HT* 287).

As Offred learns, even before Gilead consolidates its political ascendency, the power to reduce a person to a position is only step one: "That is what you have to do before you kill...You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real. So that's how they do it" (180). It is for this reason that she guards her own name so assiduously: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, like some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried" (80). Offred's buried name, like her gossip and her autobiography, is thus not simply effaced, but goes "underground" and is charged with sub-versive potential. By contrast, Searle inadvertently yields up his own name to the poststructuralist's practice of iterability, and becomes an accomplice, after the fact, to his own exclusion by declining to have his essay included in Gerald Graff's collection of the debate in *Limited Inc.*

The structural similarities of Derrida's essay to gossip, compounded by Searle's self-exile, are complemented by its author's ecstatic tone which is barely distinguishable from the sadistic euphoria of the gossiper dissecting his prey. Derrida is quite plain about his motives in writing "Limited Inc":

> I could have yielded to the temptation of suggesting to interested readers that they simply reread *Signature Event Context* instead of obliging myself to comment or to repeat myself more than once. Where does the pleasure I take in this repetition, in prolonging the debate, or rather the "confrontation" come from? (35)

The conspicuous enjoyment Derrida takes in redundancy already signals the frivolousness of his discourse, the idleness of his "repetition." Moreover, the desire to write is explicitly figured in terms of a ready target--the scandal which invites, and even demands, gossip:

> I have just cited the *Reply*. The word "confrontation" appears twice in the first paragraph, once in each sentence, the second stating that--*at (and in the) present [au présent]*--"the confrontation" between Austin and myself "never quite takes place." Is it because the confrontation never quite takes place that I take such lasting pleasure in it? Because I, too, think as much, almost that is, almost but not quite? Or is it, on the contrary, because I am very excited, I confess, by this scene? By the speech acts of the *Reply*, by their structure composed of denial, seduction, coquettishly fascinating underneath the virile candor, initiating a "confrontation" by saying that it has not taken place and, moreover, that *at (and in the) present*, between the late Austin and myself, *it does not take place*, or at least not entirely, *not quite*, both because I have missed the point, missed him, and because he was already dead ("a theory that Austin did not live long enough to develop himself"!) when I missed him, so that in fact I did not have much of a chance. (35)

The giddy flurry of rhetorical questions, as well as the hint of sexual arousal in the language of "yielding to temptation," "excitation," "seduction," "coquettish fascination," and "virile candor" all mark Derrida's narrative with what Spacks calls "an erotics of power"--the link between gossip and sex. Not only is the sexual secret so often the subject of gossip, but "the tongue, like the penis, [is] an instrument of seduction and power" (Spacks 123). Like the lascivious gossiper, Derrida revels in his liberating, transgressive reply to Searle's bewitching "denial." Moreover, by appropriating the form of Searle's "confrontation" which "never quite takes place" (a perfect formulation of the relationship between the gossiper and the gossipee in Derrida's text), Derrida illustrates his guile as a

gossip and ensures that his "seduction" does not compromise his own discursively dominant position.

Appropriations of this sort suggest that at the heart of the gossiper's gratification is the act of citation: "I have cited at length and shall continue to...because it gives me pleasure that I would not like to miss, even though it may be deemed perverse: a certain practice of citation, and also of iteration...is at work, constantly *altering*, at once and without delay--*aussi sec*, including *Sec*--whatever it seems to reproduce. This is one of the theses of *Sec*. Iteration alters, something new takes place" (40). Even a captive gossip's delight in re-citing is apparent, for example, in Offred's parodic new versions of the "sacred" sayings of Gilead: "All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I corrected her in my head" (43); "*Give me children, or else I die.* There's more than one meaning to it" (57); "Not every Commander has a Handmaid: some of their wives have children. *From each*, says the slogan, *according to her ability; to each according to his needs.* We recited that, three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts" (111). Her reiteration of the state's maxims (including one borrowed from Marx) in new contexts not only works as a political tactic, laying bare Gilead's scandalous rewriting of biblical texts to justify its own authority, but works at a personal level as well, establishing her reader as an anxious gossip recipient. The Handmaid's disclosure, marked by the practice of iteration, thus epitomizes the gossiper's characteristic relationship to scandalous material: "Can you believe they said that? Imagine!"

