ABSTRACT

LIN, MICHELLE- "Only the blind are free": Sight and Blindness in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin.* (Under the direction of Dr. Leila May)

Sight plays a pivotal role in Margaret Atwood's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2001). Sight and blindness are manifested on multiple levels, with multiple implications, within the intertwining narratives of the novel. The novel's treatment of sight, however, is largely negative, mirroring the increasingly ocularphobic discourse (particularly that in France) during the twentieth century. This discourse challenged the reliability and validity of sight and perception, as well as the ideologies based on a visual conception of the world. In the novel, treatment of sight can be separated into three categories: unreliability of sight, fear and mistrust of sight, and blindness as the ultimate solution to the problems posed by sight. Chapter 1 studies the use of photographs and mirrors in the novel in order to expose the deficiencies of sight: sight is not reliable because it is subjective and because the visual does not represent fully the human mind or experience. Another mechanism that undermines sight is discussed in Chapter 2, which examines four scopic structures that are employed in order to establish a fear and mistrust of sight in the novel. These four scopic structures include the gaze of the absent mother/father, God, the Panopticon, and the lover. Sight is not only unreliable, but it is also something to be feared, even when the look emanates from a supposedly benign subject. Like many French ocularphobic theorists, the novel refuses to posit neither the restoration of nor an alternative to sight. Blindness is the novel's ultimate solution to the deficiencies of and imprisonment in a sight-based world. The blind carpet-weavers believe that only the blind are free, a conclusion that Iris ultimately agrees with. Despite the disastrous consequences produced by her blindness, Iris prefers blindness because it

is, she says, what ultimately allows us to live. Iris's preference for blindness, however, is based on a confused definition of sight. However, she is correct in her conclusion that blindness enables us to live, to make mistakes, because it is from these mistakes where the trajectories and stories of our lives take shape.

"Only the blind are free": Sight and Blindness in Margaret Atwood's

The Blind Assassin

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mom, dad, and sister, who have always been supportive of my choices.

BIOGRAPHY

Michelle Lin received her bachelor's degree in Molecular and Cell Biology from the University of California, Berkeley in May of 2003. She also minored in English, a subject that she decided to pursue in graduate study. She is the recipient of the Robbie S. Knott scholarship for the 2004-2005 school year. Upon graduation, she will be working as an editorial assistant at Cambridge University Press in New York.

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Introduction: French Ocularphobic Discourse

Once considered the noblest of all senses, sight increasingly became viewed with distrust during the twentieth century. Especially in France, a growing number of theorists, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida among them, began to question the reliability of vision, as well as its supposed ability to provide a direct, unmediated outlook onto the world. Sartre in particular was extremely ocularphobic; he concluded from his studies that the apparently simple act of gazing or looking at another person engaged one in a struggle for power that ultimately imprisoned and trapped its object. Sartre found nothing redeeming in the look. The look of the Other not only challenges one's self-perception and perception of the world, it also causes one to experience oneself as object rather than as a subject. Foucault's study of the Panopticon showed how the gaze became institutionalized and how it could be employed to conduct disciplinary surveillance. Derrida challenged the idea of perfect specularity, arguing that a disruptive element always exists between two seemingly identical images. This argument shows that vision is not the objective process that some assume it to be. In fact, in popular culture and current legal discourse, testimony by first person witnesses is more likely to be challenged now than in earlier times. This trend reveals a decline in the validity of sight. Roland Barthes also argued that there is an element in all photographs that defies reduction by sight to language. Instead of being a straight-forward analogical representation of nature, the denotative element in the photo instead turns out to "point to a traumatic reality that is no longer there, a fragment of a whole that can never be revealed" (Martin Jay 445). I am arguing that vision alone cannot capture this irreducible element. Jean-François Lyotard believed that blindness was preferable to sight.

Although their methods of approaching sight varied, all these theories are linked by a common mistrust of sight, its reliability, and its possibilities for redemption. These theories share an understanding of sight as subjective and chiasmic, intertwined with and inseparable from language and emotion. The chiasmic property of sight indicates that sight itself is not pure. Sight does not reflect a stable world because sight itself is not a static or stable process. The ideas of the French theorists are connected by a collective refusal to hierarchize the senses, a deconstructionist attitude typical of the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterizes the postmodern world.

It is not only in French existentialist and post-structuralist philosophy that we find an ocularphobic discourse. Such discourse is nowhere more evident than in Margaret Atwood's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2001). The negative dynamics of sight are manifested on multiple levels, with resonating implications, in the novel's intertwining narratives. The novel consists of three main narratives. The frame narrative is told in first-person, from the point of view of an elderly woman named Iris Chase, sister of the famous deceased author Laura Chase. Iris tells the story of her life and Laura's, up until (and a little after) the point when Laura commits suicide. The story involves photographs and mirrors throughout the narrative. This memoir is told in segments, often interrupted by segments of Laura's novel, *The Blind Assassin*, which is a story of two lovers who meet in secret. This portion is dominated by scopophobia, the fear of being seen. This narrative uses photographs to explore the unreliability of the specular process. It also examines "the look" as manifested in the interaction between lovers. Within the story of the lovers is a science fiction story that they improvise during

their meetings. The sense of sight and its loss dominate this story, as represented in the blindness of the assassin.

As Iris spins out her story, she withholds information from us, thus blinding the reader in much the same way that she herself was blinded. During the course of the entire novel, the reader discovers that Iris, not Laura, is the true author of *The Blind Assassin.* (Although Iris is the true author of the novel, I will, for simplicity's sake, refer to this narrative as "Laura's novel.") Iris is the one who secretly meets with this lover. We discover that the lover is Alex Thomas, an orphan and member of the Communist brigade, whom Iris and Laura meet (and fall in love with) for the first time at their father's button-factory picnic. By the end of the novel, we learn that, unbeknownst to Iris, her husband, Richard Griffen, has been programmatically and repeatedly raping Laura, using his knowledge of Laura's love for Alex to blackmail her into submission. Richard's victimization and Iris' blindness, her inability to perceive her sister's situation, drives Laura to take her life.

On one level, the reliability of sight is challenged through the problematized use of photography and mirrors. The two media are commonly perceived to be direct, unmediated imitations of reality and are supposedly the most stable "objects" upon which one can confer his look or gaze. Atwood, however, shows that these images are not stable, that they can elude the look. This quality is consistent with Barthes' claim that all photographs contain an opaque, irreducible quality that cannot be decoded linguistically. In the picnic photo, for example, Alex Thomas' gesture does not admit of easy interpretation. The meaning of his gesture is indeterminate, revealing the photograph's limited ability to represent. Laura tries to extend the photo's capacity to imitate life

through her manipulation of color, and in doing so, exposes the photograph's shortcomings. Photographs can neither reveal one's psychology nor one's true nature. Likewise, mirrors often fail to provide a field upon which a direct, unmediated reflection of the subject can be glimpsed. Instead, the speculative process regarding mirrors and photographs is selective, subject to influence from the viewer's desires and preconceptions. Textual mirroring is used not only to draw attention to the unreliability of vision, but also to challenge the notion of perfect specularity. One sees different things at different times. Rather than confirming the subject's presence and reinforcing the reliability of vision, photographs and mirrors expose the flaws of sight and of a world conceived through sight.

Sight, however, is not simply unreliable. It is also viewed with suspicion and mistrust. The ability to see does not result in an enhanced perception of reality. Instead, the look debilitates and imprisons the object being looked at. Iris, for example, is "trapped" by the gazes of her dead parents and Richard. The process of seeing involves less one's prowess as a viewing subject and more an intimidating awareness of being looked at and the recognition of oneself as object. Once one perceives oneself as the object of another's look or gaze, one's identity becomes constituted by this look and, consequently, one's freedom disintegrates. The Other is free; I am not free. I experience the Other's freedom through the disintegration of my possibilities. However, what Iris does not yet realize is that if everyone is determined by the gaze, then no one is free. In the novel, the look prevents Iris from exercising agency, exerting her own freedom until the very end. The identity bestowed upon Iris by the "invisible gaze" of her parents is that of a good sister. Hence, all of Iris' actions are geared toward the reinforcement of

this identity, which ironically fail. Iris agrees to marry Richard Griffen to ensure not only her future but Laura's as well. Iris, however, also uses this constituted identity as a disguise, to mask her own attraction to Alex Thomas (i.e., she sits herself beside Alex Thomas in order to "protect" Laura). Iris finds it especially difficult to break with this identity, because the look that constitutes it emanates from a subject (her mother) who is in fact dead. The difference between the invisible looking subject (embodied in her dead parents) and the visible looking subject posited by Sartre is that the former does not allow a reversal of the look. Since Iris' parents are dead, she cannot reverse their look back onto them, because they are not there to receive it. Instead of battling the identity constituted by this look, then, Iris resigns herself to it, to the identity of the good sister. (Her ultimate failure to uphold this identity, however, could be interpreted as a subversion of the parental gaze that supposedly fixes her.) While Iris sees herself as powerless to resist or reverse the identity constituted by this look, Laura sees the invisible look as liberating. From Iris' point of view, the subject's failure to look back dooms her to a state of perpetual Object. According to Laura, however, it is because the subject cannot "look back" that frees one from being constituted by the subject's look.

The invisible gaze is also manifested in the absolute gaze of God and the Panopticon. While both of these gazes affect Iris and Laura to varying degrees, one thing is clear: both employ the look as a form of discipline. Of the two sisters, Laura is more religious and hence more influenced by the absolute gaze of God. After their mother's death, Laura is frightened of God's gaze. However, she overcomes her fear by negotiating with God. The bargains she makes with God depend on not only belief in his existence but also in the existence of his absolute gaze. Iris, on the other hand, is more

influenced by and frightened of the anonymous Panopticon. She is afraid of being seen by anyone at any time. This fear climaxes during her affair with Alex Thomas. However, as the affair continues, the Panopticon's influence wanes as Iris discovers that its specular process is also subjective. The Panopticon is not all-seeing, as was originally believed. Through disguise and concealment, one can avoid its gaze. Subversion through avoidance is the only way to defeat the Panopticon. Unlike Iris, Laura initially does not fear the Panopticon. She disregards the dangers of being looked at by the Panopticon, preferring to challenge it head-on. This open defiance, when coupled with her dependence on an all-seeing God, has disastrous consequences for her in the novel. The triumph of the Panopticon over the absolute gaze of God in *The Blind Assassin*'s mirrors the decline of faith and the supplantation of religion by technology as a means of discipline and surveillance during the twentieth century.

It could be argued that sight has a somewhat benign aspect when the interaction between subject and object is of a more compassionate nature, such as the interaction between lovers. Jean-Paul Sartre, however, did not believe the "mutual glances of tenderness" between lovers could overcome the "frightening dialectic" of subject and object. Desire, he argued, is the wish to possess the freedom of the lover, to appropriate it for oneself. In doing so, one extinguishes the subjectivity of the lover, making the lover one with oneself. Margaret Atwood appears to be influenced by this theory, for she echoes and extends this dynamic in her novel. Alex's look disturbs rather than consoles Iris because of its intent to possess: he uses his look as he would a camera and a Panopticon. Atwood explores Sartre's theory on the lover's look by examining the inability of the look to satisfy the lover. In Alex's absence, Iris tries to remember him

through reflecting his look, but cannot hold the memory of him in her look; her attempts are futile. Her imagination fails her. And despite the power relations manifested in the look, in the chapter titled "The destruction of Sakiel-Norn," Iris finds her inability to return Alex's look distressing. The lover's look is not only unnerving, but also fails to satiate the demands of desire.

The blind assassin in Alex's story is not the only blind assassin in the novel: Iris is the other sightless murderer. Like the carpet-weaver children, the small frivolous details of Iris' life blind her to her perception of Mr. Erskine, Richard and Winifred Griffen, and to Richard's sexual exploitation of Laura. In telling her narrative, Iris blinds her reader in much the same way that she herself was blinded. This narrative strategy is used to justify Iris' actions. Blindness, it appears, is the only alternative to sight in the novel. Atwood brings up the possibilities of touch and language, only to dismiss them later, when both senses fail to satisfy, to create an alternate world, or to provide a reliable way of perceiving the world. The novel mirrors twentieth-century French ocularphobic discourse in its refusal to prioritize and hierarchize the senses. While sight undergoes a decline, the novel rejects the possibilities of other senses (hearing, touch, smell, taste) as suitable replacements for sight. Blindness, it appears, is the only alternative to sight, although it hardly brings about a happy utopia; in the novel, Iris' blindness wreaks havoc, has disastrous consequences. However, blindness, it is implied, is preferable to sight. Blindness enables freedom on several levels: it frees one from the delusions imparted by sight-based ideology, including the illusion of self-fulfillment; it allows one to transcend Sartre's "frightening dialectic" of the look, prevents one from being constituted by a seeing Other; it allows one to create a perception of the world that is not based on sight.

The novel's treatment of sight as unreliable and subjective (seen in photographs and mirrors), as frightening (in the Panopticon and the Lover's gaze), and of sight-based ideologies as flawed (in the absolute gaze of God) reveals a deep mistrust of sight that nothing, save blindness, can remedy.

Chapter One: Unreliability of Sight: Photographs and Mirrors

1.1 Photographs

Oliver Wendell Holmes once referred to photography as a mirror with a memory. The advent of photography, he believed, fixed the "most fleeting of our illusions" and permitted them to endure before our eyes (53-54). It is under this guise that photographs purport to represent the world, a veridical reflection of reality. Additionally, the photograph's fixed, stable quality supposedly allows for its complete subordination to and domination by the looking subject. According to Roland Barthes, an atmosphere of anxiety surrounds the photograph. This anxiety stems from the photo's denotative capacity to imitate the world, for photographic denotation establishes an awareness of *having-been-there* to the eye of the beholder (Martin Jay 443). The photograph creates a new space-time category, establishing a spatial immediacy in the space of a temporal anteriority. In other words, the image in the photograph physically exists in the present, but the events have already passed. The physical presence of memory in the form of the photo evokes an implicit trauma, that of the pain associated with mourning that loss. Barthes also argues that all photos contain an irreducible element, an obtuse quality that cannot be decoded, that defies description in linguistic terms. This quality is called the *punctum*; it is the "unexpected sting" that disturbs the intelligibility of the culturally connotated meaning. The punctum refers to something prior to codification. Because of this obtuse quality, it can evoke a higher order of emotional intensity. Jacques Derrida comes to a similar conclusion in his work, except that he calls it the "sublime." The concept, however, is the same. The punctum, as Barthes defines it, hints at a pre-existing reality. However, I would like to suggest that the punctum cannot be decoded not

because it refers to a pre-existing reality, but because sight, as a sense, is inadequate to decode it. The punctum refers to another dimension beyond the realm of sight; it is inadequately represented by sight. The studium, on the other hand, refers to the publicly available meaning of the image. It signifies through code, and thus can be decoded through semiotic analysis. As though accepting this critical analysis of photography, *The Blind Assassin* challenges the reliability of sight by linking sight's claim to veracity with that of the photographic image. Margaret Atwood's use of photographs in the intertwining narratives not only reinforces Barthes' idea of an irreducible visual signifier but also highlights the artificiality, as opposed to the reality, of both the photographic medium and vision itself. Despite the appearance of stability conveyed by photographs, their images not only manage to elude the look of the observer but also exhibit a chameleon-like quality, the perception of these images' contents shifting upon each look.

The most prominent photograph in the novel is the picture of Iris, Laura, and Alex Thomas at the button factory picnic. This photo exists in several forms: the original in the newspaper, Iris and Laura's fragmented versions, and the textual photo described in the prologue and epilogue of the intercalated novel. In the original published photo, Alex Thomas is sitting in the middle, with Laura and Iris on both sides of him, like "bookends." Both Laura and Iris are looking at him and smiling. Alex is smiling, too, but his hand is raised up in front of his face, as "gangland criminals did to shield themselves from the flashbulbs when they were being arrested" (192). The caption underneath the picture says: "Miss Chase and Miss Laura Chase Entertain an Out-of-Town Visitor." This caption represents one publicly available meaning of the image. Reenie, Laura and Iris's nanny, however, sees through this publicly endorsed veneer

because of her knowledge of their lives and her fears for them. She criticizes Iris and Laura for looking like "lovelorn geese", telling them that they have made "sorry spectacle[s] out of [them]selves . . . for mooning over some young thug who looked like an Indian" (192).

The fragmented pictures, however, alter the meaning of the photograph, and of memory itself. Two copies of this fragmented picture exist: one with Iris and Alex, with Laura cut out, and one with Laura and Alex with Iris cut out. The only portion remaining of either of the sisters is the hand. When Laura cuts these photos, she relegates (or as Jean-François Lyotard would say, forecloses) the former publicly available image to the unconscious. What represented the studium in the original photograph becomes the punctum in its altered version. In fact, it is this fragmented picture that is first presented to the reader. The reader is not told the cultural context of the photo; we do not yet know that this photo is taken at the button factory picnic. We also are not informed of a third person's presence. The following chapter, "The hard-boiled egg", leads us to believe that this picnic is the one that takes place in the photograph. Thus, while the studium of the original becomes the punctum of the altered photograph, the punctum of the original becomes the studium of the altered. In other words, desire and love lie "beneath the surface" in the original photograph. Only Reenie points this fact out in the original photograph; Iris and Laura both adamantly deny their love for and attraction to Alex Thomas. It is after the photo is altered that desire and love rise to the surface, become obvious: "She's half turned towards him, and smiling, in a way she can't remember smiling at anyone since" (4). Additionally, when the photo is taken, Alex Thomas raises his hand to cover his face. Iris originally interprets this gesture as criminal-like.

