

SUSAN SWAN AND THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

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Introduced to readers as “the tallest woman freelance writer in Canada”, Susan Swan belongs to a generation of writers whose experimental, innovative fiction has proved vital in the contemporary project of de/re/constructing narrative practice. Her 1983 novel *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* constitutes an excellent example of what critic Linda Hutcheon has termed “historiographic metafiction”—“fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities” (*Canadian* 13). As a conscious engagement with social and historical contexts, such fiction aims at destabilizing and subverting accepted patterns of belief by reconceptualizing and narrating possible subjectivities. By means of intertextuality, especially parody, it engages in an ideological critique in terms of both sexual and national politics.

The Biggest Modern Woman of the World tells the story of the Nova Scotian giantess Anna Swan, who “may or may not be related” to the author of the novel, as the blurb on the back cover of the Ecco edition informs. A feminist perspective is established already in the Preface, as we learn that “Anna Swan is, *curiously*, not as well known as the other Nova Scotian giant, her friend Angus McAskill” (emphasis added). Thus the ironic mode asserts itself even before the narrative proper begins.

The story is told retrospectively by the giantess herself:

Now I am in full voice... blowing my own horn... spieling the way I used to for P.T. Barnum, Queen Victoria, and all the normals who came to my performances after I grew up into an eight-foot giantess who toured North America and the continent. This is my final appearance and I promise to tell all. What really happened to the BIGGEST WOMAN OF THE WORLD in a never-before-revealed autobiography which contains testimonials and documents by friends and associates (from their perspective) of a Victorian lady who refused to be inconsequential. (2)

Announced as a true story, an “authentic account”, Anna’s narrative nevertheless includes several other narrative perspectives and discursive modes. Furthermore, it is also intended to “entertain”: “A good performer has many spiels,” she tells us, “and I have three up my long sleeve to delight and astound” (2).

We are indeed both delighted and astounded as we follow the adventures and misadventures of Anna Swan from her humble birth in Eastern Canada in 1846, through stardom in New York and Europe, to her final days in an Ohio farming town called Seville in 1888. The story, Anna’s swan song, registers the inscription of an extraordinary woman into history. But rather than a mere sequence of events, the story is in itself a performance: a public rather than a private affair. “To me,” she writes shortly before her death, “life is a performance and all moments are dramatic” (332).

Parodically following the early tradition of fictional narrative, the novel is carefully dated through letters and diary entries. There are references to real life characters, but the veracity of facts is always contested. The reader is never sure, for example, in spite of Anna’s constantly being measured, exactly just how tall she really is or how long is her birth canal. She resists being formulated. Narratively,

however, Anna cannot avoid being reified by the men in her life. As critic Teresa Heffernan remarks,

Anna is cast as a marketable commodity in Apollo and Barnum's story, as the fecund, fertile female by her father, as domestic mate by Angus, as an interesting scientific experiment by the numerous Victorian doctors, and as a Cinderella figure who married for love in the fairy tale narrated by the curator of the Sunrise Trail Museum in Tatamagouche. (29)

Rejecting all such social roles, Anna concludes that she does not fit anywhere (332).

Although the first person narrative is interspersed with fragments from "factual" documents, such as The Route Book of Judge Hiran Percival Ingalls, testimonials and medical reports, letters from her mother and from her giant friend Angus, Anna's "autobiographical" voice does predominate. But it is a theatrical, public voice which presupposes an audience and which self-consciously fictionalizes the facts and figures surrounding her. According to Heffernan,

Even as Swan writes about her huge female subject in a chronological narrative, the possibility of a continuous, coherent, autonomous agent or a consistent, objective, historical account recedes as the author acknowledges the artifice and the inevitable biases inherent in generating narratives. Nevertheless, Swan is sensitive to the potential conflict between her acknowledged desire to recover the history of women and tell stories about women (or freaks or Nova Scotians) and her awareness of the impossibility of recovering a true history or a definitive story. In *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, Swan considers this tension in light of the process by which women and men represent their

histories and how the stories of women, Canadians, freaks, have been/are written out of history by “normals.”(27)

Indeed, with its irony and ambiguity, Swan’s novel is instrumental in the contemporary project of interrogating the nature of representation by challenging, through parody, the tenets of realism.

A larger-than-life female character and a “performer,” Swan’s protagonist herself challenges all pre-conceived notions of what a heroine should be. In her eccentricity, furthermore, she contests the very posture of early feminist narratives with their emphasis on experience and on an identity that could be taken as the norm.

As Judith Butler argues in her influential work of 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, contemporary feminist practice must engage in a radical critique of the categories of identity which support patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. Underlining the need to subvert from within the terms of the existing social arrangements, she posits gender not as a preconceived category but as a “stylized repetition of acts” (140). Gendered identity is seen as provisional, arbitrary and performative; the possibility of change lies precisely “in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of identity as a politically tenuous construction” (141). The power of agency, therefore, resides not in a pre-discursive gendered essence, but in the performative denaturalization and displacement of signifying practices. In the chapter “Subversive Bodily Acts,” she asserts: “the culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (93).