Similarly, because it turns the very text of the *Reply* against the intentions of its author, Derrida's entire essay can be read as a performance unleashing the parodic potential of iterability on Searle's high-minded dogmatism: "there is no getting away from intentionality, because *a meaningful sentence is just a standing possibility of the corresponding (intentional) speech act*" (Searle 202). As Derrida argues, Searle's contextual explanation of speech acts, following Austin's, is undermined by its own exclusion of "non-serious" speech acts on the basis of their supposedly "paracitic,"

"supplementary" relation to "serious" ones. Searle's claim that such an exclusion is only provisional is fatuous in the extreme since, "what is at stake above all," Derrida says, "is the structural impossibility and illegitimacy of such an idealization, even one which is methodological and provisional" (67):

> Once it is iterable, to be sure, a mark marked with a supposedly "positive" value ("serious," "literal," etc.) can be mimed, cited, transformed into an "exercise" or into "literature," even into a "lie"--that is, it can be made to carry its other, its "negative" double. But iterability is also, by the same token, the condition of the values said to be "positive." The simple fact is that this condition of possibility is structurally divided or "differing-deferring" [*différante*]. (70)

Searle's confusion over this point is the source of much hilarity for Derrida, and he seems to struggle, at times, to keep his pen from shaking as he laughs. His feigned earnestness, "Let's be serious," "But let's be serious," "Why am I having such difficulty being serious in this debate, in which I have been invited, in turn, to take part?" (34-35), sounds regularly throughout the essay like a gong announcing each stage of the dismantling of Searle's text *in his own words.* Citation as parody in "Limited Inc" is thus enlisted not only to demonstrate the limitlessness of contexts, but also to displace the binary between serious and non-serious discourse. As Christopher Norris argues, in "Limited think: how not to read Derrida," opponents to deconstruction like John Searle and Warren Ellis make a mistake when they "suppose that first-rate philosophy--analytical work of the highest order--cannot be conducted in a style that partakes of certain 'literary' figures and devices, or which makes its point through a skilful interweaving of constative and performative speech-act genres. For if there is one thing that Austin should have taught them--so Derrida implies--it is the need to press these cardinal distinctions as far as they will go, but also to keep an open mind when dealing with instances, anecdotes, off-beat usages, anomalous cases and so forth which might seem to 'play old Harry' (Austin's own phrase) with all such tidy categorical schemes" (145-46).

Recent defences of gossip, emphasizing the importance both of laughter and marginality, have made similar claims. Code's feminist apology for gossip, "In Praise of Chaos," is a

case in point. Just as Derrida insists upon a reading practice of "deconcentration" in which it is "the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, paracitic, borderline cases which are 'important' to me and are a source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system" (*Limited* 44), so Code appeals to "the unruliness of gossip, its (self-referential) resistance to paradigmatic summing up, which is at once the locus of its power and its danger" (104). For her, there is "an implicit assertion of the inadequacy of [the] social order" in the "contexts, differences, and specificities...constructed in gossip out of the 'trivia' and disorder for which philosophy has little time in its self-presentation as an orderly, controlled project" (Code 102). Whereas Code's feminism seems to slip into the phallogocentric position of essentializing woman and her discourse as "chaotic," "random," or "disorderly," thereby reinforcing the patriarchal image of female cackle, Derrida's categorical challenge to the "non-serious" reiterates Spacks's deconstruction of the myth that "women have always chattered, leaving to men the realm of serious discourse" (Spacks 147) at the level of philosophical debate.

Beyond its structural, metaphoric, stylistic, and methodological similarities to gossip, "Limited Inc" develops this relationship further, at a thematic level, in its formulation of "the Austinian heritage," "his legacy and...those who have taken charge of it as his heirs apparent" (93). In the opening paragraphs of the essay, Derrida disavows any personal knowledge of Searle. Yet, even in the absence of anecdotal evidence--the lifeblood of gossip--Derrida sustains an atmosphere of scandal by inventing a narrative of illegitimacy at the heart of Searle's posturing as "the 'authorized' exponent of a genuine speech-act philosophy" (Norris 143). Searle's extreme dismay that "Derrida's Austin is unrecognizable," that "the confrontation between Derrida and Austin never quite takes place," leads Derrida to wonder: "if there is a confrontation, is it not provoked by the three + n authors of the *Reply*, who present themselves in the guise of Austin's legitimate heirs, bearing the heritage to fruition in the 'general theory of speech acts' promised by the Oxford professor of moral philosophy, but which fate left to his American progeny, in the

promised land, to fulfill" (35)? Subsequently, Derrida's essay unfolds as an uprooting of the Austinian family tree with the aim of exposing Searle as an imposter, an "heir" who is "self-made," "auto-authorized" (37).