However, in her recollection of the fragmented photo, this gesture defies interpretation: "[H]e's holding up his hand, as if to fend her off in play, or else to protect himself from the camera, from the person who must be there, taking the picture; or else to protect himself from those in the future who might be looking at him, who might be looking in at him through this square, lighted window of glazed paper. As if to protect himself from her. As if to protect her" (4-5). This gesture does not have a fixed, determinate meaning. One could argue that the foreclosure of cultural context from the photo results in its indeterminate meaning, thereby allowing the reader to impose her own subjective interpretations onto the photo. However, foreclosure does not even need to occur for a photo to be robbed of determinate meaning. The process that occurs here is similar to the process that Barthes describes for the dissemination of a text into the world. In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes argues that the author's interpretation of his text is not the final, ultimate interpretation. When you deny an author, Barthes says, you deny a final fixed meaning to the text. When the text is disseminated into the world, it takes on a meaning of its own. It becomes autonomous from the author; its meaning is always indeterminate. The text is controlled by nothing other than language itself. Likewise, Alex's gesture cannot be determined because we do not have access to Alex himself. If we go by Barthes' theory, we do not need Alex to impose a meaning on his gesture because it is likely that Alex himself does not know. Alex's gesture becomes autonomous from him and from the cultural context; it becomes controlled by nothing other than the specular process itself. However, just like a reader is needed to construct meaning from a text, a viewing subject is needed to construct meaning from a visual context. The language of a text is nothing without a reader. This analogy holds for Alex's gesture:

while its meaning cannot finally be pinned down, Iris does assign some meaning to it: "As if to protect her" (517).

The multiplicity of meanings stemming from the irreducible element of the picnic photo is a means for Iris to remember Alex, to re-establish a connection with him that no longer exists. One possible signification of this gesture is wish fulfillment: "As if to protect her." Alex's raised hand could also signify what it was originally interpreted as: protecting himself from the camera. However, the gesture could also be interpreted as protecting himself from future viewers. Sartre argues that one must always be cautious about being the object of the look because one cannot apprehend the Other in the clear vision of what he will make out of one's act. When Alex conceals his face, he protects himself from future Others because he is aware that the image could be used against him in the future. (And indeed it is: the picture is later used on a Wanted poster when he is accused of burning down the Chase button factory.) The most intriguing speculation about Alex's motive, however, is the following: "As if to protect himself from her." This speculation is related to the previous one in that both gestures show an awareness, or prescience of the future Other. However, this interpretation has an additional dimension to it, that of love, desire, and the desire to possess the lover through the look. By partially obscuring his face, Alex prevents Iris from completely possessing him through her look. Since only a portion of him remains, she can never completely recover or repossess him through the photograph. Iris often stares at the photograph, searching for something she must have "dropped or lost, out of reach but still visible, shimmering like a jewel on sand" (5). According to Sartre, one's freedom and potentialities disintegrate under the

look of the Other. Alex's gesture allows him to protect himself from Iris and others by retaining a certain degree of freedom and autonomy.

Foreclosure of the cultural context, in a sense, frees the picture from a fixed interpretation by the gaze, revealing its irreducibility in the endless possibilities of the gesture. Since this gesture cannot be decoded, each looking reveals a different interpretation. Different interpretations of the same image imply that the photograph is not a stable, reliable medium; it does not provide a direct, unmediated image of the world. Nor is sight a stable and reliable process. Rather, what one sees in the photograph is informed by one's own subjectivity, desires, and experiences. Additionally, subjectivity shapes one's relations to people in photographs. Atwood's use of photographs in the novel reveals that photographs are an inadequate means for people to relate to each other, because the photographic relation is visual only.

In relegating the cultural context to the realm of invisibility, the altered photo also relegates Laura to invisibility. The altered photo is symbolic of Iris' treatment of Laura during the course of the novel. Thus, what was publicly available knowledge in the original photo ("Miss Chase and Miss Laura Chase Entertain an Out-of-Town Visitor") becomes foreclosed in the altered photo. Laura's absence becomes the punctum, rather than the studium, of the altered photo. Her relegation to invisibility paradoxically enables and disrupts the conventional romance plot between Iris and Alex. Laura's presence, "whether seen or not", indicates another dimension beyond the "studium" of the romance plot presented in the altered photo. The punctum indicates a dimension of sisterly betrayal on Iris's part. Iris's initial reaction to the hand is one of anxiety, and possibly jealousy: "The sight of Laura's light-yellow hand, creeping towards Alex like an

incandescent crab, gave me a chill down my spine" (220). The hand is described as encroaching onto Alex, invading his (and Iris's) space. Laura's foreclosure from the photo and the narrative gives the hand the power of irreducibility, and thus the power to evoke a higher order of emotional intensity. When Iris discusses the photo in the prologue, she spends very little time describing Laura's hand: "Over to one side—you wouldn't see it at first—there's a hand, cut by the margin, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass as if discarded. Left to its own devices" (5). By shutting Laura out of her affair with Alex Thomas (in other words, by withholding information about Alex from Laura), as symbolized in the photo, Iris unknowingly makes Laura vulnerable to Richard's blackmail. By the end of the novel, Iris realizes that the hand cannot be ignored: "It's the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down" (517). To leave Richard, run off with Alex and fulfill the conventional romance plot would be to ignore Laura and her love for Alex—in the narrative, the photograph, and the course of her affair—and subsequently, to commit a crime similar to the ending Iris proposes for the blind assassin and the girl: to privilege individual survival at the cost of society, to endorse treachery to one's country, to place private contentment over the general social good (343). The different interpretations of the same photo shows that sight is a subjective process, and cannot process a photograph objectively.

In the prologue, Iris is described as constantly searching for something. "She lays [the photograph] flat on the table and stares down into it, as if she's peering into a well or pool—searching beyond her own reflection for something else, something she must have dropped or lost, out of reach but still visible, shimmering like a jewel on sand" (5).

Examination of the physical details of the photo is fruitless. I would like to argue that Iris is trying to remember, and through this remembrance, to repossess, Alex in her search for a definite, fixed meaning of the photograph. She is trying to decode the punctum and the sublime in the photo. The punctum, according to Barthes, points to a traumatic reality that no longer exists, a fragment of a whole that can never be revealed. Iris's attempt to capture and decode the punctum is an attempt to retrieve the happiness, the Edenic state in the photo. However, this obtuse element consistently eludes her look. Everything in the photo is described as "drowned, but shining" (5) and "drowned now—the tree as well, the sky, the wind, the clouds" (518). I am suggesting that the drowning is the punctum, the sublime: a presence that is felt, possibly visible, but out of reach. Here, the photo is used to demonstrate the inadequacy of sight to recapture past events and emotions. The visual is inadequate because there is always an element that eludes it, that resists decoding. Sight cannot encompass all of one's experience. The use of this photo shows the failure of the look as a means of fulfillment; one is always dissatisfied, even after looking to the heart's content. The look does not provide reconciliation, because it cannot overcome the physical distance between the subject and object, and because an element will always resist or elude the look.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the photograph does not reflect memory and reality; instead, it alters both. In other words, the photo can become detached and independent from reality, or independent from *a* reality, supposing there is a pre-existing reality. Through these alterations, the novel challenges the photographic medium as a reliable imitation of the world. Laura's modification of the picnic photo reveals the medium's limitation to accurately portray reality. One does not simply look at the contents of a

photograph through a neutral lens; one projects one's desires, hatreds onto the photograph. This projection colors and constitutes what we see. This projection also bestows meaning upon not only the photograph but also the reality it purports to "represent." Laura's reasoning for excluding herself from Iris's photo is that the image of Iris and Alex alone is "what you want to remember" (220). At the end of the novel, Iris acknowledges that the "picture is of happiness, the story not" (518). The picture, thus, offers a representation of reality more compelling (or more desirable) than reality itself.

Iris also uses photographs throughout her memoir to construct stories of her parents and grand-parents, giving her access to a knowledge that she would not have otherwise. As a young child, Iris often stares at paintings and photographs of her Grandmother Adelia. She idealizes her grandmother, "giving" her a world-weary, mocking smile, meeting a fictitious lover in the conservatory. Whereas the multiplicity of meaning in the picnic photo helps Iris to re-establish a connection with Alex, the stories Iris constructs from these photos establish a level of intimacy and connection between Iris and her grandmother that never existed. They also demonstrate the autonomous nature of the photograph: the photograph can exist independent of reality. The photograph supports the construction of an imaginary relationship. After her mother's death, Iris confesses that she can no longer remember what her mother looks like save through photographs. When looking at the pictures of her grandmother, Iris *creates* memories through the photographic gaze. She creates reality. Iris endows her grandmother with characteristics she may or may not have possessed. Thus, the photograph of Grandmother Adelia functions as neither an aid to restore memory nor a

reflection of reality, but rather as a vessel for Iris's own imaginings. The photo becomes for Iris a "hollow shape" filled with her own desires and projections.

The photos of her parents simultaneously give Iris access to knowledge she may not have had otherwise and allow her to fashion stories from them. Iris compares the photo of her mother as a young woman to the mother she remembers: "My mother is wearing a sealskin coat; from underneath her hat the ends of her fine hair crackle. She must already have acquired the pince-nez that preceded the owlish glasses I remember . . . . She looks courageous, dashing even, like a boyish buccaneer" (68). This photograph is the only section where Iris speaks admirably of her mother. While Iris can see aspects of her mother that she remembers, she also sees characteristics, potentialities of her mother that she had never seen before. The photograph, in this case, is an open invitation to fantasy and wish-fulfillment; it extends human visibility and sight in its ability to preserve qualities and characteristics from the past. The newspaper photo of Iris's parents after her father's return from the war serves as the basis for Iris's speculation about their relationship after the war. "The newspaper camera catches them in its flash; they stare, as if surprised in crime . . . . They were now strangers, and—it must have occurred to them—they always had been. How harsh the light was. How much older they'd become" (76). The photo, however, does not tell this story: it only serves as the scaffolding on which this story, real or not, can be built. Though the photo has indeed taught something profound to Iris, it also continues to invite her to project her own feelings and experiences onto photographs. Like her mother, Iris is separated from the man she loves when he goes off to war. The emotions she experiences when he returns from the Spanish Civil War are very similar her speculations about her parents in the aforementioned photo. In

the stories Iris concocts from the photos, we find that photography (and, by extension, sight) is not a record of memory, but it also invites the creation of new memories, memories that are constantly shaped by our own feelings, desires, and projections.

On the other hand, because photographs are a "mirror with a memory" (Holmes), they play a central role in restoring memory, and particularly in demonstrating the limits of human memory. The man and the girl in the picnic photo are sitting under a tree that "might have been an apple tree; she didn't notice the tree much at the time" (4). However, the photograph's restorative power is limited as well. Iris's contemplation of the weather reveals the photo's inability accurately to portray and preserve all dimensions of experience: "There must have been a breeze, because of the way the shirt is blowing up against her; or perhaps it wasn't blowing, perhaps it was clinging; perhaps it was hot. It was hot" (4). The last statement, "It *was* hot," indicates the triumph of tactile human memory over the sight-based photographic memory.

Laura's studio portrait has another implication against the visual medium of the photograph: the photo, and by extension, sight, is an inadequate means to gauge one's nature and psychology. Analysis of several photos reveals that psychology cannot be constituted visually. In Laura's studio portrait, taken as a young woman, her upper body is turned away from the photographer and her head is turned back to give a "graceful curve to the neck." Iris' speculation of the photographic procedure exposes the artificiality of the medium: "A little more, now look up, towards me, that's my girl, now let's see that smile" (45-6). She describes the details of the photo: "A straight nose; a heart-shaped face; large, luminous guileless eyes; the eyebrows arched, with a perplexed upwards turning at the inner edges. A tinge of stubbornness in the jaw, but you wouldn't

see it unless you knew" (46). According to the last sentence ("A tinge of stubbornness in the jaw, but you wouldn't see it unless you knew" [46]), this portrait of Laura shows that the photo does not adequately reflect one's nature or psychology. In other words, the visual nature of the photograph fails to portray fully one's psychological nature. Indeed, later in the novel, Iris is shocked by the contrast between Laura and her surroundings, which consist of "the dainty prints, the ribbon rosebuds, the organdies, the flounces" that Winifred has chosen for her. "A photograph would have revealed only harmony. Yet to me the incongruity was intense, almost surreal. Laura was flint in a nest of thistledown" (427). Photographs fail to document Laura's struggle and resistance against her imposed identity. Photos physically and metaphorically flatten people, leaching them of color. Only three-dimensional reality, or knowledge—knowledge that not only surpasses the visual but counteracts its illusions—can shed light onto the intricacies of human nature. Reality is not composed of only the visual dimension. Therefore, the photo, which operates solely in the visual realm, cannot be said to represent psychology properly.

This deficiency can also be seen in an impromptu picture of Iris and Laura, taken soon after Laura's birth. In this picture, Iris is wearing a dress, holding a blanket. Laura's hand is curled around Iris' thumb. The older Iris, looking back on this picture, is unsure of the meaning of her expression: "There I sat . . . visible hand clutching the baby's crocheted white blanket in an awkward, ferocious grip, eyes accusing the camera or whoever was wielding it . . . . Was I angry because I'd been told to hold [Laura], or was I in fact defending it? Shielding it—reluctant to let it go?" (85). Iris' expression is the punctum, the irreducible quality, of this photograph. Even to Iris herself, the meaning of her expression is lost; even she cannot fix a definitive interpretation of her gesture. (In

fact, her two speculations about her relation to Laura are a projection of her future oscillation between being a good and a bad sister to Laura: angry at Laura, or protective of her.) We never know what the object of the photograph is thinking. The irreducibility in this photo (and of all photos in general) is the human experience. The human experience may be both rational (mind-like) and experiential (of the body). When human memory fails, one cannot count on photography to do the job, because memory has multiple dimensions aside from the visual, dimensions that the photograph does not capture. Iris' use of these photos thus demonstrates the failure of the visual as a whole to constitute and portray psychology. This exposure is also a blow to the theories of Freud and Lacan, whose psychological theories were largely visually based. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, for example, stated that the child first realizes he is separate and distinct from his mother when he sees his reflection in the mirror (Lacan 190): "...the sight in the mirror of the ego ideal, of that being that he first saw appearing in the form of the parent holding him up before the mirror" (Lacan, trans. Alan Sheridan [NY: Norton, 1978], 257). Likewise, Freud claimed that penis envy is initiated when the small girl first sees the naked boy and realizes that he has something that she does not have.

Through her manipulation of color, Laura attempts to add another dimension to the photograph that cannot be revealed by the visual medium alone. In doing this, Laura tries to endow others with the same type of transcendent sight that she herself possesses. Through color, she tries to make others (especially Iris) see the world as she sees it. She uses hand-tinting materials to color people in photographs. However, she does not color people corresponding to their physical appearances. Instead, she colors them mauve, green, orange, blue, to represent the colors of their souls. "It's the colours they *ought* to

have been," she tells Iris (194). Here, Laura uses a visual means (color) to enhance the visual medium, to portray what a strictly representational visual medium cannot portray: the complex nature of human beings. (Iris herself is painted blue because she is "sleeping." The implications of this will be discussed later.) Later in the novel, Laura sends a message to Iris about her rape through color alterations of Iris' wedding photos. In one photograph, the bridesmaids and bridesgrooms are washed over in indigo, obliterated from the picture. The only figures left in this photograph are Iris, Laura, Iris' husband Richard, and Richard's sister, Winifred. Richard and Winifred are colored in a "lurid green", symbolizing their greedy corrupt natures and their collusion in Richard's rape of Laura. Iris, again, is colored in aqua blue, signifying her blindness to Richard and Winifred's natures. This color, however, is also a larger indictment of Iris' perceptive deficiencies. Laura herself is a brilliant yellow, which arguably symbolizes her innocence. Iris, however, fails to decode the message: "What did it mean, this radiance? For radiance it was, as if Laura was glowing from within, like a glass lamp or a girl made of phosphorus. She wasn't looking straight ahead, but sideways, as if the focus of her attention was not in the picture at all" (451). Since a photograph alone cannot reveal the nature of one's soul, Laura uses color to make up for the photo's deficiency. However, we find that even color is limited in its ability to portray reality. Color is a sign of something else and must therefore be interpreted. Since it must be interpreted, it is a message that may not always be decodable or deducible by the viewer. Laura's yellow color, for example, most likely refers to her innocence. But since color is a referent, it can only refer to something; it cannot *show.* While yellow can be associated with the yellow glow of the medieval and Renaissance halos, it is also conventionally associated

with cowardice and caution. Since color refers to, as opposed to conferring, meaning, it runs the risk of being misinterpreted because it can represent a multiplicity of meanings. Iris does not interpret yellow as innocence. Iris' failure to decode this message is not simply an indication of her blindness, but it is also indicative of the failure of the visual medium alone as a vehicle to convey messages, to convey any set of codes, to represent the truth. This failure also demonstrates the subjective process of vision: what one person sees in the photo, the other may not. Since vision is flawed, all things that use vision as a means of understanding the world are also flawed.