A similar focus on the openness of future conceptualizations informs the study of Donna Haraway published in 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* proposes irony as both “a rhetorical strategy” and “a political method” (149). Clustering her ideas around the figure of the cyborg, “a condensed image of both

imagination and material reality" (150), Haraway calls for an identification with this post-gender non-innocent hybrid creature as a means to achieve historical transformation. Defining her cyborg myth as being "about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (154), she proceeds to argue for the need to engage in "cyborg writing", which she thus defines:

Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.

The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. (175)

Similarly to Butler, Haraway emphasizes the importance of discourse in the contestation of ideological practices, a form of critique which underlies as well much of the argument of Rosemary Hennessy's *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (1993).

Drawing on the work of the major theorists of postmodernism, and criticizing much of the contemporary eclecticism arising from an uncritical appropriation of contesting discourses, Hennessy proposes "ideology critique" as a fundamental political stance for feminists. In her chapter "Feminist Standpoint, Discourse, and Authority: From Woman's Lives to Ideology Critique," she argues for "symptomatic reading", which consists in making visible

that which hegemonic ideology does not mention, those things which must not be spoken, discursive contestations which are naturalized in the interdiscourse but which still

shape the text's diseased relation to itself. To read symptomatically is to reveal this historicity in the texts of culture and in so doing put on display the exploitative social arrangements that they so often manage. (94)

According to Hennessy, furthermore, "Nowhere is the question of who feminism speaks for more crucial than in the histories we tell" (100). Of critical importance in the feminist project, the processes of disarticulation and rearticulation made possible by the counterhegemonic view of the subject-in-language allow women "to renarrate their cultures, particularly the social construction of woman as multiply differentiated and historically-specific subject position" (137).

In *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, Susan Swan abandons the concern with the representation of experience (she was much criticized by Anna Swan's descendants for not being "truthful") to undertake a flight into eccentricity and spectacle, stressing the performative status of being a woman and exposing the provisionality of our notions of gender. The same can be said of Anna's Canadianness and of our notions of nationality, as we will see later.

The novel is ultimately about risk, about transgressive behavior, about narrating and (re)presenting the multiply-constructed self. Like much historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon defines it, it requires that we "question the processes by which we represent ourselves and the world to ourselves. . . . We cannot avoid representation. We *can* try to avoid fixing our notion of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and transcultural" (*Politics* 54).

Ironic to the core, the story of Anna Swan relies heavily on intertextuality and on the use of mixed genres such as the epistolary, the documentary, the autobiographical. But nowhere is the break with traditional representation so evident as in the use of the grotesque as a literary device and in the establishment of a carnivalesque atmosphere with its emphasis on change, renewal, and disorder.

Transgressing the domestic space (Anna's body literally does not fit into her parents' house), shunning the patriarchal marriage contract (Anna develops laryngitis on her wedding day), Swan's protagonist explores the world through travel and performance, through a life of action and conflict. After her illicit love affair is discovered by the dwarfs, whom she accuses of being "the moral guardians of Middle America" (305), Anna recognizes that her marriage to Bates has indeed been "a disastrous act" (203). She realizes, furthermore, that her life has become "a cliché—a farce acted out on an Ohio plain where the marvelous was diminished by the perception of those who dwell within material reality." As "a prisoner in the dimension of ordinary life," she longs for a way out of her three containers: the house, the self, and the body (306).

Thus Anna can be seen as eccentric in the sense that she defies socially enforced norms and beliefs. But she is obviously un-natural in other ways as well. Marginalized by her size, her origin, her sex, and her activity as a professional freak show entertainer, she assumes, in her vitality and comic irreverence, a carnivalesque posture, very much in the sense of the grotesque as described by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierachical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (10)

In the world of Swan's novel, furthermore, differences of class, gender, race, and nationality are rendered relative by the multiplication of difference itself. We have, as Heffernan recognizes, a subversion of the dichotomy between privilege and marginalization. Because

everyone is marked as other—"the Canadian-giantess, the impotent Yankee, the lonely lesbian queen, the Québécois strongman, Apollo the normal, the right-wing dwarfs"—a defamiliarization of normalcy is achieved (33) and the hybrid and impure take center stage.

But nowhere is the transgression of norms as evident as in Swan's description and celebration of the female body as grotesque. It is here that the intertext with Rabelais and Bakhtin appears as a potent form of disruption. For the novel can be said to mimic Rabelais' fusion/confusion of the individual with the world through the use of the open, protruding and secreting body, which "with its food, drink, defecation and sexual life" (Bakhtin 18), emphasizes the ambivalence of life's transformations.

Swan's emphasis on the material bodily principle, her Rabelaisian concern with the lower bodily strata, is especially important for its "translation" of the grotesque into the feminine. Adopting (and parodically adapting) literary conventions which have traditionally been male to the narrative exploration of her female character's fluid body boundaries, the author creates a text which is doubly transgressive. When Anna menstruates, all the women of the small town of Seville, Ohio, get their menses (272). When her waters of pregnancy break, Londoners experience a spring shower on a perfectly cloudless day (241). But most of the curiosity she arouses has to do with her sexual response, for, as a big woman, she must be either the epitome of female pleasure or perhaps, as Apollo wonders, "she is a freak and does not have sexual desire" (220). Both false, of course.