According to Christopher Norris, Derrida is especially suspicious of "a strong proprietary drive" (143) he detects in Searle's "feverish" reading of "Signature Event Context" which is "unable to support the fact that questions might be posed serenely concerning the limits or the presuppositions of Austin's theory. Or at least unable to tolerate this when it is done by *others*":

> It is this last feature that I find most interesting: what characterizes a self-proclaimed heir (especially when his father has died too young, at the age of 48!) is the fact that, doubting his own legitimacy, he wishes to be the only one to inherit and even the only one, in a *tête à tête*, to break, now and then, the filial bond of identification, in what is here the height of identification; he alone shall have the right of criticizing or correcting his teacher, defending him before the others at the very moment of murderous identification, of parricide...Thus, Sarl would like to be Austin's sole legitimate heir *and* his sole critic: "I should point out that I hold no brief for the details of Austin's theory of speech acts, I have criticized it elsewhere and will not repeat those criticisms here." (Derrida, *Limited* 42)

In this particular narrative, Derrida is well aware that he is "impeding the procedure of inheritance and of legitimation" (42). To this end, his relation of the melodrama culminates in a scene which further unsettles the prospect of a pure bloodline and a generous bequest by demonstrating that Searle "proves" his claim to legitimacy by insisting, ambivalently, that Austin both had a "general theory of speech acts" and had died too young "to have really had (or "developed) one" in "a masterpiece of metaphysical-oedipal rhetoric" (Derrida, *Limited* 94):

> Imagine the scene: Austin's will is about to be unsealed. Although the envelope has not yet been entirely opened, the lawyer of one of the sons begins to speak: "Once one has a general theory of speech acts...." Once? We still don't know if Austin had one or was going to have one. This "once," from a rhetorical point of view and floating as it does between the logical and the chronological, organizes the suspense among all the presumptive heirs. Did Austin have it? In which case the heritage would be more certain? Did he not quite have it, in which case it would still have to be developed? If so, by who, with what justification, in what direction? Sarl has said "Once one has..." Ah! That "one": it is the moment of anonymity, oscillating between Austin and Searle, who, at the end of this paragraph, is going to take things in hand... (94)

By turning Searle's noble lineage into the story of a bastard son who murders his father and claims his throne with a few rhetorical swipes of the pen, Derrida once again exploits the scandalizing power of gossip. In fact, Gluckman identified this very tactic, in which members of a group "hit at one another through their ancestors," among the strategies of the gossiper who uses gossip "as a social weapon" ("Gossip" 309). More subtly, Derrida's scandalous frame-story actually "frames" Searle in another way because, like all good gossip, it "fits its material into established structures, interpreting happening first by perceiving it in familiar patterns" (Spacks 14). Such structures, Spacks says, "generate obvious sources of satisfaction in gossip: both the universal delight in story and particular pleasure in the kind of story our culture makes *immediately comprehensible*" (14; my emphasis). In other words, Derrida's transposition of Searle into the familiar role of black sheep functions as a kind of shorthand which shores up any gaps or ambivalence in his argument by providing a narrative whose circuit of meaning is monologic, and completed as soon as it is invoked.

Obviously, however, Derrida's gossip about Searle is not identical to the model of gossiping implied by the "Historical Notes" of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Pieixoto is not a real deconstructionist any more than Derrida is merely a gossip. He is an historian, with slavishly historical concerns--concerns which are rarely attributed to Derrida, least of all by detractors like Ellis who recoil at terms like "iterability," "textuality," "freeplay," and "dissemination." Pieixoto's masculinist historiography is ostensibly concerned with the authentification of his sources by "establish[ing] an identity for the narrator" (285) through a consideration of the "internal evidence" (286)--surely a logocentric project if ever there was one. But, as Burke has persuasively argued, Derrida's own anti-authorialism is not all it is cracked up to be. Searle's charge in the *Reply* was precisely that, in *Sec*, Derrida claims that writing involves a "break with the author's intentions in particular or with intentionality in general" (201). Derrida's neo-pragmatist boosters in the United States have often been as quick to embrace this formulation of deconstruction as his *auteurist*

detractors, since it serves both "as an expedient justification for abandoning interpretive norms in the pursuit of an abyssal or freeplaying criticism," and "one more reason to dismiss deconstruction as a kind of rootless textual nihilism" (Burke 140). Yet neither of these conclusions is easily derived from either *Of Grammatology* or *Limited Inc.* For Derrida insists that "*at no time* does *Sec* involve the *absence*, pure and simple, of intentionality. Nor is there any break, simple or radical, with intentionality. What the text questions is not intention or intentionality but their *telos,* which orients and organizes the movement and possibility of a fulfillment, realization, and *actualization* in a plenitude that would be *present* to and identical with itself" (*Limited* 56). Consequently, "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance" (Derrida, *Limited* 18). Burke teases out the significance of such statements in Derrida's corpus to conclude that reports of the author's death in poststructuralism are exaggerated and premature.