Laura uses photos as a way to communicate with Iris, falsely believing in the certitude and reliability of vision. As a young girl, Iris does not believe Laura when Laura *tells* her about Mr. Erskine's sexual advances. This incident may have caused Laura to distrust the reliability of language and hence, to turn to sight as a means of expressing the truth. Encoded in the second wedding photograph is Laura's message about her rape by Richard. This photograph contains only Richard and Iris. Iris' face is bleached out so that her eyes, nose, and mouth are fogged over, "like a window on a cold, wet day" (451). This treatment symbolizes Iris' blindness to Laura's victimization and to Richard's true nature. Richard's face is painted a dark grey, obliterating all of his features. His hands are red, and red flames have been drawn up around him, flames that "shot up from around and somehow from inside the head, as if the skull itself were burning" (451). J. Brooks Bouson has pointed out that the fire imagery around Richard resembles the picture of the man on fire in Iris and Laura's picture book. The man on fire scares Laura as a child, and thus her rendition of Richard aflame signifies her fear of Richard (Bouson 265). I would also like to argue that Richard's hands have been colored

red in order to symbolize his guilt, as well as the baseness of his touch. Given Laura's religious inclinations, it seems plausible that the flames could also symbolize Richard's devil-like nature. Since the flames emanate from "within" his skull, this suggests that Richard's evilness is a deeply ingrained, inherent part of him. (And, by the same analogy, the yellow light coming from within Laura indicates the inherent nature of her self-sacrificing, angelic qualities.) In this photograph, the background has been blacked out, leaving Iris and Richard's figures "floating as if in mid-air, in the deepest and darkest of nights" (451). The darkness could represent the symbolic darkness inhabited by the characters of the novel (save for Laura), blind to and unseeing of the other's cries for help, of the other's actions. The darkness also represents the darkness of the environment that they have created in their lies, concealments, and disguises from each other. The chapter ends here; since Iris fails to decode the message in these two images, we are given no interpretation of these photographs. The reader, instead, is left to interpret the images, thereby placing him/her in a subject position similar to Iris'. Iris' failure is representative of the greater failure of the visual to encompass reality. In fact, Iris' discovery of the truth comes not through vision, not through an image, but through language, through a word: "besotted."

Just as Laura uses the visual medium of the photograph to reveal the true natures of people, she also employs the visual medium of the photograph against itself in order to document her resistance to the principles of Iris' wedding. This type of documentation is another means by which Laura uses the photo to relate to other people: she uses the photo to reflect her open resistance. A photo is not normally used for resistance or psychology (as seen earlier), but Laura uses facial gestures as a sign of her opposition to the wedding.

In the wedding group portraits, Laura refuses to comply with the demands of the photograph; she refuses to stand still and smile. All of Laura's resistances involve some sort of manipulation of the look. In one photo, Laura is "resolutely scowling." With this picture, Laura takes advantage of the photo's imitative capacity in order to show her true feelings and opinions about the wedding. In another picture, she moves her head so that her face is a blur. Since the photo is incapable of recording movement, Laura is able to demonstrate two things here. First, by turning her face away, she escapes the photographic gaze. The gaze depends upon the object being static. Movement, however, breaks the concentration of the gaze. Laura's movement allows her to resist objectification by an Other, because her face cannot be captured by the look. Laura's movement also draws attention to the artificial nature of the photograph and its inability to record all aspects and dimensions of life. Iris uses a sight-based and tactile metaphor to describe this image; she calls it a "pigeon smashing into glass" (240). Just as many are deceived by the seeming transparency of what they see (which includes photographs), the pigeon is deceived by the transparency of the glass. Laura, however, clearly realizes the photo's transparency and uses this knowledge to demonstrate her resistance.

In a third photograph, Laura is gnawing on a finger, with a sideways guilty glance, "as if surprised with her hand in the till" (240). Again, Laura is calling attention to the photograph's artificial nature. No one would want to be caught in the middle of such an action in a photograph. However, that does not mean that people do not perform these actions if the photograph does not record them. Life molds itself to the camera; the camera does not always mold itself to life. For the camera, one always puts on one's best face; one is always poised. One does not want to be caught off-guard in a photo. One,

however, is not always composed in real life. Iris assumes that there is a defect in the film in the fourth photograph, because there is an effect of dappled light falling up on Laura, "as if she's standing on the edge of an illuminated swimming pool, at night" (240). This image symbolically illustrates that which is not apparent in the photo or the reality constituted by the specular process. It makes Laura look as if she is privy to some secret, some divine knowledge that no one else is aware of. (And she is, because she is the only one who foresees the dangers of the marriage. She is, consequently, the only one who actively resists it.) The night refers to the figurative darkness in which everyone else is enshrouded. Additionally, in folklore and mythology, water (often in a pool or bowl) is used as a medium to see beyond. This effect could lead us to conclude that Laura is endowed with a transcendent capability.

In the novel, photos are often used as openings, transitions, and conclusions. The picnic photo, for example, is used to open and close the intercalated novel, Laura Chase's *The Blind Assassin.* The studio portrait of Laura and Iris as children signals the sisters' entry into the Symbolic (under their tutor Mr. Erskine). Iris' wedding photo is a clear demarcation between her childhood and her adulthood. Laura's alteration of Iris' wedding photos signals the transition from the Depression to the war. By closing and opening certain chapters, certain parts of life with images, Atwood shows that there are events and experiences that are left uncaptured by the image. The image, in other words, is an inadequate record of life. "The picture is of happiness, the story not." Laura and Iris' studio portrait does not include all their experiences that influenced them up to the time in which the portrait was taken—it does not record their dreaminess, their experience with Miss Violence—although it is quite obvious that these experiences make up who

they are. Likewise, Iris' wedding photo does not reveal her emotions (namely, despair and disillusionment), nor does it reveal the events that led up to the wedding. Images, thus, can only serve as markers; they cannot represent the whole of human existence. Images are simply one way of structuring life. This stance is echoed in Derrida's theory of the sublime. According to Derrida, photos impose a frame, a structure of potential meaning, onto the formlessness of life. In this way, it is similar to how a narrative structure operates to turn a series of events into a potentially meaningful story. Neither, however, forecloses all meaning into one simple interpretation.

Derrida's notion of the sublime also says that the unsettling moment of the photo is that it confronts us with a "present image" of the past, an image of a self that appears to be irredeemably alien to us now but is, nevertheless, still here within us. This moment is illustrated not only in the picnic photo, but also in Iris' wedding photo. Iris is quite critical of herself in the photo. She points out signs of awkwardness in herself, "something gangly about the stance . . . as if her spine is wrong for this dress", her arms are held "with the elbows a little far out" (239). Iris also calls attention to the title, the studium of the photo: " 'A Beautiful Bride,' was the caption. They said such things then. In her case beauty was mandatory, with so much money involved" (239). This last statement is something that no one else will acknowledge, just as the photo of Iris and Laura's swooning over Alex is something no one will acknowledge (save for Reenie). She describes this picture in the third person, her reason being that she "[doesn't] recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word" (239). Here, instead of restoring memory, photography illustrates the disjunction between "official" memory (that recorded in photos, records, etc.) and "personal" memory. Although her presence at

the wedding is recorded, Iris does not recall being there. Personal memory can be selective, more selective than photos at times. While the photo previously presented a reality more compelling than reality itself (in the form of the picnic photo), here, personal memory presents a reality more compelling than the reality conferred by the photo. Neither memory nor photographs, therefore, is reliable, because both are constituted visually. The photo also draws attention to the disjunction between past and present: "I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person. I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, if she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember" (239). Iris also comments on her figurative blindness as a young woman, drawing another distinction between her present and past selves: "I have the better view—I can see her clearly, most of the time. But even if she knew enough to look, she can't see me at all" (239). However, Iris does not state a preference for one state of being over the other, which indicates her distrust of vision. Although she is now endowed with transcendent sight, it does not logically follow that this is a more desirable state.

As a side note, I would like to point out that the improvised science fiction story also contains an allusion to photography. One of the myths of Sakiel-Norn says that through a charm, the real city was shrunk very small and placed in a cave beneath the great heap of stones. Everything—the palaces, the gardens—and everyone is still there, but now no bigger than ants. Only the King knows what's happened, that everything has become so small. The rest of the people do not know that they have become so small, they do not know that they are supposed to be dead. To them the ceiling of rock looks like a sky, the light coming in through a pinhole between the stones looks like the sun

(12). Iris also alludes to this image later in the novel, when she fantasizes about the "sky of rock" cracking open, Alex descending through from a rope, and whisking her away to the real world. The image of the sky of rock, the sun shining through a small hole, is very similar to how a camera operates. According to Jonathan Crary, when light passes through a small hole into a dark, enclosed interior, an inverted image will appear on the wall opposite the hole (Crary 27). This allusion could refer to the fact that the world that Iris and the people of Sakiel-Norn inhabit is merely a reflection; it is not reality. In fact, constant references to "real people" throughout the novel show that Iris and Laura feel artificial and not "real."

Margaret Atwood's use of photographs in *The Blind Assassin* exposes the medium's limitations to portray reality accurately. It also reveals the limitations of the photo as a memorial for human relationships. Iris tries to use the photo to relate to Alex, her parents, and her Grandmother Adelia. In the case of Alex, Iris often feels incomplete. In the case of Grandmother Adelia and her parents, the photograph is an open invitation to wish fulfillment. Both are a result of the visual nature of the photograph. The photograph is an inadequate means to repossess the lover because it is sight-based and can never overcome the distance between subject and object. Since the photograph is a visual record, it can only *refer*, by provoking speculation, as in the pictures of Iris' parents and grandparents. The referential quality of the photo inevitably leads to the punctum, the creation of one or more irreducible elements. While Barthes argues that the punctum stems from something prior to codification, I believe it demonstrates instead an experience that cannot be captured by vision alone. At times, knowledge and memory may allow one to decode a seemingly irreducible element; for example, knowledge of Iris

and Laura's lives allows one to decode the meaning of the other hand. However, other times, memory and knowledge are insufficient: Alex's hand gesture, Iris' expression—these cannot be decoded. These gestures elude the scrutinizing gaze. In fact, the ability of the photograph to restore memory is questionable because memory operates on multiple levels, only one of them being visual. Additionally, the novel challenges the photo's imitative capacity. A study of studio portraits and of Laura's resistance to the camera reveals the artificial nature of the photography medium. Rather than imitating and reflecting life, photos demand that life mold itself to the camera. Laura manipulates photographs in order to make them more *representative* of reality, demonstrating the photo's inability to record and reveal one's inner nature. While Iris uses photos as a means of connecting with absent people, Laura uses photos to connect with people. Laura tries to bestow transcendent sight onto others (namely Iris) through photos. This attempt requires a belief in the reliability of the visual medium to convey messages. As we discover in the novel, this belief is erroneous. Iris' failure to read and decode Laura's visual messages is not only an indication of her own blindness, but also an indication of the failure of the visual to constitute reality completely.

1.2. Mirroring

In a book such as *The Blind Assassin*, dominated by the mechanics of vision, it is perhaps not surprising to discover the employment of several different techniques of mirroring, including symbolic mirroring, internal/textual mirroring, mirroring of characters, and the mirror image. In this essay, I will deal primarily with symbolic and internal mirroring. Both are used to demonstrate the unreliability of sight. Symbolic mirroring deals with the figurative function of the mirror itself. The mirror often offers

an image of ourselves that we are not satisfied with, as is in Iris' case. Since the mirror (and by extension, the specular process) is imperfect, Iris often does not see a perfect reflection of herself. Instead, the image she sees is constituted by her own subjective impulses. As an older woman, Iris often clings to a "mirror" image of her younger, more attractive self. The mirroring of text not only reinforces Derrida's argument about the impossibility of perfect specularity, but is also paradoxically used to both "blind" and reveal to the reader the true author of *The Blind Assassin*. Although mirroring occurs on multiple levels, with multiple implications, the mirrors overall demonstrate that sight is not an objective, stable process and should not be trusted.

Like the photograph, the mirror does not offer a perfect reflection of the world. If, as has been argued, vision itself is subjective, what one sees in a mirror is doubly so. Jacques Derrida argues that perfect specularity is impossible. The specular unity of two seemingly identical images is always disrupted by a surplus, an invisible otherness. Visual and linguistic mimicry, Derrida says, is never perfect because there is no self-contained entirely unified original referent prior to the speculative process that can be seamlessly produced (Derrida 36). Derrida seems to be arguing that something is missing in visual and linguistic mimicry, that mimicry fails because there is some sort of ontological defect. However, I would like to argue that mimicry fails because subjectivity creates a surplus that interferes with the purity of sight. Subjectivity adds something when it interprets data. On the night before her wedding, Iris stares at herself in the mirror, unable to see anything: "I seemed to myself erased, featureless, like an oval of used soap, or the moon on the wane" (235). Here, the mirror fails to reflect a perfect image. Instead, the reflection Iris sees is influenced by her own subjective feelings. She

does not see a direct, unmediated image of herself in the mirror, but rather she sees herself as how she feels. Sartre argues that the gaze of the Other establishes my identity as an *object* rather than the subject that I am. The gaze of the Other robs me of my subjectivity. In this moment, Iris feels she is "featureless" and empty because her agreement to Richard's marriage proposal is the ultimate result of her inability to assert her identity. It is the ultimate pinnacle of having her identity being fixed by the look of the other. Since Iris has been trapped by the gazes of her parents and their obligations (be a good sister), she has been unable to form an identity of her own. Iris' marriage to Richard is one that she consents to because it will provide a good future for Laura. Her marriage to Richard traps her in another gaze—that of being looked at by the husband. In this gaze, she is constituted as a good, obedient wife. Iris experiences no more freedom under this gaze as she did previously: "As the days went by I felt I knew Richard less and less. He was effacing himself, or was it concealment? Withdrawal to a vantage point. I myself however was taking shape—the shape intended for me, by him. Each time I looked in the mirror a little more of me had been colored in" (303). Iris experiences Richard's freedom (withdrawal to a vantage point) through the disintegration of her own possibilities. Her possibilities disappear as her image is shaped and cultivated for consumption by the male gaze. This passage also illustrates the chiasmic intertwining between sight and subjectivity. Each time Iris looks in the mirror, she sees a different image: more of herself has been "coloured in." In other words, the mirror reflects not only Iris' physical, external changes, but her mental, internal changes as well. Additionally, Iris' physical changes transform her into a smooth, reflective surface, similar to a mirror. "It was necessary to be sleek, devoid of bristles. A topography like

wet clay, a surface the hands would glide over" (303); "I was sand, I was snow—written on, rewritten, smoothed over" (371). Iris cannot form her own identity; she can only reflect the identity that others impose on her back to them.

As an older woman, what Iris sees in the mirror continues to be influenced by subjectivity. However, the reflection she sees is not an identity constituted by the Other. Instead, she sees a reflection that she does not identify with. She is unable to recognize herself, or rather she refuses to: "When I look in the mirror I see an old woman . . . Sometimes I see an older woman who might look like the grandmother I never knew, or like my own mother, if she'd managed to reach this age. But sometimes I see instead the young girl's face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face, which seems—especially in the afternoons, with the light on a slant—so loose and transparent I could peel it off like a stocking" (43). Unlike the child who sees and identifies with his image in the mirror, Iris does not identify with the image reflected by the mirror. She displaces identification with the older woman onto her mother and grandmother. Iris deceives herself into believing that her present face is simply a mask, a temporary state of being. She finds her younger face much more preferable to her current one. Iris' refusal to identify with her mirror image, her displacement of this image onto others, and her subsequent identification with a past, "drowned" face reveals the mirror's failure as a reflective surface. The mirror itself is not defective, but the specular process that interprets the reflection in the mirror is. The specular process can manipulate the image in the mirror to serve the looking subject's subjective desires. One sees what one wants to see, which is often an alteration of reality. Iris refuses to see herself as an old woman; rather, she prefers to see the young girl's face

that she "once spent so much time rearranging and deploring." (It could also be argued that Iris has come to see herself as other than the way the previous—her parents, Richard, Alex—and present Others have fixed her.) Since desire manipulates what one sees, the specular process is not to be trusted in this case.