Constantly measured and examined as an anatomical wonder, she resists scientific classification, being repeatedly misconstrued and misunderstood, not to say misled. After losing her virginity to the midget Hubert, who under the pretense of measuring her birth canal ruptures her maidenhead with an icicle, Anna makes love to three other men: the Canadian giant Angus McAskill, who does not know how to give her pleasure; the American giant Martin Bates, her husband, who is impotent; and the Australian Apollo who, although not a giant, succeeds

in both arousing and impregnating her. To add irony to irony, Anna's giant body cannot bring forth life: her daughter was stillborn and her "son", a baby of uncertain sex who "possessed and unformed male organ on his other body and might have had female organs inside" (327), died shortly after birth. She does not fulfill the role of fertile female imagined for her by her father. Nor can she help Bates in the breeding of a giant race for the American nation. Refusing to follow the cultural scripts of femininity devised by patriarchal culture, she inscribes herself in history as the multiple-selved "genuine show-biz celebrity" (2).

Anna Swan's enormous dimensions and the public character of her life as a performer enhance the successes and failures of a woman who prides herself in having no "prudish morality" and who boasts, "I was Rabelaisian in my giant core" (115). Her final act of resistance in a world which proves much too small for her consists in assuming the narrative voice of her own story and thus shifting the terms of its viewing—an important non-hegemonic strategy. But even this narrative stance is problematized by the fact that she leaves her manuscript to be edited by Bates after her death. Ultimately, as Teresa Heffernan points out,

Anna does become a character, a subject, a presence, but her identity necessarily emerges in relation to a fluctuating social, historical, and cultural environment both within and outside the text; she is neither static nor fully autonomous but a fluid character who both participates in and is incorporated into the inconsistent and heterogeneous narratives constructed by herself, her husband, family, friends, lover, enemies, acquaintances, the author, and the reader. (30)

By playing within and against a complex network of power relations, by problematizing the issue of an autonomous identity, Susan Swan deconstructs the principles of both realistic narrative and essentializing

representation. Her novel illustrates the theoretical formulations of contemporary feminist theory in the context of postmodernity, as seen in the discussion of Butler, Haraway and Hennessy.

A similar concern with the multiple play of domination can be detected in Swan's novel in relation to national identity. Following the common literary association of the (usually female) body with territoriality, the novel can also be read as a tale of political alliances and identification, with Anna's sexual encounters serving as a measure of Canada's self-affirmation. The Canadian giant Angus McAskill, who has shunned worldly success for a quiet country life in Nova Scotia, fails to fulfill Anna's aspirations. He can neither arouse her sexually nor understand why she refuses to marry him. Of course, the sexual mismatch is not entirely his fault. As Anna herself realizes, part of the problem has been caused by her own inexperience as a woman: "At fifteen, I didn't know I was as much in charge of my sexual ecstasy as the man. . . . Had I known, I would have shown Angus how to rub me" (58).

Once in New York, Anna develops a rather ambiguous relationship to Canada. Indoctrinated by the ideals of the American Dream, she ends up marrying the Kentucky giant Martin Van Buren Bates, the epitome of imperialist domination, who sees Anna as the possible procreator of a giant race of Americans. Ironically, Bates proves to be impotent. It is, as we have seen, a short Australian who succeeds in giving Anna sexual satisfaction. Apollo, who manages to remain uncolonized by both the British and the Americans, is seen by critic Smaro Kamboureli as "a politically unmarked subject", signifying "the universal condition that Anna aspires to but never attains" (14). Perhaps this is so. But Anna is neither male nor normal. Besides, her unconventional "modernity", although temporarily contained by her marriage to Bates, renders her "excessive" in terms of signification, precluding any possibility of universalization. Writing to her mother about her married life on an Ohio farm, Anna remarks:

I feel I am acting out America's relationship to the Canadas. Martin is the imperial ogre while I play the role of genteel mate who believes that if everyone is well-mannered, we can inhabit a peaceable kingdom. That is the national dream of the Canadas, isn't it? A civilized garden where lions lie down with doves. . . . We possess no fantasies of conquest and domination. Indeed, to be from the Canadas is to feel as women feel — cut off from the base of power. Oh Momma, I am finding housewifery difficult. (274)

Indeed, as Linda Hutcheon remarks, "national differences and politics cannot be separated from sexual differences and politics" (*Canadian* 120). Both Anna and Canada are marked by difference, and neither can be fully categorized.

Anna's (Canada's?) self-narration into history must necessarily break the rules and conventions of traditional stories. Hence the parodic and the grotesque with all their irony, ambivalence and provisionality. By investing her female character with such Rabelaisian traits, Susan Swan plays with the contradictions which inform the relationship between women, their bodies, and the gendered identity attributed to them. As objects of the dominant male gaze, women are to be contained and fixed. As a multiple, uncontained figure in the process of forging her own story, Anna exposes and contests literary and historical representations of naturalized identities.

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