Not only is the "claim that the author does not exist unique to the *Grammatology*," Burke points out, but even there, the fact that "what begins as a confident disclaimer of the author gradually lurches into hesitation and postponement" suggests that its anti-authorialist claims are more strategic than ontological. Specifically, he argues that Derrida *must* insist upon the disappearance of the individual author in his detailed and *auteurist* reading of Rousseau's autobiography, connecting "the psychopathological impulse that drives Rousseau to write with his masturbatory practices" (124). Otherwise, Rousseau would not be merely an *example* of logocentrism, "one meeting point amongst so many others of the logocentric metaphysics which has governed Western thought from its beginnings down to the present day" (Burke 120). For the claim that his subordination of writing to speech "was profoundly implied by the entire age" is all the more urgent in light of the fact that

> the 'age of metaphysics' that Derrida demarcates becomes all the less propitious to the logocentric thesis in that those areas in which the question of writing itself was raised--general grammar, the Leibnizian project of the *characteris universalis*--exerted energies more accommodating to a nascent grammatology than metaphysical phonocentrism. Indeed, in this era we would anticipate that grammatology, as the

> science of writing, would do everything to draw forth the efflorescence of interest in the sign system, the mathematicisation of knowledge, in the Chinese ideogram, the burgeoning disciplines of pasigraphy and so forth, rather than pressing the dour and negative thesis that we behold here only the illusion of writing's liberation, that at the most fundamental level writing was still shackled, lateralised, debased. (Burke 133)

Thus, in response to the Derridean question, "What privileged place does Jean-Jacques Rousseau occupy in the entire history of logocentrism?", Burke hazards the audacious reply that "without Rousseau there would be neither a single example of logocentrism between Plato and Hegel, nor a logocentric text of any length in the history of logocentrism. Indeed, we might wonder if it is even correct to talk of privilege in this context" (135-36). The author of the *Confessions* has not disappeared after all, but returns to Derrida's text "under erasure"--a tactic whose ambivalence allows Derrida to have his cake and eat it too, so to speak, since it means that he never has to explain why, "if logocentrism is all-pervasive," he makes "one author stand for 'the reduction of writing profoundly implied by the entire age,' and examine[s] this repression in the innermost recesses of his corpus" (Burke 123).

The return of the author in Derrida is also apparent in the logic of deconstructive analysis which proceeds from the insight that "the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely" (Derrida, *Of Gram* 158). The imperfect nature of textual imperialism (both at the level of consciousness, "the mystic writing pad," and at the levels of speech and material production) means that gaps and *aporias* will always appear within the communicative act which disrupt the flow of meaning. This fact does not herald "the death of the author" but only the need to situate intentionality. As Burke says, "if authorial intentions are to be deconstructed it must be accepted that they are cardinally relevant and recognizable" (141).

So, too, the Handmaid's intentions cannot be ignored entirely by the dismissive historian. For Pieixoto's outright appropriation of Offred's text is not based on an enterprise, say, of demonstrating how *she* unconsciously reinscribes the patriarchal norms her text intended to subvert. His reading is more of a selective culling than a

deconstruction. As such, her intentions are something to be overlooked or weeded out so that the objectivity of the historian will not be compromised by the "bias" of his source. For this reason, his historiography cannot be considered strictly Derridean, as I argued, somewhat prematurely, in an earlier version of this paper (see Johnson 50-54). Instead, Pieixoto's reading of "The Handmaid's Tale" seems more germane to the least rigorous brand of American deconstruction popularized by the freeplay of the notorious Yale school and by J. Hillis Miller and Geoffery Hartman, in particular, who find in (hasty or artful readings of) Derrida, an expedient justification for reversing the standard view of "criticism as at best a humble handmaid to creative endeavour" (Norris, *Deconstruction* 97). Similarly, Pieixoto's "reading" is actually a *rewriting* of the Handmaid's text; his practice of iteration is to re-cite her text in new contexts so as to make himself the author.

Nevertheless, there is still something troubling about the return of the author in Derrida's oeuvre since deconstruction "accepts the author, but on condition that the critic can produce the text as a broader signifying structure within which the author's determining will is inscribed as one factor amongst the others. The critic thus establishes a constant superiority over the author" (Burke 143). Deconstruction, in other words, stages a constant production of new critic-author hierarchies. Pieixoto's gossip about Offred reproduces precisely this overthrow of the author, first predicted by Barthes, but still crucial to Derrida's own gossip about Searle's illegitimacy or Rousseau's masturbation. What is most telling, however, is that the author's intention in no way serves as a check on this system of reading. On the contrary, intentionality is the structural guarantee of its possibility. Authorial intention is the deconstructive critic's only protection against the "auto-deconstructive text," since "it is only through doubling Rousseau's text into intention and its other that the *Grammatology* can carve out *its own precarious self-identity*" (Burke 148; my emphasis).