Hilde Staels argues that textual mirroring foregrounds the use of story-telling as a framing device and challenges the traditional binary opposition between fact and fiction (Staels 151). I would like to propose alternatively that internal mirroring challenges the notion of perfect specularity and that of a pure, unmediated vision. The novel uses two scenes to illustrate this concept: the mirroring of the picnic photo with Alex Thomas and the mirroring of the chestnut tree dream. The picnic photo opens and closes Laura's novel. In the prologue, the focus is upon the eye's speculation about the irreducible details of the photo. The attempt to capture these details in the look momentarily blinds the gazer to the other hand: "Over to one side—you wouldn't see it at first—there's a hand, cut off at the margin" (5). However, in the epilogue, the focus of the photo is on the other hand (and by extension, the disastrous consequences that result from ignoring it). "The photo has been cut; a third of it has been cut off. In the lower left corner there's a hand, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass. It's the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down" (517). The photo has not changed between these two viewings; its contents are stable. This does not mean that there is a pre-existing reality. Instead the reality of the photo is shaped by sight. Since sight is unstable, so is the reality that it forms. One still manages to see differently upon two viewings of the identical image. This variation occurs because the specular process constitutes this image. Vision, being impure and subjective,

never interprets two images in the same way. The disruption that occurs between the picnic photo of the prologue and that of the epilogue is not a visually-based disruption. Instead, it is the result of the gazer's cumulative experiences that she imposes upon the second viewing. Different events have happened to Iris, and therefore she sees different things in the same image at different times. Additionally, she herself is different upon each look. Not only is vision unstable, but the viewing subject is unstable as well. The subject is dynamic and constantly changing; the subject is never the same person. In the interval between writing the prologue and the epilogue, Iris experiences not only the death of Alex Thomas, but also Laura's death and the discovery of the truth behind Laura's pregnancy. This knowledge influences how she views the photograph at the end. (I assume that Iris writes the prologue prior to Alex and Laura's death because she says at one point, "I wrote it myself, during my long evenings alone, when I was waiting for Alex to come back, and then afterwards, once I knew he wouldn't" (512). Although the photo itself has not changed, the gazer's perception of it has. In fact, there is a double flaw with photographic images. One looks at them with an already flawed vision, and they are an already flawed representation. Vision is a form of projection onto a non-existent reality, and a photo falsely purports to represent this reality. Therefore, looking at a photo is a form of duplicity. The mirroring of text here proves that vision cannot provide a neutral, unmediated perspective on the world. The use of photos as mirrors demonstrates that all images are constituted through vision.

Textual mirroring also appears in a recurring dream of Iris', further refuting the notion of perfect specularity and pure vision. Iris first has this dream after she has found out about Alex's death. However, within the chronology of the novel, the reader's first

experience of this dream is in the chapter, "The chestnut tree," where the older Iris re-lives the dream. The details in the first part of both dreams are almost identical: waking up, going to the window, the spider-veined moon, the orange glow of the lamps. However, the focus of each dream is different. The dream that the older Iris has is permeated with a fear of being seen. In this dream no reconciliation occurs. Alex leaves before she can say anything to him: "Now he was walking away, and I couldn't call after him. He knew I couldn't call. Now he was gone" (396). Iris, however, is caught by the Panopticon (embodied in Richard): "*No, no, no, no,* said a voice . . . . But I'd said that out loud—too loudly, because Richard was awake now. He was standing right behind me. He was about to put his hand on my neck" (396). The dream that occurs in Laura's novel, while it contains similar elements, has a different focus. The focus in this dream is Iris' failed reconciliation with Alex. First, Alex joins her in her room, then takes her on the roof, where he shows her the destruction of Sakiel-Norn. Iris cannot fix his image in her gaze; nor can he look directly at her. (Implications of this will be discussed in another chapter.) While the focus of both dreams is sight-related, they refer to different types of sight: one refers to the Panopticon, and the other refers to the look as an unsatisfactory means of reconciliation. Although the elements of both dreams are the same, the specular process interprets the same dream differently. As an older woman, Iris "sees" the same dream differently than as a young woman, because her experiences color her perception of the dream. While the young Iris has managed to hide her affair with Alex from the Panopticon, the older Iris has been foiled by the Panopticon (embodied in Winifred) and has had her daughter and granddaughter taken away from her as a result.

The mirroring of this dream has a second function, however: it is part of a larger narrative device that uses mirroring simultaneously to blind and reveal to the reader the true author of *The Blind Assassin.* The similarity between the older Iris' dream and the dream in Laura's novel disrupts the reader's pre-conceived notion that Laura is the author of the novel. This mimicry also hints that the unnamed woman in the novel may have been Iris. How else could this dream be Iris' if she had not experienced it firsthand? Additionally, we know the unknown man in street in the older Iris' dream is not Richard, because Richard is in the bedroom with Iris. The unknown man's presence leads the reader to question the identity of this unknown man, and, based on Iris' reaction to him, may possibly lead the reader to conclude that Iris may have had a lover. The appearance of the later dream first, however, also blinds the reader because the reader does not yet have the tools to interpret this dream. Mirroring of other elements in Laura's novel and Iris' memoir reveal subtly the true author of the novel. For example, the title of the prologue is "Perennials for the Rock Garden." The reader is told that after Iris' marriage to Richard, she takes up the hobby of rock-gardening: "I contented myself with books—*Perennials for the Rock Garden, Desert Succulents for Northern Climes,* and the like" (442). *Perennials* is also one of the possessions she takes with her when she leaves Richard. Laura, however, does not appear to show interest in rock-gardening. The mirroring of this book also challenges such a preconceived notion. The mirroring of this element never explicitly says that Iris is the author. However, the emphasis on rock-gardening in the novel and memoir hints that, since rock-gardening was a hobby of Iris' (and not Laura's), she may be the true author of *The Blind Assassin.*

Another mirroring element that challenges preconceptions is Iris' use of literary quotes in the memoir and in Laura's novel. The unnamed woman in Laura's novel quotes "Journeys end in lovers meeting" and "You can't cancel half a line of it"; likewise, Iris demonstrates knowledge of these poems in her memoir. Also, in the novel, the unnamed man asks the woman at one point to stand in front of her window. He tells her that he will be under the chestnut tree, watching. This action is also, very subtly, mirrored in Iris' memoir prior to the Xanadu Ball: "I looked out the bedroom window, down to the sidewalk, through the branches of the chestnut tree. Then I turned out the light" (334). Unraveling these clues, however, requires active reading. Additionally, these clues are so subtle that the reader may not pick up on them upon the first reading.

The reader's perception is also further confused by mirroring devices that act specifically to cloud his or her understanding. In the beginning of the novel, the reader is led to believe that Laura Chase is the true author of *The Blind Assassin*. The mirroring of certain elements in the memoir and Laura's novel reinforces this perception. This type of mirroring (mirroring-to-blind) counters the effect of the other type of mirroring (mirroring-to-reveal), leaving the reader confused as to the identity of the real author. One example of this type of mirroring is the novel's use of pronouns. Laura's novel refers to the man and woman as "he" and "she": "She knows the names, she doesn't need to write them down" (4). In the memoir, we are told that Laura always refers to Alex Thomas as "he." This mirroring of pronouns corroborates the reader's belief that Laura is the author, that she is the unnamed woman in the story. Likewise, the mirroring of certain emotional responses reinforces this belief. The woman in the picnic photo is described as smiling at the man "in a way she can't remember smiling at anyone since"

(4). At the button factory picnic, Laura's reaction to Alex is described in the same way: "She looked at [Alex]. I'd never seen her look at anyone else in quite the same way. Startled, dazzled? Hard to put a name to such a look" (177). Iris tells the reader Laura's reaction, but withholds her own, and therefore uses this mirroring element to reinforce the reader's preconceptions. The girl in the picture is also described as "too young", which is a concern of Iris, Reenie, and Elwood Murray's in Laura's relationship to Alex. "Anyway, [Elwood Murray] thought we should know. The man was a grown man, and wasn't Miss Laura only fourteen?" (198). Also, in the memoir, Laura tells Alex that he will set himself on fire if he lights his match with his thumbnail. "You shouldn't do that . . . . You could set yourself on fire" (177). This statement is mirrored in the novel, which again leads the reader to believe that Laura is the woman in the novel. The unnamed woman in the novel makes a comment about how the people who inhabit the rooms where she meets her lover are more real than she is. Likewise, Laura's reason for running away to Sunnyside is that she wants to see how real people live: "That's what other people eat," said Laura, "in real life," and I began to see, a little, what the attraction of Sunnyside must have been for her. It was *other people*—those people who had always been and who would continue to be *other* . . . . She longed, in some way, to join them" (327). On the Queen Mary, the unnamed woman's main daytime activity is sitting on the deck behind her sunglasses. She refuses the swimming pool and the quoits, takes notice of the dogs and dog-walkers on the ship. In Iris' memoir, Laura is engaged in the very same activity of sitting on the deck, behind a pair of sunglasses. She tells Iris that she could be a dog-walker. When Iris pressures Laura about what is bothering her, Laura changes the subject and asks about the quoits. The mirroring of the dogs, quoits, and

sitting on the deck chair also reinforce the reader's perception that Laura is the true author of the novel.

However, mirroring is not the only technique used to challenge the reader's notions. Iris also relies on disruptions in seemingly identical mirror images to reveal the "truth." For example, the picture of the picnic and the picnic in the chapter titled "The hard-boiled egg" are actually two different picnics. The reader, however, is led to believe that the picnic in the photo refers to the picnic in the following chapter. (Once the reader finds out about the button-factory picnic, she can connect it to the picnic in the picture. However, prior to this discovery, small disruptions in the mirror images already hint that the picnic in the picture and in the following chapter are different.) Here, the disruption lies in two places: the description of the weather and the extraneous hand. The weather in the picnic picture is hot: "There must have been a breeze, because of the way the shirt is blowing up against her; or perhaps it wasn't blowing, perhaps it was clinging; perhaps it was hot. It *was* hot" (4, emphasis mine). In the picnic of the next chapter, however, it is windy: "The leaves of the apple tree rustle . . . There's a breeze coming from the water, she says. The wind must have changed" (12). This subtle disruption challenges the reader's preconceptions. Additionally, the other hand in the picture indicates another's presence, whereas the man and woman are alone in the picnic with the hard-boiled eggs. If the reader is sharp enough, he or she would question this disparity. However, the disruptions that occur are purposely very subtle and unpronounced, and therefore easily overlooked. Iris' use of disruptions between mirror images thus contributes to the reader's blindness and confusion.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the specular process as applied to mirrors is not free from subjectivity. One's emotions and desires affect one's perception; they affect especially what one sees in the mirror. Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language does not have an intrinsic value or meaning in and of itself, that language does not identify a pre-existing reality. Likewise, sight does not name a pre-existing reality. Both language and sight *create* reality. Since vision constitutes reality, mirrors cannot be pure reflections of the world. A pure world prior to vision does not exist. Iris' mirror images are influenced by her feelings; she feels empty and sees a featureless, erased face in the mirror. Iris can also reject her mirror image: as an older woman, she refuses to believe that her reflection represents or constitutes her identity. Mirrors are, like photographs, a limited representation of sight. The mirroring of textual elements in the memoir and novel simultaneously reveal and blind the reader to the true story behind *The Blind Assassin.* Certain elements reinforce the assumption that Laura Chase is the author and therefore the unknown woman; other elements challenge this assumption. This technique reinforces the concept that an unstable reality is created by sight, then further destabilized by mirroring.

Chapter 2: Fear and Mistrust of Sight

The term "invisible gaze" refers not so much to the act of a viewing subject that is unseen as to the feeling of being watched and objectified by an unseen subject. This gaze manifests itself in various forms, with varying effects, in *The Blind Assassin.* Three or four of the most prominent forms of the gaze are the absolute gaze of God, the gaze of the absent mother and father, and the Panopticon. (The Panopticon is a prison surveillance system designed by Jeremy Bentham and studied by Michel Foucault; it will be discussed shortly.) The gaze of the absent mother and father refers to Iris' parents' expectations of her. These expectations are manifested through their look, which constitutes Iris' identity. This gaze, the gaze of God, and the Panopticon are similar in that all three purport to be ubiquitous, all-seeing, and all-knowing. However, God and the Panopticon are part of a larger system that employs the gaze as surveillance, in order to discipline the masses. Also, God and the Panopticon are active looking subjects, whereas the dead mother/father is passive. The gaze of God and the Panopticon emanates from a centralized source. Obviously, the absolute gaze of God predates that of the Panopticon, going, as it does, at least as far back as the origins of monotheism. The gaze of God was part of a larger system of surveillance and discipline whose most recent incarnation is in Christianity. The Panopticon, however, does not employ any guises. The Panopticon is, quite blatantly, a system of surveillance and discipline. Although all four gazes influence Iris and Laura to some extent, the gaze of God holds the most sway over Laura, whereas Iris is most influenced by the gaze of the absent mother/father and, later, by the Panopticon.

2.1.1. The Invisible Gaze: The Absent Mother/Father

As a young child, Iris is influenced not only by the gaze of her parents but also by the gaze of her absent grandmother: "And so Laura and I were brought up by [Grandmother Adelia]. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren't. As she was dead by then, we couldn't argue" (62). Thus, Adelia's gaze fixes them in an identity that they cannot resist because she does not reciprocate their look. Adelia's gaze makes Iris aware of herself as an object, rather than the subject that she is. Likewise, Iris' mother's gaze fixes Iris in an identity that, because of her absence, cannot be resisted. Before her death, Iris' mother asks Iris to be a good sister to Laura: "I hope you'll be a good sister to Laura. I know you try to be" (93). Iris, however, disagrees with her mother's conception of herself:

> My mother held me steady in her sky-blue gaze . . . . I wanted to say that she was mistaken in me, in my intentions. I didn't always try to be a good sister: quite the reverse. Sometimes I called Laura a pest and told her not to bother me . . . . Sometimes I hid from her, inside a hollow lilac bush beside the conservatory, where I would read books with my fingers stuck into my ears while she wandered around looking for me, fruitlessly calling my name. So often I got away with the minimum required.
>
> But I had no words to express this, my disagreement with my mother's version of things. I didn't know I was about to be left with her idea of me; with her idea of my goodness pinned onto me like a badge, and no chance to throw it back at her (as would have been the normal course of affairs with a mother and a daughter—if she'd lived, as I'd grown older). (93-4)

Iris' mother's gaze is the last memory Iris has of her. Her mother's gaze functions similar to the way the photograph operates. The death of Iris' mother leaves her with a permanent impression of Iris as a good sister. However, Iris is not a good sister, so the reality is at odds with the identity produced by the mother's photographic gaze. I would like to extend Sartre's analysis of Jean Genet in *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* to Iris.

Jean Genet, upon being caught stealing, is labeled a "thief" by his mother (Sartre, *Saint Genet,* 295). The gaze of the adult mother, in *Saint Genet* as well as in *The Blind Assassin*, is a constituent power that has transformed her into a constructed being. In labeling Iris a "good sister", her mother condemns her to that identity. Most importantly, it is the mother's *look* that crystallizes the self that Iris will become. Prior to this look, Iris is not yet anyone; she does not yet have an identity. She is a pure, acting consciousness that unselfconsciously experiences the emotions that accompany it. Once she is seen (by her mother), she becomes conscious of (and remains) what she was, but is now forced to act out this "something else." She sees herself because somebody (her mother) sees her. The difference between Iris's mother and Genet's mother is that Iris' mother sees her as a good sister, thereby creating Iris as the good-sister-that-she-(really)-is-not. Genet's mother sees him as a criminal, thereby turning him into one. The gaze of Genet's mother creates him as what he is, while the gaze of Iris's mother leaves her with a moral commandment to be something that she is not and cannot be.

Iris's mother's look affects her ability to form her own identity. Human freedom, according to Sartre, is undermined by the look of the other. My possibilities and potentiality escape me under the Other's look. The gaze of the Other establishes my identity as an object rather than the subject that I am. It robs me of my subjectivity. Iris' possible identities disappear under her mother's look, which constitutes her identity as a good sister. Her mother's gaze establishes Iris' identity as an object, that of a good sister. The gaze does not just create and invade physical spaces, but also invades and traps psychologically. "Being-looked-at forces me to apprehend myself as the object of the Other's unknowable appraisals, of value-judgments, and these value judgments affect me"

(Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 358). Likewise, being looked at forces Iris to apprehend herself as the object of her mother's value-judgments. Upon doing so, Iris disagrees with her mother's judgments: "I didn't always try to be a good sister: quite the reverse" (93). However, Iris has no means of conveying this disagreement to her mother. Iris' attempts to create a resistance are futile. Her mother judges her as a good sister. These judgments affect Iris because she feels obligated to adhere to them upon her mother's death. Thus, her mother's gaze traps Iris in the identity of a "good sister."

Iris' father, Norval Chase, also acts as a constituent power that crystallizes her identity. After her mother's death, Norval Chase asks Iris to look after Laura, should anything happen to him. Iris then experiences another disintegration of her potentiality as she experiences herself being-looked-at by her father: "His one blue eye assessed me, as if speculating about whether I could be depended on. I lifted my chin, straightened my shoulders. I wanted desperately to deserve his good opinion" (101). While Iris previously felt resentment and jealousy towards her mother, she readily agrees to the same request from her father. Instead of resisting the look of the Other, as she did previously, Iris now wants to fulfill the expectations, the value-judgments that come from the look of the Other. For the moment, she willingly participates in the disintegration of her freedom in order to gain the Other's approval. Her reaction, I believe, is different towards her father's look because, unlike the case of her mother's look, she gains something from fulfilling her constituted identity. However, this promise of reward still does not succeed in regulating Iris' behavior. On her tenth birthday, Reenie bakes Iris a cake. Initially Reenie fears it may be too soon after their mother's death, but "life had to go on, so maybe the cake wouldn't hurt" (142). When Laura finds out that the cake may

hurt Mother's feelings, she asks Iris if their mother is watching from heaven. Iris, instead of reassuring Laura, becomes "obstinate and smug" and doesn't tell. Laura then refuses to eat the cake, so Iris eats both of their pieces.

Iris' wavering between her self (selfishness) and her self-as-constituted-by-the-gaze-of-her-parents (protectiveness) is the only constant in her relationship towards Laura. Iris reluctantly agrees to marry Richard in order to ensure Laura's future. She does so under the belief that she is playing the role of the good sister. "What [my father] was saying was that unless I married Richard, we wouldn't have any money. What he was also saying was that the two of us—me, and especially Laura—would never be able to fend for ourselves" (226). The death of both their parents leaves Iris under the domination of a constant, unseeing gaze that she can no longer reverse or turn back on itself. As a result, Iris feels chained to the identity solidified by this gaze, often oscillating between resistance to and fulfillment of it. She has no other viable alternatives; all her other possibilities have disappeared. She has only a reactive sense of identity. The result is a feeling of bitterness that results in her superficial attempts to look after Laura. For example, on the Queen Mary, Iris, clearly seeing that Laura is troubled, tries to ask her what is wrong. Laura, however, refuses to tell her. Iris persists, " ' I promised Father I'd take care of you,' I said stiffly. 'And Mother too.' . . . Laura took off her sunglasses, but she didn't look at me. 'Other people's promises aren't my fault,' she said. 'Father fobbed me off on you. He never did know what to do with me—with us. But he's dead now, they're both dead, so it's all right. I absolve you. You're off the hook' " (378). Laura's attitude towards the gaze of the absent mother and father differs from Iris'. Iris constantly feels plagued and constrained by these gazes, and by trying to live up

to the identity they have constituted, whereas Laura feels no obligation towards them. According to Laura, Iris should not feel beholden to them anymore because they are dead. (She may also be hinting that Iris' capacity to fulfill this role is hindered due to her figurative blindness.) Laura refuses to let the gaze affect her. She is the ultimate arbitrator; she is the one who ultimately determines her future, her identity. Laura refuses to be turned into an object through the gaze. According to Laura, their parents no longer have authority over Iris; she no longer has to obey the promises she made to them. Iris, on the other hand, constantly feels the presence of their parents' gaze, *especially* since they are dead. Her present actions do not change their view of her, her goodness remains "pinned on [her] like a badge." This results in a feeling of guilt, stemming from her failure to live up to this perception of herself. It is this unalterable identity that bothers Iris the most, because her failure to fulfill this identity leaves her empty and "bereft", with no viable alternate identities.

2.1.2. The Invisible Gaze: God

Being the more devoutly religious of the two sisters, it then logically follows that Laura is more influenced by God and his gaze. As a young child, Laura becomes frightened of God after their mother's death. She fears that God has punished her and worries about God's potential to see all. "[Laura] began to fret about God's exact location. It was the Sunday-school teacher's fault: *God is everywhere,* she'd said, and Laura wanted to know: was God in the sun, was God in the moon, was God in the kitchen, the bathroom, was he under the bed? . . . Laura didn't want God popping out at her unexpectedly" (137). Laura's need to know God's exact location stems from a fear that motivates a strategy she devises in order to escape God's look. She believes that she

can avoid God and escape his wrath if she can pin down his physical location. However, this strategy is problematic because she never knows when God may appear: "Probably God was in the broom closet . . . but she couldn't be certain whether he was there at any given moment because she was afraid to open the door" (137). Since God does not have a precise physical location, Laura never knows when she is being watched. This physical ubiquity is similar to how the Panopticon operates. Since Laura does not know whether she is being watched, she must therefore be on good behavior at all times in case God looks in at her. Laura's fear of God allows her to be disciplined by his gaze. Laura makes pacts with God in order to allay her terror and to escape his wrath. These pacts depend on a belief in God's absolute vision, for if God does not see the sacrifice you make, how would he otherwise know about it? And, consequently, how would he reward it? As a child, Laura tries to drown herself in the Louveteau River, falsely believing that her sacrifice will make God bring her mother back to life. As a young woman, Laura makes a fatal bargain with God: she tells God that she will succumb to Richard's sexual advances if he saves Alex. God, however, does not come through with his end of the bargain. Despite the fact that Christian believers usually behold God's gaze as protective as well as judgmental, the novel finds even this belief in a benign redeeming quality of the gaze to be ruinous. This incident will be discussed more in detail later in the section.

To be disciplined and influenced by God requires belief in his existence. While Laura is clearly influenced by God's gaze, the gaze holds little influence over Iris, as she increasingly doubts his existence. Iris is influenced by the absolute gaze of God only once during the course of the novel, the night of her acceptance of Richard's marriage proposal.

> What I was experiencing was dread, but it was not dread of Richard as such. It was as if the illuminated dome of the Royal York Hotel had been wrenched off and I was being stared at by a malign presence located somewhere above the black spangled empty surface of the sky. It was God, looking down with his blank, ironic searchlight of an eye. He was observing me; he was observing my predicament; he was observing my failure to believe in him. There was no floor to my room: I was suspended in the air, about to plummet. My fall would be endless—endlessly down. (228)

Iris feels God's gaze only in the aftermath of a crime or punishment. The absolute gaze of God, however, fails to regulate her daily behavior. What fear Iris does experience does not result in her conversion to Christianity, nor does it even cause her to believe in God. Instead it disappears, it does not "persist in the clear light of morning" (228). As a young child, the most immediate influence on Iris is not the gaze of God, but the gaze of her absent mother; as a young woman, the Panoptic gaze exerts more influence in terms of discipline and regulation.

2.1.3. The Invisible Gaze: The Panopticon

The last of the three scopic structures that dominate *The Blind Assassin* is that of the Panopticon, a surveillance system that disciplines and regulates behavior. Scopophobia, the fear of being seen by anyone, is most pervasive in the narrative of the two lovers, Iris and Alex. In fact, the secret to the Panopticon's power is the fact that *anyone* can be the gazing subject at any time. Initially a prison surveillance system, the Panopticon was designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. Its structure consisted of a central tower, from which the inspector could view the prisoners in the cellblocks; the cellblocks formed a ring around the tower. Inside each cellblock were two windows, one looking in and the other looking out, thereby allowing the inspector in the tower to see the silhouettes of the inmates inside. Michel Foucault examined plans for the Panopticon while he was studying the process by which the gaze became

institutionalized and inscribed in social space (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*). The Panopticon's architectural design, Foucault said, allowed for a total and individualizing surveillance whose absolute look extended the old religious preoccupation with God's sight. Although it was impossible for the gazing subject to look at everyone all the time, the power behind the Panopticon's influence lay in the possibility that anyone could be looking in at anytime. The mere presence of a being with the potential for seeing and objectifying prisoners is enough to invoke fear and vulnerability so that they conform to the modes of morality inscribed and enforced in the prison (Angelina Vaz 36).

Under the inspecting gaze of the Panopticon, each individual undergoes a process of interiorization in which he internalizes the gaze to the point that he is his own overseer and exercises surveillance over and against himself. Foucault argued that the Panopticon's surveillance is administered diffusely via various social institutions. In the novel, family and class concerns are the prime mechanisms that institute this internalizing monitor. On Iris' excursions with Alex Thomas, the presence of an Other (from the "society" class of which she is a member) with the potential to see is enough to instill fear in her. However, the presence of a potential Other does not succeed in disciplining her. Iris undergoes the process of interiorization. In Alex's company, she often feels as if she is being watched. She feels vulnerable to the look of others. And while the Panopticon does not succeed in preventing her from seeing Alex altogether, it does succeed in regulating the time she spends with him. Over time, though, Iris learns to outmaneuver the Panopticon, through disguise and lying. However, neither Iris' heightened awareness of being watched nor her avoidance of the Panopticon results in a keener sense of sight.

As Iris makes the transition from childhood to adulthood, the Panopticon supplants the gaze of the absent mother as the more influential look. It could be argued that the replacement of the mother's gaze by the Panopticon results in Iris' failure to live up to the identity constituted by the mother's gaze. After all, Iris' initiation into the awareness and fear of the Panopticon occurs at the moment of sisterly betrayal. In any case, it is clear that the Panopticon is the look that dominates Iris' married life. She does not trust any of the servants in Richard's house: "They regarded me with distrust, which I reciprocated" (319). Winifred also drops in frequently and uninvited, a movement similar to that of the Panopticon inspector. Iris never knows when she will be in the house. "[Winifred] made me increasingly nervous. She was in and out of the house constantly; I never knew when she might appear, popping her head around the door with a brisk smile. My only refuge was the bathroom, because there I could turn the lock without seeming unduly rude" (319). Iris soon finds other ways to avoid Winifred's inspecting gaze. She leaves the house under the guise of going shopping, thereby escaping the gaze. Instead of shopping, though, she wanders around the streets of Toronto. It is during one of these aimless walks that she runs into Alex Thomas. This reunion, documented in "The hard-boiled egg", sets into motion their love affair, during which her fear of the Panopticon is fully manifested and eventually overcome.

Iris' fear of being seen is so acute that the presence of a potential Other is enough to regulate her behavior, or at least the time she spends with Alex. Angelina Vaz points out the connection between Foucault's analysis of the potential Other and Sartre's studies on the look. Sartre argues that the "look" can be manifested by an infinite number of objects: the rustling of branches, the sound of a footstep. While these objects are not the

look, they do represent the eye and body as support for the look. They manifest not only the look but also the probable existence of an unknown gazer. By the middle of the novel, it is obvious that Richard and Winifred are not the Panopticon. Instead, they represent only two of the many possible gazers in the Panopticon. Iris' constant fear of being watched by a probable Other reveals the extent to which she has internalized the inspecting gaze. It is Iris, more than anyone else, who exercises surveillance over herself. As she walks away from the picnic on Queen Street, she feels the apples on the tree "watching her like eyes" (13). In the next chapter, "The park bench," Alex tries to placate Iris' fears, telling her that no one she knows is around, to which Iris ominously responds, "You never know when there will be . . . . You never know who you know" (18). Iris continually polices herself, regulating her time spent with Alex. In order to prevent the Panopticon from catching her, Iris must always stay one step ahead. She must be alert, she must exercise caution, she cannot draw attention to herself. In other words, Iris must exercise the Panoptic gaze over herself in order to prevent being-looked-at by another. Acting as Panopticon over herself, however, results in a heightened paranoia because it makes her feel more vulnerable than she really is. Lying in bed with Alex, Iris exercises the inspecting gaze over the room:

> The room is darker now, yet she sees more. The bedspread heaped on the floor, the sheet twisted around and over them like a thick cloth vine; the single bulb, unshaded, the cream-coloured wallpaper with its blue violets, tiny and silly, stained beige where the roof must have leaked; the chain protecting the door. The chain protecting the door: it's flimsy enough. One good shove, one kick with a boot. If that were to happen, what would she do? She feels the walls thinning, turning to ice. They're fish in a bowl. (111-12)

Iris' gaze first acts like the camera, surveying the minute details of the room. One of these details (the chain protecting the door) triggers the Panoptic gaze, causing Iris to

study her situation from the perspective of the inspector in the tower. In other words, the vulnerability Iris feels is a result of her occupation of the central tower. She does not realize that, at this moment, there is no Other. (At least, there is no Other who is standing outside, looking in on them. Alex Thomas himself is a probable Other, but he is not threatening in that sense.) The only Other present is Iris' projection of herself onto a central, penetrating gaze. Iris feels that no room is protected from the gaze of the Panopticon, because she does not realize that she has interiorized it, so it follows her and disciplines her everywhere. However, the Panopticon is *not* all-knowing; its specular process, like that of all people, is subjective. Iris does not yet realize that their room, like the "sunless sea" in Xanadu, is out of the Panopticon's realm of visibility.

The realization that the Panoptic gaze is subjective enables Iris to overcome her fear of it, namely through disguise. Martin Jay points out that Foucault's obsession with the dangers of the Panopticon blinded him to the micropractices of daily life that subvert its power. Iris engages in several of these micropractices in the novel. She initially, tentatively, subverts the gaze by lying. She lies to Richard, Winifred, and their servants, telling them that she is shopping, when, in fact, she is meeting Alex. However, as the novel progresses, Iris learns to rely on disguise in order to avoid having to lie. She learns to adjust her mannerisms, her facial expressions: "And so she's stuck doing a cloak-and-dagger number without a cloak. Relying on her face alone, its guile. She's had enough practice by now, in smoothness, coolness, blankness. A lifting of both eyebrows, the candid, transparent stare of a double agent. A face of pure water. It's not the lying that counts, it's evading the necessity for it. Rendering all questions foolish in advance" (260). Under the guise of confidence and poise, Iris is able to defy the Panopticon, to

render herself opaque to the Panoptic gaze. Through disguise, Iris is able to conceal herself from the Panoptic gaze, because, through disguise, she discovers that the Panoptic gaze is not all-knowing or all-seeing. The scopic process, even for the supposedly absolute Panopticon, is subjective. The intentions and expectations of the viewers determine what they see. This realization enables Iris to subvert it.

As the narrative progresses, Iris' insight into the biased process of the Panopticon reduces her paranoid fear of being watched. In the Top Hat Grill, where she meets Alex before he goes off to Spain, Iris looks around, casually commenting: "Still, here they are, sitting at one of its booths, like real people . . . . What she'd like to know at the moment is why they're eating out. Why they aren't in his room. Why he's throwing caution to the winds" (358-59). Although Iris is self-conscious of being seen with Alex in public, this scene is not characterized by the paranoid fear that dominates the earlier portions of the narrative. Iris is starting to realize that all vision, even the Panopticon's vision, is subjective. She knows that no one looking in this restaurant will be able to identify her, socialite wife of Richard Griffen, because they would not expect to see someone like her in this type of restaurant. They would only see a woman in a restaurant. In her last meeting with Alex, Iris masters physical disguise: "She's worn her summer-weight raincoat from two seasons before, pulled a scarf over her head. The scarf is silk but it was the worst she could do" (458).

Once Iris realizes how and where the Panopticon is likely to look, she is able to maintain a higher level of discretion. She knows that she should exercise greater caution in places where she is recognized. Thus, when she is on the lookout for Alex's story, she is careful not to touch or look at them. She finds it in her pharmacy store by scanning

through the shelves with her eyes. She then goes to a train station and buys the magazine there, contending that "it would never do to start rumours, by strange behaviour of any kind at all" (399). Also, during her last meeting with Alex, they go to a hotel. It is risky, but when they enter, Iris realizes that no one would expect them to be anything but unmarried, or if married, then not to each other. The hotel's surroundings, therefore, disguise them from the all-knowing gaze. Iris hopes that they think Alex is paying for her, so that she would be unnoticed, "unremarkable" (458). Rather than allowing herself to succumb to the fear of a probable Other, Iris reassures herself of the success of their disguise. Instead of occupying the position of the all-knowing inspector and exercising the gaze against herself, Iris tries to occupy the point-of-view of the unaware Other. This point-of-view, she reassures herself, is colored by the surroundings and by the Other's own preconceptions. In doing so, Iris no longer allows paranoia or fear of the Panopticon to control her.

In Iris' last meeting with Alex, desire overcomes fear of the Panopticon. Previously, the Panopticon—or rather, fear of the Panoptic gaze—regulated the time they spent together: "I have to [go]. They'll be looking for me. If I'm overdue, they'll want to know where I've been" (13). However, Alex's absence increases Iris' yearning and desire for him; so much that, upon his return, her desire to see him triumphs over her fear of getting caught. She is still worried about being caught, but her desire to remain in his presence overrides her inclination to leave: "He sleeps for three hours. The sun moves, the light dims. She knows she ought to go, but she can't bear to do that, or to wake him either" (461). When Iris finally leaves, she is still able to deceive the Panoptic gaze. However, she is only successful because she has taken care to conceal herself during

previous reconnaissances. If she had continually allowed desire to overcome her fear, she may have aroused the Panopticon's suspicions and may eventually have been caught.

Although Iris acquires the ability to subvert the Panopticon, these techniques do not result in a more keen sense of sight. In fact, the iris is the part of the eye that does not see. Laura tells Iris that, while playing hooky, she has seen Iris walking around in the streets; Iris, however, did not see her. Additionally, while watching Iris from his room's window, Alex comments that Iris looks around too obviously to see if anyone is watching. This gesture causes other people to notice her. "Now she's stopped as if on cue; she gazes around in that dazed way she has, as if she's just wakened from a puzzling dream, and the two guys picking up the papers look her over. *Lost something, miss?"* (252). Iris' constant fear of being seen, therefore, does not result in her experiencing an enhancement of sight. Instead, her fear of being seen seems to blind her. Fearful that anyone may be watching her, she sees no one. Her fear of being seen also, paradoxically, causes her to be seen.