Deconstruction and gossip alike thus seem to be informed by a stunted autobiographical impulse, or at least a desire for negative self-invention. Burke's diagnosis of Derrida

highlights this very point: Derrida never "'starts to speak'...*in propria persona*, but only with a voice borrowed from another. Or, to put it differently, finds [his] own voice in the hollow of an Other's" (151-52). Therefore intentionality in deconstruction, like "authentification" in Pieixoto's historiography, is no guarantee of what Gayatri Spivak has called for in "the invention of a reading-subject's perspective that would occupy or cathect the representative space or blank presupposed by the dominant text," that "use[s] the resources of deconstruction 'in the service of reading' to develop *a strategy* rather than a theory of reading that might be a critique of imperialism" ("Imperialism" 521; my emphasis). As it appears in "Limited Inc," the provisional and temporary return of the author seems more like one of "the various alibis that the dominant subject-position gives itself as it constructs the subordinate as other" in order to "consolidate the self" (Spivak, "Imperialism" 521). Authorial intention is thus restored only long enough for the one true author to return, the monological authority whom Searle had the effrontery to challenge.

The imperializing implications of such reading by rewriting were already understood, even if they were not contested, decades earlier, by Oscar Wilde in "The Critic as Artist"--in a volume ironically entitled *Intentions*. Proclamations such as "the best criticism is autobiography," and "That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul...It is the only *civilized* form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life" (Wilde 144), suggest that the reversal of critic and author is deeply rooted in the rhetoric of imperial domination. Critical "autobiographies," like "Limited Inc," thus become a matter of demonstrating one's own "civility" by telling scandalous stories about others.

Likewise, Pieixoto's iteration of Offred's story offers an equivalent example of such negative autobiography, since he finds his own voice by stealing hers:

> Did our narrator reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself? Or was she discovered in her attic hiding place, arrested, sent to the Colonies or to Jezebel's, or even executed? Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects mute. We may call forth Eurydice from the world of the dead, but

> we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (293)

Pieixoto's final word on Offred's text thus shows ways in which gossip can be both self-referential and self-constituting. If Offred is his Eurydice, then Pieixoto has scripted for himself the role of Orpheus whose irresistible power of song can raise the dead and wring tears from trees. For Pieixoto then, whose methods seem to be underwritten by Derridean notions of absence and iterability, gossip affords an expedient means of self-construction through the textualization of other people's life stories.

Ironically, however, Ovid's version of the Orpheus story ends with the singer's painful realization of the impotence of song and the dangers of gossip. Ovid's Orpheus, who rejects the female body after his second loss of Eurydice by singing scatological songs, could be seen as Pieixoto's ironic counterpart since he too is a gossip spreading scandalous stories--about Venus and Adonis and even about his own father--to revenge himself on love. Orpheus' empowerment through his rejection of female sexuality (in his extravagant grief he turns to pederasty as well as to malicious gossip) is ultimately parodied by Ovid since the singer is ripped to pieces by the frenzied Maenads when he discovers that his tune--based on the appropriation of his father's story--can't hold off his own destruction. As W. S. Anderson suggests, Ovid rejects Orpheus' "violent misogyny," exposing him as "a performer, egotistic, calculating, self-dramatizing" (44, 47). Like Orpheus, Pieixoto too is implicated in the dangers of privileging the linguistic/masculine at the expense of the physical/feminine in true Derridean fashion, only to be ripped apart, more subtly, by Atwood's cutting satiric portrayal. Although Pieixoto is blind to the ironic implications of Orphic gossip as a paradigm for self-construction, Orpheus himself, as he is torn to bits, embodies the ultimate reminder of the consequences for the academic's Derridean free-play with Offred's story.

If the principles of Derridean logic and especially its more radical manifestations in

American deconstruction are ultimately parodied in this text, though, where does this leave Atwood's view of gossip that would seem to operate on those very principles? Offred's insistence on the value of context--"Context is all" (136)--seems to produce a rupture in Atwood's thematization of gossip. While it might be taken to suggest Derrida's multiplication of contexts and the ways in which meaning is never determinate, and thus to open its own door to Pieixoto's appropriative "reading," the Handmaids' gossip itself tells a very different story. As Bruce Stovel suggests, gossip is indeed an art; adapting Bakhtin, we might call it an art that is "immanently social; the extra-artistic social milieu, affecting art from outside, finds direct, intrinsic response within it" ("Discourse" 393). Thus, as in the case of Moira's parody of Aunt Lydia, in gossip "the [extraverbal] situation enters into the utterance as an essentially constitutive part of the structure of its import" ("Discourse" 397). In gossip of the kind Moira practices, the extraverbal situation is not restricted to the physical person or event to which it refers, but also includes "the implicit reference to common knowledge, common values" (Jones 246) whose silent citation determines the individual's inclusion in a social group. Gossip, at this level, is a social communication *par excellence* since, as Bakhtin recognizes, "[t]he meaning and import of an utterance in life (of whatever particular kind that utterance may be) do not coincide with the purely verbal composition of the utterance. Articulated words are *impregnated* with assumed and unarticulated qualities" ("Discourse" 401).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead's socio-political structures that largely determine the extraverbal contexts of gossip are so extreme that every covert utterance is steeped in the ideological assumptions of a particular group's relation to the social order. Just as the Handmaids and Marthas gossip about the Wives and Commanders, so too, Offred speculates, the Wives must gossip about their social counterparts: "*Agreed to it right away, really she didn't care, anything with two legs and a good you-know-what was fine with her. They aren't squeamish, they don't have the same feelings we do.* And the rest of them leaning forward in their chairs, *My dear*, all horror and prurience. How could she?