I would like to re-emphasize that the purpose of the Panopticon is to regulate behavior through surveillance. The fact that one can be viewed at any moment should be enough to prevent one from breaking the rules. However, in Iris' case, surveillance does not cause her to adhere to society's typical moral standards. Instead, it is her transgression of these moral standards that make her more sensitive to the Panopticon's gaze. Surveillance simply makes her more cautious about covering up her transgressions. In fact, the presence of the Panopticon encourages Iris' wayward behavior: "Lately she's had the sense of someone watching her, though whenever she recoinnoitres there's nobody there. She's being more careful; she's being as careful as she can. Is she afraid?

Yes. Most of the time. But her fear doesn't matter. Or rather, it does matter. It enhances the pleasure she feels with him; also the sense that she's getting away with it" (261). Thus the fear generated by the Panopticon provokes Iris to see Alex more. It does not prevent her from seeing Alex. Iris' subversion of the Panopticon's supposedly absolute gaze not only enhances her pleasure with Alex, but it also gives her a sense of power. The presence of the Panopticon encourages Iris to transgress moral standards. Her burgeoning awareness of the Panopticon's deficiencies (namely, that is not absolute) gives her a sense of pleasure in defying it. Additionally, the Panopticon does not know about her defiance. The Panopticon (in the form of familial and class surveillance) still thinks it maintains control over her when it does not. This illusion of its control makes transgression appealing to Iris.

The Panopticon also manifests itself in a different form in Iris. Besides exercising the gaze against herself, Iris also exercises the gaze upon others, particularly in the rooms where she and Alex meet. In Laura's novel, Iris often feels as if she is trespassing in the various rooms. She is also possessed with the desire to look through these rooms and their belongings, as well as Alex's. Her voyeurism places her in the position of the inspector in the central tower.

> She never manages to overcome her sense of transgression in these various rooms—the feeling that she's violating the private boundaries of whoever ordinarily lives in them. She'd like to go through the closets, the bureau drawers—not to take, only to look; to see how other people live. Real people; people more real than she is. She'd like to do the same with him, except that he has no closets, no bureau drawers . . . Nothing to find, nothing to betray him (253).

Here, a reverse panoptic process occurs. Instead of shielding herself from the Panoptic gaze, or viewing herself from the central tower, Iris becomes the center from which the gaze emanates. She becomes master of the situation. As the Panopticon, Iris exerts

surveillance over the rooms, their belongings, the people who live in them. Alex, however, escapes the gaze of the Panopticon. This reverse process differs from the actual Panopticon in that Iris' gaze, her look, is surreptitious. That is, the people she spies upon (including Alex) are unaware of being surveyed. Iris conducts surveillance under disguise; she would like them (namely, Alex) to think that she is trustworthy. Iris' surveillance does not serve as a mechanism to regulate behavior; rather, she seems to use the inspecting gaze to gain knowledge, to see how people live, to see "where [she and Alex] stand" (253).

I will now turn to the relationship of other characters in the novel, namely Alex and Laura, to the Panopticon. Like Iris, Alex is aware of the dangers of the Panopticon. However, Alex realizes the not immediately apparent shortcomings of the supposedly absolute Panoptic gaze: he knows that its gaze is subjective and limited. He does not constantly look over his shoulder in fear that he will be caught. He also realizes that one who is constantly afraid of being watched will, ironically, be watched because of the attention he draws to himself. Since the Panoptic gaze is embodied in a human, its gaze, therefore, like that of all humans, is not objective. The Panoptic sight is also influenced by subjective instincts, preconceptions, and beliefs. Subjectivity manipulates what one sees. Since the Panopticon is not all-knowing, it therefore does not have a direct, unmediated access to the world. Alex realizes this. Since Alex knows the Panoptic gaze is subjective, he too realizes the effectiveness of disguise as a way of avoiding the gaze. In the chapter entitled "The lipstick heart", Alex tells Iris not to worry about people seeing her because "[t]hey'll only see the car. This car is a wreck, it's a poor folks' car. Even if they look right at you they won't see you, because a woman like you isn't

supposed to be caught dead in a car like this" (25). Likewise, in "The messenger", Alex's request for Iris to look outside the window is met with reluctance. In response to Iris' worries, he tells her, "It's all right. They won't know you. They'll just see a woman in a slip, it's not an uncommon sight around here; they'll just think you're a . . . woman of easy virtue" (120). Seeing is subjective, colored by one's preconceptions. No one will "see" Iris—in other words, no one will recognize her because they will not expect to see her in that context.

Alex is more skilled than Iris in eluding the Panopticon, which gives him a sort of advantage over her. At times, he takes a perverse pleasure in watching her fear: "He doesn't mind her nervousness: he likes to think he's already costing her something" (17). However, Alex too is vulnerable to the Panopticon and the fears it generates. He has not mastered the Panopticon in any sense because he continues to hide from it. He does not trust his friends in the Communist party and eventually abandons them all. Just as Iris fears being seen by Richard, Winifred, or someone who will recognize her, Alex fears being seen by the police: "He thinks he was spotted once, on the street: recognized. Some goon from the Red Squad, maybe. He'd walked through a crowded beer joint, out the back door" (260). Alex's gesture in the picnic photo also signals, if not a fear of the Panopticon, then an awareness of its dangers. Additionally, in the chapter titled "The messenger", he falls prey to the suspicion that someone may be spying on them. Overall, however, Alex avoids being discovered by the Panoptic gaze because he is cognizant of both its dangers and limitations.

Laura, on the other hand, is openly defiant towards the Panoptic gaze. Her disregard for the Panopticon first manifests itself in Port Ticonderoga, in her public

strolls through town with Alex Thomas. At first, Laura is not aware that her behavior is improper. Neither is she aware that it draws, from a certain perspective, unwanted attention to her. When confronted by Reenie and Iris, Laura refuses to back down.

> "People are talking," said Reenie: always her clinching argument.
>
> "That is their own concern," said Laura. Her tone was one of lofty irritation: other people were her cross to bear. (200)

Laura's dismissal of Reenie and Iris' concerns indicates a dismissal of the Panopticon in general. She does not care about the attention her behavior generates; she does not care if society finds her actions improper. The Panopticon does not regulate Laura's behavior, either. After this confrontation, Laura is even more openly defiant of the Panoptic gaze. She flouts the rules; she no longer simply forgets them, as earlier. She deliberately continues to go out in public and ignores onlookers. "As the days passed I came to feel that Laura was making a fool of me . . . . Once I saw her with Alex Thomas, deep in conversation, ambling along past the War Memorial; once at the Jubilee Bridge, once idling outside Betty's Luncheonette, oblivious to turning heads, mine included. It was sheer defiance" (200). At private school, Laura "[makes] no secret of detesting it" (330). Her poor academic performance and her absences are deliberate acts of resistance. Unlike Iris, who opposes the Panopticon through avoidance and disguise, Laura opposes the Panopticon through open defiance: she manipulates the gaze to challenge social conventions, to resist the imposed expectations of society on her.

Laura's open defiance of society and of the Panoptic gaze reveals a fortitude and independence that is, at first glance, commendable. At one point, Iris speaks admirably of Laura's open disregard for the opinions of others: "I cared what people thought. I always did care. Unlike Laura, I have never had the courage of my own convictions"

(203). Although Laura's spirit and defiance of the Panopticon are admirable, they have deadly implications for her later in the novel. Laura's flouting of conventions makes her vulnerable to the look of the Other. The look of the Other, Sartre says, causes the death of my possibilities. As my possibilities escape myself, I become an instrument for the Other. My possibility, he says, is that I will either become an obstacle for the Other, because my actions will compel him to new acts, or I will, under the look of the Other, become a means for the Other, in which every act I perform against him can on principle be for the Other an instrument which will serve him against me (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 354). This happens because there is indetermination in the Other's look: the Other clearly sees me, but I cannot apprehend the Other in the clear vision of what he will make out of my act. In her open defiance of the Panoptic gaze, Laura does not realize that she gives Richard the information he needs to blackmail her in the future. Her walks with Alex Thomas are acts that are performed against the Other. Laura mistakenly presumes this Other to be Iris and Reenie. She does not realize that the Other can be anyone. The Other (embodied in Richard) finds a way to use this act as an instrument to serve him against Laura: he threatens to put Alex in jail if Laura refuses his sexual advances. In defying Reenie and Iris' wishes, Laura does not realize that the Other could be anyone, that anyone in the present and future could use this information against her. Laura's open defiance of the Panopticon, therefore, results in her exploitation and subsequent downfall.

Laura's attitude towards the Panopticon is not the only factor that causes her death. Equally at fault (that is, excluding external factors such as Richard and Iris' blindness) is her belief in God and in his absolute gaze. Laura consents to Richard's

blackmail on the faulty premise that doing so will allow God to protect Alex: "It was horrible, but I had to do it," she tells Iris. "I had to make the sacrifice. I had to take the pain and suffering onto myself. That's what I promised God. I knew if I did that, it would save Alex . . . I kept my end of the bargain . . . and it worked. God doesn't cheat" (487). However, Laura unpleasantly discovers that God *has* cheated her, or rather, her faulty belief in God and the power of his gaze has caused her to suffer unnecessarily.

Successful defiance of the Panopticon can occur only if the Panopticon is not aware of it. In order to subvert the Panoptic gaze, one must realize that it, and the system that produced it, cannot be changed. Open defiance, like Laura's, will not result in change, but will simply provide an instrument for the Other to use against them. Open defiance requires a kind of naive belief, an optimism that things can be changed. Iris' fear of the Panopticon, as opposed to fear of the absolute gaze of God, is representative of the shift in the twentieth century from religion to technology as a means of discipline and surveillance. Also, Iris' survival and Laura's doom reveal the faultiness of relying on God, and on God's omnipotent gaze as a source of discipline. It also reveals the faultiness of believing in a benign component of the gaze. While Laura suffers for her defiance of the Panopticon, Iris, the atheist, benefits from Laura's defiance because it brings her in contact with Alex Thomas. Upon accepting Richard's marriage proposal, Iris fears she is being punished by God. However, she soon realizes that the Panopticon, not God, is to be feared in the modern world. This realization enables her to create an alternate, unseen world hidden from its gaze. She is able to seek solace in her meetings with Alex and his stories of Sakiel-Norn. Laura, on the other hand, because of her failure to realize the Panopticon's dangers and because of her unwavering belief in a righteous

God, is victimized by Richard, Winifred, and even Iris herself. Contrary to Iris' initial belief, she is not punished for failing to believe in God; rather, Laura is punished for defying the Panopticon. Successful defiance of the Panopticon requires that the rebel realize and work within its dynamics. It requires an ultimate mistrust of the look. It requires pessimism and doubt in the redemption of humankind. As Angelina Vaz points out, the rebel must realize that no reliance can be placed on any single individual, including God (Vaz 42). In the structure of the Panopticon, there is no absolute point. Thus, each person is watched by all or certain of the others, resulting in an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust. It is this mistrust that governs our actions and our relations with others, because, in a world where the logic of vision determines the nature of our lives, only through mistrust are we able to survive.

2.2. The Lover's Gaze

Occupying the other end of the spectrum of the look, opposite from the Panopticon, is the lover's gaze. While the Panopticon is the epitome of mistrust, fear, and malevolence in the look, the lover's gaze should be the embodiment of all that is benign and gentle in the look. However, *The Blind Assassin* does not echo this sentiment, choosing instead to align itself with Sartre's views. In fact, the novel most closely mirrors (no pun intended) Sartre's theory of the look in its treatment of the look between the lovers. Sartre saw no redemptive qualities in the look. Even the interaction between lovers, the most reciprocal of human relations, is dominated by a power struggle. The mutual glances of tenderness between two lovers cannot overcome the frightening dialectic of subject and object that Sartre posits (Martin Jay 292). Although the primary

interaction between lovers is tactile, desire has a visual component as well: "I am possessed by the Other, the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculptures it, produces it as it *is*, sees it as I shall never see it. The other holds a secret—the secret of what I am" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 445). According to Sartre, desire is the yearning to possess the subjectivity of the Other, appropriating him or her as flesh. Lovers are engaged in a mutual dialectic of possession. The lover wants the beloved's freedom *first and foremost* (ibid., 452), to possess it entirely for himself. The result is sado-masochism acted out through a contest of gazes. Whatever triumph the lover may have in possessing the freedom of the beloved through the look, however, is short-lived, because objectification cannot completely extinguish the subjectivity of the object.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the look between lovers, likewise, is treated with mistrust. It is when the lover's eyes are closed that he is the least threatening. However, Atwood extends the dynamics of the lover's gaze beyond the mere battle of wills posited by Sartre: the lover's gaze also functions like a photograph to aid memory, and as a blinder that selectively excludes in order to maintain the romance. Nevertheless, both manifestations of the lover's gaze are insufficient and fail to satisfy the viewing subject *because* of their visual basis, thereby reinforcing the novel's thematics regarding the decline of sight and the failure of vision to achieve reconciliation.

Sartre's theory of the look between lovers is directly appropriated in the chapter titled "The tango." While on her honeymoon, Iris comments on the contest of gazes performed by a pair of professional dancers who do the tango: "As for the dance, it was more like a battle than a dance. The faces of the dancers were set, impassive; they eyed

each other glitteringly, waiting for a chance to bite. I knew it was an act, I could see that it was expertly done; nonetheless, both of them looked wounded" (245). The dancers perfectly illustrate Sartre's theory of the look as a hostile contest of gazes. Neither dancer conceals his or her efforts to possess the other through the gaze. In the end, however, neither succeeds. There is another dimension to this gaze, however. The battle of gazes between the dancers is supposed to be an act; in other words, the battle of the look is supposed to be artificial. However, as we see, by the end of the dance, "both of [the dancers] looked wounded" (245). The look is dangerous because it is not always subject to human control. Instead of the subject controlling, regulating, and determining the object of his look, the look ends up controlling and determining the subject. Despite the dancers' best efforts to keep the specular process an act by merely performing the aggressive look, the look winds up ensnaring them in its ongoing power struggle. One can never escape the fundamental power struggle embedded in the look. This is similar to the subjectivity of the specular process. When we look at things, we cannot control our emotions and how our emotions, perceptions, intentions shape what we see. We cannot look without judging, even if we try, because there is no look that does not judge.

In Laura's novel, the gaze between the lovers takes on a more benign, although ultimately no less disturbing, form. The ability of the look, even between lovers, to unsettle signals a mistrust of the look that transcends all else. This mistrust affects human relationships in that sight generates suspicion and distrust between people. Vision threatens the stability of the relationship. I mentioned that Alex is the least threatening to Iris when his eyes are closed: "*I've missed you,* he might say. Or: *I can't get enough of you.* His eyes shut, grinding his teeth to hold himself back; she can hear it against her

neck" (262). Alex is the most open, the most forthcoming, when his eyes are closed. Iris also waits until his eyes are shut to ask him about matters of importance. Sartre would argue that doing so prevents her from being constituted by Alex, that it allows her to maintain some freedom. Iris finds Alex's gaze threatening, not only in its desire to possess but also in its disinterested inspection. In one scene, Alex's gaze functions as a photograph. He is memorizing her, he says. This gaze makes Iris uncomfortable, and resentful of her loss of freedom, she puts her hand over his eyes. "She didn't like being examined like that. Fingered" (123). One can never completely possess the other through a look because the subjectivity of the other prevents it. The other's subjectivity gives him or her the power to resist the look, even to reverse the look back upon the viewing subject. Additionally, the lover's gaze is particularly disorienting because of its detective-like nature. Alex's gaze is devoid of tenderness and affection, taking on the function of a camera or Panoptic gaze instead. His look is described in tactile terms: "fingered." What is disconcerting about the look is its capacity to take on the properties of other senses. Sight performs the role of touch here, but it still maintains distance, it still maintains the subject/object distinction. Although the sense of touch is the primary contact between lovers, the infusion of this sense into the disinterested, inspecting gaze of the look is perceived as threatening because it gives sight a totalizing perception that it does not possess. Memory is Alex's reason for employing this gaze: "To have you later . . . Once I've gone", to which Iris responds, "Don't. Don't spoil today" (124). Alex's unnatural use of the eye as photography is also unnerving. Photographs, as discussed earlier, invoke a sense of trauma associated with a lost past. By employing the gaze as

photograph, Alex draws attention to the ephemerality of the moment. Now becomes then, even when it is now.

Another example of Alex's use of the look to possess occurs when he requests Iris to stand at her window. "I want you to," he says, when asked why. "I want to make sure you're safe, he adds, though safety has nothing to do with it" (23). Alex tries to mask the true reason for his request with a pretense of concern. The reader can infer that he wants to derive pleasure not only from looking, but also looking without the possibility of being-looked-at. Since Iris will not be able to see him ("[I'll be] under the tree," Alex tells her. "The chestnut. You won't see me, but I'll be there" (23), she will not be able to reciprocate or reverse the look upon him. She will be, in a sense, "in the spotlight." This inability to reciprocate the look places Alex in a position of maximum power and surveillance. He is free to judge her, to constitute her by his look. Iris, however, is not free. She must stand there and "perform" for him. Additionally, Alex's position here is very similar to the inspector in the central tower of the Panopticon. He can look without being looked at. Alex occupies the position of the pure subject, one who claims the right to look without being looked at. The looking object, Iris, will be aware of the presence of a probable Other. When Alex tells her where he will be waiting, Iris realizes that he has in fact been exercising surveillance over her—or if not her, then her surroundings. "She thinks, He knows where the window is. He knows what kind of tree. He must have been prowling. Watching her. She shivers a little" (23). This realization produces a sense of anxiety. Thus, the inspecting gaze, even when emanating from the eye of the lover, fails to transcend the frightening dialectic of subject and object posited by Sartre.

However, Atwood extends Sartre's dialectic of the look one step further. Atwood concedes Sartre's point that the contest of gazes is frightening and cannot be overcome through love. However, she also explores our dependence on the visual. Even though the look is frightening, equally frightening is when the look fails us. In *The Blind Assassin,* the visual fails to hold on to, to possess the lover. Even the photograph, the most stable medium onto which the look can fixate, frustrates attempts to possess the lover through the look. Prior to Alex's departure to Spain, Alex sees Iris' face "waver" in front of him like a "reflection in a troubled pool" (360). Alex cannot capture her face through his look, which then leads him to resort to touch to reassure himself of her presence: "A soft and milky glow surrounds her; the flesh of her arm, where he's held it, is firm and plumped. He'd like to grab hold of her, haul her up to his room, fuck her six ways to Sunday. As if that would fix her in place" (360). Alex tries to overcome the distance of sight through touch. Likewise, in Alex's absence, Iris has a hard time trying to reconstitute her memory of Alex through sight.

> Now he's still in focus, at the far end, each detail distinct—eye, mouth, hand—though tremulous, like a reflection on a shivering pool. But her mind can't hold him, she can't fix the memory of what he looks like. It's as if a breeze blows over the water and he's dispersed, into broken colours, into ripples; then he reforms elsewhere . . . taking on his familiar body. Around him is a shimmering. (412-13)

Here, the lover's gaze is not so much a manifestation of power dynamics as it is a manifestation of sentimental yearning. The look, the visual fails to recover and repossess what has been lost. Iris' attempts to reconstruct Alex's image are shaky and tremulous. Her mind can recall his features, but it cannot sustain them. She cannot find a stable medium onto which she can project her memory of Alex because vision itself is not stable. Thus, Iris' attempts to remember Alex through vision are futile. Iris cannot fix

her gaze on Alex: like the sublime in the photograph, he escapes her, his image disperses and reforms beyond her reach of visibility. Vision cannot represent the whole of Alex; it cannot represent the whole of a person or experience. Additionally, Alex's fragmentation is representative of the fragmentation of self, drawing attention to the illusion of a unified, coherent self. Alex's fragmentation demonstrates that there is no unified self prior to vision or language, that vision, language, and other senses form and constitute one's self. Iris' failure to reconstitute Alex as the object of her gaze demonstrates the instability not only of the visual medium, but also of a memory that depends on the visual medium and even of the object itself that sight and memory try to grasp.

Even though the look disturbs, more disconcerting is the lover's failure to return the look. The inability to reciprocate the look is more unsettling than the look itself, despite all the negative valences embedded in the look. After Alex's death, he comes back to Iris in her dream. His features are first described: "She can see the dark eyebrows, the hollows of the eye sockets, the smile a white slash across the oval of his face" (468). Alex's eyes are absent, giving him the appearance of not only a skull, but also of a blind person. In this dream, it is not the lover's gaze that is disorienting, but the lover's inability to look: "He isn't looking at her, not at her exactly; it's as if she is her own shadow and he's looking at that. At where her eyes would be if her shadow could see" (468). Whereas Alex was previously able to gain pleasure from a hidden subject position, Iris cannot gain pleasure in the same position. She needs him to reciprocate her look because she needs the Other's look to constitute her identity. "[The Other] sees [my body] as I shall never see it. The other holds a secret—the secret of what I am" (Sartre 443). Iris feels that Alex's look is the only way to make her feel complete; it is the only

thing that can complete her reconciliation with him. She also needs the power struggle behind the look, because it allows her to form her identity through adversity. Otherwise, she will be trapped in one identity with no means of fighting back, as in the case with her parents' gaze. In this dream, Alex's image takes the form of a photograph. His skin is greyish and half-toned; he is described as "two-dimensional, like a photograph, but smudged" (468). Although Alex comes back in a medium that supposedly allows for total fixation by the look, he still manages to elude the look. Once Iris discovers that the look does not bring the fulfillment she desires, she tries to find fulfillment through touch. Touch, however, also fails: "She longs to touch him, but she hesitates: surely if she were to take him in her arms he would blur, then dissolve, into shreds of cloth, into molecules, into atoms. Her hands would go right through him" (468). Instead of enhancing experience, adding another dimension to the experience of sight, touch would destroy the object. Alex's image then morphs, his eyes growing into vertical slits, his skin shining like tin. This change frightens Iris: "He isn't what she remembers. Everything that made him singular has been burned away" (468). Alex's subjectivity disappears, thereby allowing for total possession by the look. This possibility, however, frightens Iris. Since Alex's subjectivity has been extinguished, he cannot reverse her look. Iris' perception of him, therefore, is subject to her emotions and expectations: her fright transforms her perception of Alex from a lover to a threatening creature. Alex tries to counter this fright, tries to help her overcome the hindrance of sight by commanding her look: "Look at me, he says . . . . But she can't. She can't focus on him, he won't stay steady. He's indeterminate, he wavers, like a candle flame but devoid of light. She can't see his eyes" (469). This scene extends Sartre's dialectic of the look between lovers. Iris wants his

look; she wants him to look back, despite the threats embedded in it. The dream is reminiscent of the Greek myth in which Orpheus tries to bring his wife back from the underworld. He is told not to look at her until they reach earth. However, he cannot resist, and as they are climbing up the tunnel, he turns to look back at her. She then disappears back into the underworld. The look in Iris' dream is also used to repossess the lover. The look is used to confirm the existence of the lover. The difference between these two stories is the effect the look has on the viewed object. In the Greek myth, the look causes the object to disappear. In *The Blind Assassin,* the look, having total possession over the object, is able to transform it. However, Iris finds that even extinguishing subjectivity (which allows for total possession by the look) is unsatisfactory. The looks exchanged between Alex and her are misdirected; they fail to catch each other's eyes and thereby cannot "see" each other. This dream demonstrates less the frightening power struggle behind the look and more the failure of the look to remember, repossess, and satisfy one's desires. The look fails to possess not because of the inability to reconcile human freedom with the desire to possess, as Sartre suggests, but because of the visual medium on which it relies. A person is more than what is constituted by sight, what "meets the eye", so to speak. Iris needs to find alternate ways to remember Alex, ways that are not based on sight. In fact, this dream demonstrates the need for a new perception of the world that is not sight-based, for it is the only way that one can escape from the simultaneous pull and repulsion of the look.

While the look fails as a means of reconciliation between lovers, there is also the danger of looking too much. The lover's gaze is also selective, which reinforces the subjective nature of the look. The lover's look fashions the other in his or her image,

filtering out details that do not correspond with the image of the lover. The lover also regulates the look of the beloved: "He's oddly reticent about such details—what goes on in his life when she's not there. Perhaps he feels it might diminish him in her eyes, to know too much. Too many sordid particulars. . . . Romance is looking in at yourself, through a window clouded with dew. Romance means leaving things out: where life grunts and snuffles, romance only sighs" (261-2). Sight, as manifested in the lover's gaze, constitutes reality. Sight creates what one sees, it does not refer to a pre-existing reality. The look, when emanating from the eye of a lover, fashions its object as the lover. This type of look poses another danger, but it is not just as a power struggle or as an unsatisfactory means of connecting with the lover. Instead, the new danger of the lover's gaze would be to remove its selective filters and see too much. The lover's gaze has the potential to over-possess; as in the tango scene, it has the potential to veer out of the viewing subject's control. "The danger would come from looking too closely and seeing too much—from having him dwindle, and herself along with him. Then waking up empty, all of it used up—over and done. She would have nothing. She would be *bereft*" (262). The look, therefore, has the power to deny, to empty. While one aspect of the lover's look is unable to satisfy, another aspect of the lover's look results in over-satisfaction. The result, however, is the same: the desire to repossess the lover through the look is frustrated.

The lover's gaze, therefore, has three components: the power struggle, as posited by Sartre, reciprocation of the look as fulfillment (which works counter to the power struggle), and the fashioning of the Other into the lover. In *The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood explores the implications of the lover's gaze beyond the dynamics posited by

Sartre. The novel does reinforce some of Sartre's ideas: the lover's look, like all looks, causes the object's freedom to disintegrate. However, the lover's look contains more components outside its implication in power struggles and contests of wills. The lover's gaze is, paradoxically, mistrusted and desired. Both components of the gaze fail to satisfy and repossess the lover, however. Additionally, the lover's gaze is also selective, constituting reality and the lover himself. The impossibility of possessing the lover through the look, of finding fulfillment through the look does not simply stem from the inability to reconcile human freedom and possession, but it also stems from the instability and unreliability of a visual medium to grasp what is inherently stable. The only way to transcend the frustration and dissatisfaction that results from the pull-to-repulsion-from cycle of the lover's gaze is to form a new perception of the world that is not based on sight.

Chapter 3: Literal and Figurative Blindness: The Blind Assassins

3.1.0 Introduction

We have seen that sight is not to be trusted in *The Blind Assassin*—neither when the vision in question belongs to the Other, nor when it is one's own. The look of the Other has a malevolent quality: it traps people, it takes away their freedom, it constitutes their identities. More importantly, sight, as manifested in memory, photographs, mirrors, and the Panopticon, is unreliable. Sight does not name a pre-existing reality; rather, it creates and constitutes its own transient reality. The look fails in many aspects, including fulfillment and restoration of memory. The failure and unreliability of sight leads the author to posit blindness as an alternative. The failures of a sight-based reality could be ameliorated by blindness. Blindness takes several forms in the novel: the literal form, as seen in the blind carpet weavers of Sakiel-Norn, in Norval Chase's blind eye, and in nearsightedness. However, blindness exists on the figurative level in Iris herself. The two forms of blindness that will be discussed in this chapter are the literal blindness of the carpet-weavers and Iris' figurative blindness.

An understanding of Jean-François Lyotard's theories on blindness will help illuminate that topic as it works in the novel (Lyotard, *Figure Foreclosed*). Lyotard's work investigates the Jewish taboo against graven images, which, according to him, derives from a certain conception of the family. Images and sight are associated with the mother, whereas language and hearing are associated with the father. While the Greek and Christian traditions search for visual plenitude and reconciliation with the mother through an image-laden form of sublimation, the Jewish tradition prohibits such a form of recognition as incestuous and therefore its taboo on images remains on the side of the

father. This prohibition is so strong that the prospect of reconciliation has been completely ejected, or foreclosed, from the psyche. This foreclosure results in a hostility to images, except for the image of the word. Foreclosure differs from repression in that it does not allow the problematic to reside within the unconscious. Repression displaces the problematic, condensing it into neurotic symptoms that are amenable to transferential projection and an ultimate solution. Foreclosure, however, has no tolerance for the problematic in the psyche and thus casts it out. With foreclosure, there is no solution, no reconciliation. The result is a hostility to images that is expressed in psychosis. However Lyotard sees the "malady" (psychosis, and the blindness resulting from it) as much more liberating than the "cure" (the search for visual plenitude) because foreclosure liberates us from the vain hope of reconciliation. Reconciliation can never be achieved. If we realize the impossibility of reconciliation, we free ourselves from the frustrations and disappointments that accompany our attempts to attain such a goal. *The Blind Assassin* echoes much of Lyotard's work. For example, Lyotard's examination of the wandering Jew causes him to conclude that blindness creates history, which is similar to the conclusion that Iris comes to by the end of the novel. Within the context of *The Blind Assassin,* Laura's belief in God and in reconciliation is what causes her exploitation and subsequent downfall.

3.1. Literal Blindness: The carpet-weaver children

The most prominent image of blindness in the novel is represented in the blind carpet-weaver children of Sakiel-Norn. Sakiel-Norn's greatest export, Alex tells Iris, is its carpets, which are "so soft and fine you would think you were walking on air, an air made to resemble flowers and flowing water" (22). Children are employed to make these

carpets, since only their hands are small enough to handle the intricate details of the carpets. The close labour demanded of the children, however, causes them to go blind by the age of ten. (Carpets, also, are assigned value based on the number of children they have blinded.) After they are blinded, the children are sold off to brothels, where their deft touch makes them high in demand. Some children escape from the brothels and become assassins.

As assassins, the blind children are also highly sought after: they kill very softly, their sense of hearing is acute, they can walk without sound, squeeze through small openings, and can smell the difference between a deep sleeper and one who is restlessly dreaming. Their other senses are heightened in order to compensate for their lack of sight. The children, when they are still able to see, are aware of their fates. However, this knowledge does not seem to bother them. "The stories the children whispered to one another—while they sat weaving the endless carpets, while they could still see—was about this possible future life. It was a saying among them that only the blind are free" (22). This statement, at first glance, may seem paradoxical. The children, one might argue, are not free: they are not free to decide their futures. Instead, their blindness causes their futures to be decided for them. A slightly perverse argument might claim that the children's blindness frees them from being constituted by the look of the Other and frees them from the illusory anarchic world of ever-receding images. And, taking into account Lyotard's theory, it can be argued that the children's blindness frees them from any misguided hopes of reconciliation.

According to Sartre, the effect of the "look" is the collapse of my universe. The act of being looked at involves the alienation of myself and the world *I* organize. Under

the look of the Other, my possibilities and potentiality escape me. The presence of the Other alters my perception of reality. The Other acts as a restraint on my freedom. However, the Other's imposition is successful if and only if the sense of reality of the object-being-looked-at is based on vision. The carpet-weaver children's blindness allows them to escape the look of the Other, and therefore the Other's potential to alter their perception of reality. In fact, their blind condition has already caused the children's possibilities to disintegrate. The look of the Other following their blinding has no effect on them. Their reality is not based on vision; instead, it is organized around and built upon their other senses. Since their identities and realities are not sight-based, the look fails to trap them into an identity or alter their realities, and vision does not perpetually condemn them to a kaleidoscopic world of illusion.

The children are free from what Lyotard terms the "vain hopes" of reconciliation. In other words, since their futures are pre-determined, they are free from any illusory visions of happiness. In the novel, Iris laments the sad fates of the children. By virtue of their blindness, the children's future possibilities are limited. They either become prostitutes or assassins, futures that are both lamentable from Iris's (and, to be fair, most of society's) point of view. However, from another point of view, knowledge of their fates actually works to the children's advantage. If one accepts Lyotard's claim that sight-based notions of reality center around visual fulfillment and reconciliation with the mother, then one could say that the blind children can never experience reconciliation because they have no access to sight. Additionally, their blindness determines their futures. However, blindness enables them to "see" the notions of reconciliation and

happiness for the illusions that they are. Blindness allows them freedom within their seemingly constricted futures.

Alex's story of the blind assassin demonstrates the benefits of blindness and the deficiencies of sight. This blind assassin is hired to kill a sacrificial virgin as part of a larger plot to overthrow the king of Sakiel-Norn. The blind assassin and the girl, however, fall in love. Though blind, this particular assassin has mastered the subtlety and nuances of language. The two of them decide to escape the Temple. As they are running away, the blind assassin realizes that the girl's ability to see will slow them down: "They're in darkness. He knows this by the way the girl stumbles, and it occurs to him for the first time that by taking her with him he'll be slowed down. He'll be hampered by her ability to see" (267). Sight is no longer the noble sense it was once considered to be. Instead, it becomes a hindrance and an obstacle. The blind assassin knows his way around the Temple by touch and smell; he does not depend on sight (or light) to guide him. The blind assassin's other senses are sharpened—these senses constitute his reality. His reality is not based on the contingencies of vision. This is an advantage to the blind assassin because, as I have already established, sight is an unreliable means of perceiving the world. Sight is always influenced by subjectivity; it is impossible to divorce the two. As a result, sight does not provide a direct, unmediated perspective on the world. Sight also takes place at a distance; it does not come into direct contact with the world. Touch and smell, however, are more fundamental senses than sight. Although neither provides a direct unmediated perspective on the world, they do, unlike sight, come into direct contact with the world, and the reality that they provide is, perhaps, more reliable (though no less real) that that constituted by sight.