Where? When?" (202). Not only is this gossip loaded with an assumed knowledge of Gilead's social structure and social practices, it also incorporates into its very form, as moral censure, the unarticulated values of the dominant discourse.

Significantly, however, gossip as a verbal performance is not simply rooted in the immediacy of the social context to which it responds. Nor is it, like Bakhtin's notion of a literary text, "a special form of interrelationship between creator and contemplator *fixed* in a work of art" ("Discourse" 294; my emphasis). In no way can gossip be a "fixed" utterance since, "[i]nasmuch as aggressive wishes control the discourse, the narrative that initiates the gossip interchange may alter form or content to serve the reporter's need. Gossip thus often partakes of fiction (some people would say lies), less because of the inevitable distortions of its passage from mouth to mouth than because of the purposes it serves for the retailer, who forms the story to fill unconscious needs" (Spacks 50). Because by its very nature gossip is repeated--from mouth to mouth or from bed to bed--and in that repetition new contexts are introduced and content is altered, its meaning can never be "anchored." As Derrida insists, "Iteration alters, something new takes place" (*Limited* 40). With each repetition, gossip retreats further away from the real object of the utterance itself whose intrinsic value is simplified or emptied and filled with a new meaning as determined by the performer. Reducing the world to a linguistic artifact, Derridean freeplay does much the same thing.

Although Pieixoto's performance is not gossip *per se*, its similarities with the post-structuralist's practice of "iterability" make gossip a suggestive model for interrogating Derridean assumptions. Pieixoto's academic gossip which reduces the viscerality of Offred's life "to an academic question" (Freibert 280) in order to accommodate his own megalomania demonstrates the dangers of Derrida's comparable exile of the body from language: "What writing itself, in the nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit's relationship with itself. In the end, their finitude, their paralysis. Cutting breath short, sterilizing or immobilizing spiritual

creation in the repetition of the letter, in the commentary or the *exegesis*, confined in a narrow space, reserved for a minority, it is the principle of death and of difference in the becoming of being" (*Of Gram* 25). By cutting breath short, Derrida's model justifies an unlimited range of appropriations and tactical supplantings.

As David Williams argues, the conditions of possibility for Pieixoto's appropriation are already inscribed at a

> level of patriarchal thought in the novel underlying contemporary theories of language. For poststructuralism has also made it possible for men to "read" women metonymically (according to the Derridean logic of *supplementarity*) as signifiers in a field of infinite substitutions, as an endless supplanting of one term by another in an infinite regress of the signifier. The consequence of Jacques Derrida's attack on the idea of a "centre" in Western metaphysics is most graphically portrayed in Atwood's novel in scenes where the Handmaid's flesh is framed by the Wife's body in the act of intercourse with the husband, or where the Wife sits on the Birthing Stool, framing the pregnant Handmaid in a cynical appropriation of the real bodily "centre" through which the child emerges. Thus in Gilead the centre is not a centre except for its female victims. ("Where?" 2)

Rather than assuaging such concerns, Derrida himself has confirmed them quite blithely: "For me deconstruction is certainly not feminist...I would say that deconstruction is a deconstruction of feminism, from the start, insofar as feminism is a form--no doubt necessary at a certain moment--but a form of phallogocentrism among many others" (qtd. in Scholes 100). But the degree to which feminism is "phallogocentric" is not as self-evident as Derrida would like to suppose.

Another, possibly more revealing way to regard the difference between feminism and deconstruction is to be found in their different zones of focus. Deconstruction, as Robert Scholes suggests, "aspires to a certain universality and durability as a method" while feminism is focussed, more narrowly, "upon the notion of a gendered reader, and is driven by a perception of injustice in the relations between men and women in specific social, economic, and political terms" (91). What such an assessment incorporates, which Derridean theory does not, is that the issue of class...has been important for feminist criticism as it has not been for deconstruction" (Scholes 92). In this regard, the differences between deconstruction and feminism are closely related to the differences between Derrida

and Bakhtin and the respective theories of gossip they generate.