3.2. Figurative Blindness: Iris, the Blind Assassin

Like the carpet-weaver children, the frivolous details of Iris' life "blind" her to her surroundings. However, while the blind children of Sakiel-Norn have compensated for their blindness by enhancing their other senses, Iris remains blind and fails to see important clues (Stein 145). Another difference between Iris' blindness and the children's blindness is that while the children's physical blindness endows them with transcendent sight, Iris' figurative blindness prevents her from acquiring transcendent sight. Since Iris' perception of the world is still based on vision, she also, unlike the children, subscribes to a belief in fulfillment and reconciliation—though perhaps not as ardently or steadfastly as her sister. (In fact, Iris' narrative devices blind the reader, much in the same way that she herself was blinded, and justify her actions.) Iris' blindness is established early in the novel, when, as a child, she fails to notice Mr. Erskine's sexual advances towards Laura. Iris' blindness also demonstrates the unreliability of appearance, because, to all appearances, she seems to be the more practical of the two sisters. Laura is considered "vague" and "feckless." "You don't know what anything costs," Iris tells Laura at one point, commenting, "It was like explaining arithmetic to a bird" (237). However, practicality and perception are not synonymous. Indeed, practicality often seems to *blind* Iris to the true nature of things. Iris cannot believe what Laura tells her about Mr. Erskine for two reasons: Laura says it very calmly, and also because it seems like an unlikely action for Mr. Erskine. "[W]hat she'd described was so implausible. It didn't seem to me like the sort of thing a grown-up man would do, or be interested in doing at all, because wasn't Laura only a little girl?" (165). Iris' father brings her along to Toronto for his business meetings with Richard Griffen. He tells her that he needs her there to

"take notes"; Iris mistakenly believes that he needs her there for support: "I believed I was there just so he could have someone with him—for moral support. He certainly needed it. He was thin as a stick, and his hands shook constantly" (224). Iris' practicality prevents her from realizing that these excursions are in fact a set-up for Richard's marriage proposal.

> "Richard will be asking you something," said Father to me. His tone was apologetic.
>
> "Oh?" I said. Probably something about ironing, but I didn't much care. As far as I was concerned Richard was a grown-up man . . . . He was well on the other side of being interesting.
>
> "I think he may be asking you to marry him," he said.
>
> We were in the lobby by then. I sat down. "Oh," I said. I could suddenly see what should have been obvious for some time. (226)

Additionally, Iris' practical reasons for marrying Richard blind her to his true nature. When she tells Laura that she has her eyes open, Laura responds, "Like a sleepwalker," thereby calling attention to Iris' figurative blindness.

Laura constantly calls out Iris' blindness in describing her as "sleeping." Iris is colored blue in the photographs because, according to Laura, she is "asleep" (195). In normal sleep, one's eyes are closed. One is blind to the outside world. However, sleep takes one into a different world, a world outside the gaze of the Other. The world in sleep and dreams is outside the visibility of the Panopticon, just as the "pleasure-dome" and the backstreet rooms are outside the Panoptic gaze. Iris' sleeping state not only indicates her blindness to her surroundings, but also to her extended retreats into those worlds. "Sleeping" is dangerous because the world it creates is ephemeral; it does not create an alternate permanent escape from the Panoptic gaze. (Physical blindness, like the carpet weaver children's, however, does create an alternate permanent space because

it forces them to perceive the world in a different way.) Instead, it is only a temporary haven, from which the return to the Panoptic space is inevitable. The danger of staying in this temporary world is that it blinds the dreamer to the goings-on in the physical world around her, the space that is dominated by the Panoptic gaze.

Iris' feelings towards Alex and her affair with him are examples of what Lyotard would call "foreclosure." In the beginning, Iris denies (to herself and to the reader) her feelings for Alex. Instead, she covers up her interest in him by pretending to be a good sister to Laura. When she first sees Laura talking to him at the picnic, she sits down with them because "[it] seemed the best thing to do, in order to protect Laura" (176). She represses the notion that she might have a romantic interest in Alex. At the dinner, she seats Alex Thomas next to her, and puts Laura at the other end of the table, also purportedly to protect Laura: "That way, I'd felt, he'd be insulated, or at least Laura would" (183). Iris admits that she does want Alex's attention, which is why she asks for a cigarette—"He looked hard at me, which I suppose was what I 'd wanted" (177)—and why she tries to argue with him: "If he said yes, I intended to disagree with him, because I wanted his attention. He was talking mostly to Laura" (189). However, Iris shies away from any overt declaration of love or attraction to Alex. She hides these confessions by telling Reenie that she doesn't like Alex (178). After the button factory fire, Laura tells Iris that she has been hiding Alex in the cold cellar. Iris then plays the role of the good sister, telling her that she will take care of Alex.

> [Laura'd] been living on her nerves, carrying around this immense weight of knowledge like some evil packsack, and now she'd handed over to me she was free to sleep.
>
> Was it my belief that I was doing this only to spare her—to help her, to take care of her, as I had always done?

Yes. That is what I did believe. (211)

Iris denies her other, ulterior motive for assuming responsibility over Alex Thomas, which is her attraction to him. Assuming responsibility for him will bring her closer to him. Instead of openly admitting to herself and to the reader her sexual attraction to him, she sublimates it into a responsibility. In doing so, Iris blinds not only herself but also the reader to her infatuation with Alex.

Iris' repression of her feelings for Alex is very similar to the Jewish foreclosure of reunion with the mother through vision. While castration anxiety is the reason behind such a violent ejection of the image, guilt and sisterly betrayal lie behind Iris' violent denial of her true feelings. Her ejection and denial of these feelings result in a kind of blindness that affects her subsequent actions towards Alex. On the day when Iris sees Alex on Queen Street, she unconsciously begins to cross over to him on the street. "Was this a betrayal, or was it an act of courage? Perhaps both. Neither one involves forethought: such things take place in an instant, in an eyeblink. This can only be because they have been rehearsed by us already, over and over, in silence and darkness; in such silence, such darkness, that we are ignorant of them ourselves" (321). Iris' crossing over to Alex, thus, is not seen as a purposeful act. It is, instead, an acting-out that does not know (Lyotard, *Jewish Oedipus,* 44). It does not involve forethought. Iris' reasons for seeking Alex out (i.e., her sexual attraction to him) have been foreclosed from the realm of the auditory and visible, rehearsed in such "silence" and "darkness" that she herself is unaware of it. She has so strongly ejected these feelings from her psyche that she cannot immediately determine her true motives for reaching out to him: "Blind but sure-footed, we step forward as if into a remembered dance" (321).

Iris' affair with Alex also colors her perception of (and blinds her to) Laura's troubles. Her affair hypersensitizes her to the guilt she feels from betraying Laura. (It could be argued, though, that Iris' "betrayal" is in fact her resistance to her mother's gaze, which recreates her as the good sister.) Since Iris interprets the world through this lens, she at least partially attributes Laura's defiance, anger, and moodiness to mourning over Alex Thomas. "I put all this down to old grief—to mourning, for Avilion and all that had happened there. Or could she still be mooning over Alex Thomas?" (379). Iris is blind to the fact that Laura's distress may stem from another source. In fact, Iris not only fails to interpret Laura's troubles, she also misses clues from Richard that signal towards his attraction to and pursuit of Laura. She catches Richard looking at Laura at odd moments, but misinterprets this looking as a quest for approval: "What he wanted was her approval, her admiration even. Or simply her gratitude" (381). On the Queen Mary, Richard disappears for long periods of time and often appears upset. Iris assumes that it is because the trip is failing to provide Richard with the social contacts he desires: "He was disgruntled, I decided, because this trip wasn't working out the way he'd planned" (377). Iris does not even consider that his frustration may be due to his foiled attempts to pursue Laura. At Avilion, Iris also misinterprets Winifred's response when she asks Winifred why she did not feel like joining Richard and Laura on the Water Nixie. "There was an odd tone to [Winifred's] voice, which I mistook for jealousy: she did so like being on the ground floor, in any project of Richard's" (394). Iris discovers later that it is on the Water Nixie that Richard blackmails Laura with information about Alex Thomas' whereabouts. Winifred's tone, thus, is not representative of jealousy, but rather of apprehension. Iris, however, fails, to borrow a phrase from the memoir, "to put two and

two together." Prior to Laura's confinement at the BellaVista clinic, Iris acknowledges that her affair with Alex Thomas has blinded her to Laura's troubles: "I'd smelled tobacco on [Laura] . . . and something else: something too old, too knowing. I ought to have been more alert to the changes taking place in her, but I had a good many other things on my mind" (425). And when Laura is sent away to the clinic, Winifred tells Iris that Laura claims she is pregnant. Iris, in trying to figure out the reasons, does not even consider the possibility that Richard could be the father. Instead, her affair with Alex, her feelings of guilt, and her knowledge that Laura also loves Alex colors her perception, and in fact, limits her ability to "see" the truth: "And if Laura had been telling the truth, then Laura was pregnant . . . . As for the father, whether imagined or real, there was only one man who was at all possible. It must be Alex Thomas" (441). Iris cannot imagine that Laura could be involved with someone against her will; her perception of Laura as stubborn and strong-willed does not allow her to "see" other possibilities.

Blindness has tragic consequences for both the children and Iris: the children must live as prostitutes or assassins, while Iris' blindness to Richard's rape of Laura, to Laura's coded messages inadvertently leads to Laura's suicide. However, the tragedies caused by blindness, it is argued, are beneficial in that they free one from illusions of happiness. The blind assassin in Alex's story is not the only one in the novel: Iris is also a "blind assassin." Iris' inherent blindness is further impaired by her involvement with Alex Thomas. This blindness results in her misguided perception that Laura and Alex Thomas are romantically involved. When Laura comes back after the war, she tells Iris that she *was* pregnant, and upon Iris' prompting, tells her that if Iris doesn't already know the father, then she cannot tell her. Iris comes to the following conclusion: "I supposed it

must have been Alex Thomas. Alex was the only man Laura had ever shown any interest in—besides Father, that is, and God. I hated to acknowledge such a possibility, but really there was no other choice" (486). It is under this assumption that Iris then spitefully reveals to Laura her affair with Alex Thomas, a revelation that literally "pushes" Laura to her death.

> "Laura, I hate to tell you this," I said, "but whatever it was you did, it didn't save Alex. Alex is dead. He was killed in the war, six months ago. In Holland."
>
> The light around her faded. She went very white. It was like watching wax cool.
>
> "How do you know?"
>
> "I got the telegram," I said. "They sent it to me. He listed me as next of kin." Even then I could have changed course; I could have said, *There must have been a mistake, it must have been meant for you.* But I didn't say that. Instead I said, "It was very indiscreet of him. He shouldn't have done that, considering Richard. But he didn't have any family, and we'd been lovers, you see—in secret, for quite a long time—and who else did he have?"

Iris' actions and words here are also an acting-out that does not know. Iris' revelation causes Laura to realize the worthlessness of her sacrifice, and the faultiness of her belief in God and his absolute gaze. Although Laura has the capacity to "see beyond", like the blind children, Laura, unlike the blind children, still clings to an illusory belief in reconciliation. (We have already seen that, according to Lyotard, this belief is dependent on vision. Only by relinquishing vision can one relinquish hopes for reconciliation.) As a young girl, Laura believes that her sacrifice (i.e., drowning herself in the Louveteau River) will allow God to bring her mother back to earth. Her sacrifice for Alex is based on a similar and equally faulty logic. This premise assumes that one's actions will be reciprocated and rewarded; it is a premise based on the hope of reconciliation. However,

one's actions are not always rewarded, as Laura shockingly discovers. Laura's needless sacrifice demonstrates the ultimate cost of believing in an ideology based on vision.

Blindness, Iris concludes in her epilogue, is preferable to sight. "How could I have been so ignorant? she thinks. So stupid, so unseeing, so given over to carelessness. But without such ignorance, such carelessness, how could we live?" (517). Although Iris laments the calamity created in the wake of her blind actions, she also acknowledges its virtue. Blindness allows us to live; it is from the consequences of blindness that stories are formed. The logic is very similar to Lyotard's theory of Jewish ethical blindness. Lyotard argues that foreclosure of castration leads to a relinquishing of reconciliation: "This is the price that has to be paid if history is to begin . . . . Historicity presupposes foreclosure, and the renunciation of compromise, myth and figure . . . a face to face encounter with a faceless Other" (Lyotard, *Figure Foreclosed,* 95-96). Just as Lyotard says that the wandering Jew makes history possible, so does blindness make history possible. It does so because it rejects any possible fulfillment or reconciliation, and in doing so, "acts without knowing", thereby creating stories. In Margaret Atwood's novel, Iris symbolizes the figure of the wandering Jew whose rejection of God, and therefore of a sight-based conception of reality, creates history. "It's loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road" (518).

Conclusion

The overall message of the novel is that sight is not to be trusted. Through the deployment of photographs and mirrors, Atwood demonstrates sight's unreliability. Vision is not an objective process; one continually imposes one's emotions and desires upon what one sees. Photography and mirrors are no exception to this rule. Additionally, both forms fail to capture the full range of human experience, as well as human psychology. The presence of the punctum—in the form of Laura's hand and Alex's hand gesture—demonstrates that the visual cannot adequately represent reality. There is always something, the "sublime" element, that the visual cannot decode or translate. Photographs can also be altered to change reality, to present a story that is more compelling than reality itself. Conversely, reality also alters itself to photographs, which can be seen in the studio portraits. Laura manipulates the visual medium of the photograph against itself. In doing so, she calls attention not only to the artificial nature of the photograph, but to the process of sight itself and its deficiencies.

Through the use of the idea of the invisible gaze, Atwood reveals how sight, in the form of the look, can entrap someone, cause her freedom to disintegrate, prevent her from exerting her identity. Iris, trapped in the identity of the good sister through the gaze of her mother and father, cannot form an alternate, viable identity. It is only her ultimate failure to live up to this identity (manifested in the death of her sister) that allows her to break away from these gazes. However, it could also be argued that Iris' failure to be a good sister to Laura is her resistance to the gaze that fixed her as a child. Following this logic, if we blame Iris too much for her failure as a sister, we run the risk of reading her via her mother's gaze. Additionally, the presence of the Panopticon and the absolute gaze

of God in the novel reveal not only a mistrust of sight but also the fallibility of sight-based ideologies as well as the subjective process of sight. The fact that the Panopticon can be defeated only through disguise (and not open opposition) further reinforces the negative view of sight. Sight cannot even be redeemed in the most reciprocal of interactions, those between lovers. Alex's look constantly disturbs and disorients Iris.

Touch and language seem, at first, to be the proposed alternatives to sight. It is language, after all, not sight, that causes Iris to realize Laura's sexual sacrifice. However, the process of language is similar to the process of sight in that neither names a pre-existing reality; both always refer to something else. This referential quality of language makes it as unstable as sight, which is where Atwood and Lyotard diverge. Jewish ethical blindness turns to the word of the father. Atwood, however, shows that the word can be as unstable and unreliable as sight itself. "In the beginning was the word, we once believed. Did God know what a flimsy thing the word might be? How tenuous, how casually erased? . . . Perhaps this is what happened to Laura—pushed her quite literally over the edge. The words she had relied on, building her house of cards on them, believing them solid, had flipped over and shown her their hollow centres, and then skittered away from her like so much waste paper" (490). Atwood's refusal to prioritize language over sight reflects French ocularphobic discourse, which refused to prioritize the senses.

Touch, at first, seems to be a more viable alternative to sight or hearing. Emmanuel Levinas argued that touch allowed for a more benign interaction, whereas visual relations with others foster instrumental manipulation. Indeed, Alex is the least threatening when his eyes are closed, when his hands touch Iris. Also, the use of the

hand as punctum in the picnic photograph points to a function the hand possesses that the eye does not; the eye's inability to take the place of the hand is represented in the photographic eye's failure to decode the hand. Touch, Levinas says, restores the proximity of self and other. It establishes proximity, rather than opposition. Touch entails a more intimate relation to the world, as opposed to the distance between the subject and object in sight. Additionally, touch is connected to the primacy of doing over contemplation, a doing that is more primordial and fundamental than hearing or sight. Touch is, in fact, how the blind assassin and the girl in Alex's story fall in love: "Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth" (256). Touch is also "blind", in a way, because it acts without knowing. However, touch takes on a malevolent aspect in Richard's sexual exploitation of Laura. Additionally, touch fails to satisfy. In her dream, Iris longs to touch Alex, to "clasp him in her arms", but she knows that doing so will cause him to disappear. Touch here causes the physical disintegration of the object.

Blindness, as opposed to language or touch, is thus the only viable alternative to sight. However, in Iris' stated preference for blindness, she conflates two different types of sight. Iris blurs and confuses the distinction between omnipotent, absolute sight and transcendent sight. Transcendent sight, like Laura's, could have allowed Iris to perceive, and therefore to prevent, certain events from occurring. Additionally, Iris assumes that knowledge of one's fate (enabled by absolute sight) would prevent one from living. However, in making this assumption, she misses the lesson of the blind carpet-weaver children. The blind children know their fates; yet, they do not see this knowledge as inhibiting. Rather, this knowledge liberates them because it frees them from any

delusions of happiness or fulfillment. The children's literal blindness determines, and enables them to see, their fate. Iris' figurative blindness prevents her not only from seeing her fate but also from perceiving hints and clues that could have allowed her to prevent such a fate. Iris casts this "fate" as inevitable in order to justify her blindness and her actions. In promoting blindness over sight, Iris also fails to make distinctions between the two different types of blindness. However, her assertion that blindness is what creates stories, what creates history, is correct, because, paradoxically, it is only from the devastating consequences of her own blindness that Iris can truly break free from the inhibiting identities placed on her by the gaze and become her own person.

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