A feminist theory of gossip based on Bakhtinian dialogics turns the tables on Derrida by suggesting ways in which Pieixoto's "iteration" of Offred's text is, first and foremost, a gendered appropriation. Like the laughter of the male narrator of the *Caquets de l'accouchée* who eavesdrops on women's chatter only to ridicule their gathering for the amusement of a male addressee inscribed in the text's narrative frame, the laughter Pieixoto generates and shares in at the Handmaid's expense is for patriarchal ears only. As Stanton argues, the male narrator's "daily return to record the women's prattle...links the production of his corpus to the women's room and the womb, the return of the postnatal female body to its pristine state--a variation on the topos of female generativity as a metaphor for male creativity" (252), which results in his production of an "excremental," "placental" text which he dubs "an AFTERBIRTH" (253). In Gilead, however, such appropriations are not metaphors. Pieixoto's gossip, based on a practice of iteration, thus replays both the actions of the male-narrated *caquets* which appropriates the form of "the birthing female body...[and] throws out the superfluous matter of the placental text, but only to offer it up to the reader, with whom he shares his best laugh" (Stanton 253-54), and the literal appropriation of the Handmaid's body by the state which he seeks "not to censure but to understand." In Derridean gossip, such appropriations are inevitable because "iterability" works in all directions at once and can thus be as useful a tool for oppression as it is for resistance.

A Bakhtinian model of gossip, however, is particularly suited to an examination of women's talk because the carnivalesque already possesses momentum in the direction of subversion due to its inscription within a class-based politics. Thus, in the wake of the academic's erasure of Offred's body, her own utterance, "Context is all," surfaces as a Bakhtinian life-preserver on a sea of Derridean supplementarity. As Offred says of Moira's story, "I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive" (228). Although Atwood's presentation of gossip applauds the emotional and

intellectual empowerment that it provides for the subordinate, it remains ambivalent about its politics and is deeply suspicious of any technique that would turn an ex-Handmaid of the system into a Handmaid of Orpheus. While Atwood's novel suggests gossip's multifarious functions for both individual and community as well as the ethical problems it raises, it also speaks to the relevance of a study of gossip as a model for socially responsible criticism. Exposing the dangers of viewing gossip finally as "a game which, like all absorbing games, expresses impulse and satisfies needs" (Spacks 47), *The Handmaid's Tale* offers its own deconstructive critique of Derridean freeplay. Finally, Atwood's stance on gossip is cautionary in its suggestion that Derridean play may itself be based on a highly questionable ethos of gossip that views the world as a playground and the person as a word.

Conclusion

Schooled in Scandal:

Gossip Theory and Postcoloniality

> Primitive people are indeed among the most persistent and inveterate of gossips.
> Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as a Philosopher*

Over the course of this study of the discourses of scandal, gossip has emerged as a versatile technique, whose multiple functions are employed equally by individuals, by groups, and by social institutions. In *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose turned gossip about her past in Hanratty, about her neighbours, and about her stepmother, into a technique of self-construction, even as her ethical rejection of gossip provided her with a key to ethical self-constitution. In *Fifth Business*, Dunstan Ramsay brought gossip into literary and academic contexts, demonstrating how the schoolmaster's betrayal of secrets could turn the saint-maker into a Saint. And finally, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred and Professor Pieixoto demonstrated, from radically different perspectives, the institutional uses of gossip to liberate and to oppress, respectively. Clearly, there is nothing "idle" about their talk. Instead, I hear in the contrasting voices and silences of these gossips a longing for identity, for transfiguration, for power, and for emancipation.

In tandem with my elaboration of the power of scandal in literary discourses of gossip, a problematic vision of poststructuralism has begun to emerge, which raises vital questions about the relationship between theory and politics. On the one hand, Foucault's analysis of the interpenetration of truth and power, and of the determining role of discourse in self-constitution, Kristeva's psychoanalytic destabilizing of centered, Cartesian subjectivity in her writing on abjection, Barthes's elaboration of the death of the author, and, finally, Derrida's deconstruction of context-based theories of linguistic meaning, all furnish valuable conceptual tools for broadening our understanding of the dynamics of gossip. Such theoretical perspectives seem particularly useful in illuminating the subversive and the

revolutionary politics of gossip which are either occluded by or implicit in gossip models inherited from the social sciences. For in French poststructuralist theory, the act of de-centering (epitomized by the gossiper) is ostensibly political and non-authoritarian.

But, to paraphrase Mark Poster, the poststructuralist critic's conviction that "If one avoids closure and totalization in one's own discourse,...if one unsettles, destabilizes, and complicates the discourses of the humanities, if one resists taking a stance of binary opposition in relation to the position one is criticizing, one has thereby instantiated a nonrepressive politics" (9), is highly problematic. Although I am sympathetic to the political objectives of such a project, I agree with, and have tried to elaborate, Poster's diagnosis that "the poststructuralists have by no means attained their goal of developing a nonauthoritarian form of discourse, and [that] they are even farther from achieving an adequate politics consonant with that discourse" (16). In particular, I have noted some of the ways in which poststructuralism's critique of Enlightenment theories of history, of subjectivity, and of language reproduces the position of the malicious gossiper who reduces opponents to texts and who uses scandal as a means of self-promotion. Edward Said's critique of "American 'Left' Literary Criticism" implicitly pinpoints the most radical practice of such a technique, when he suggests that "In our rhetorical enthusiasm for buzz words like *scandal*, rupture, *transgression*, and discontinuity, it has not occurred to us to be concerned with the relations of power at work in history and society, even as we have assumed that a text's textuality is a matter endlessly to be explored as something concerning other texts, vaguely denoted conspiracies, fraudulent genealogies entirely made up of books stripped of their history and force" (173; my emphasis). Perhaps, better than any other school of scandal, poststructuralism has instantiated the spirit of Gluckman's observation that "Scandal when directed by members of a group against another group...asserts the superiority of the scandalizing group" ("Scandal" 314).

In many ways, such an assessment of the latent politics of poststructuralism reflects the thinking of postcolonial critics who focus on the political, cultural, and material legacy of

European imperial domination. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for instance, argues that although "the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of [a] space-clearing gesture," the postcolonial "project of delegitimation cannot be a postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal. Indeed it is based...in an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering" (348, 353). For, like feminism, postcolonialism "seek[s] to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant," and accordingly, "stresses the need for the deconstructive and the political to go hand in hand":

> their projects are oriented towards the future, positing societies in which social and political hegemonic shifts have occurred. Concomitantly it is generally true that both discourses link a disruptive involvement in books with a project towards revolutionary disruption in society at large. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 175, 177)

By contrast, the historical context in which poststructuralism arose suggests a reversal of this plot, recording instead a flight from materialist politics to a haven of textuality. In the face of the dramatic failure of the student uprisings in France against the authoritarianism of state institutions, European theory consoled itself with deconstructing the totalizing political theories which had manifestly failed. Poststructuralism, writes Terry Eagleton,

> was a product of that blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968. Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language...Its enemies...became coherent belief-systems of any kind--in particular all forms of political theory and organization which sought to analyze, and act upon, the structures of society as a whole. (142)

Thus, whereas postcolonialism arises from and is informed by an ongoing critique of the historical, social, and material determinations of imperialist practices, poststructuralism, in many ways, seems either to subvert, or to "evad[e] such political questions altogether" (Eagleton 143).

Proceeding from such a sense of their differing political contexts, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin caution against the trend whereby "dominant European movements, such as postmodernism...have sought in recent times to reabsorb post-colonial writing into an internationalist postmodern discourse," without acknowledging that "the

history of literary and critical movements in the twentieth century is...deeply determined by an intersection with imperialism" (156). Much like the gossiper who pursues a negative autobiographical practice, and "despite the theoretical investment in the question of 'Otherness', certain tendencies within Euro-American structuralism and poststructuralism have operated in the same way as the Western historicizing consciousness, to appropriate and control the Other" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 162). This tendency is disguised, however, by the fact that the two posts employ similar techniques of de-centering and de-privileging. "Poststructural" readings of American literature are a case in point:

> Whilst the recent American critical models have been profoundly influenced by Europe, with Derridaian [sic] and Foucaultian [sic] theories being whole-heartedly adopted by American critics, the Americans are now beginning to recognize that their own post-coloniality had already provided the ground for similarly subversive views of language and culture. Rather than the postmodernists and poststructuralists being seen as decentering forces, undermining the categories of a universal authority, they are beginning to be viewed as confirmations of the essentially subversive nature of much American literature throughout its development: subversive, that is, of the authority of the European centre and its forms and expectations. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 163).

Might the same not be said of Canadian writing? And if so, of the role of gossip in Canadian fiction?

Ultimately, such questions lead us to reconsider Robert Kroetsch's assessment of Canada's "postmodern" status and its implications for gossip theory. If postcolonial theories provide better ways of accounting for Canadian cultural practices of de-centering than poststructuralist ones, they might also furnish still more valuable ways of understanding the functions of gossip as a political response to imperializing practices, old and new. An application of postcolonial theory to gossip, in other words, might expand the feminist defence of gossip as a political tactic and develop Spacks's thesis that gossip is "a resource for the subordinated" in new and challenging ways. Scholars have yet to formulate a postcolonial theory of gossip, but the preponderance of scandalizing in Canadian and in other postcolonial literatures suggests that political gossip has long been a tenet of cultural practice.

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