A New Ontology for the Female Subject

The Rise of the Flat Character in Stories by Solvej Balle and Kirsten Thorup

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the way the literary convention of the "flat-character" is re-imagined, in Kirsten Thorup's story "Crazy Marie" and Solvej Balle's "Alette V.," as a feminist trope that disrupts modern fiction's clichéd representations of female characters. The *flat-character,* a term coined by E.M. Forster, is an undeveloped figure designated to embody "a single idea or quality." Based on the poetics of Erin Mouré that theorize the preposition as the woman's sign: "because in the language it has no power, & can't exist alone," the essay compares the value of the flat character in the hierarchical organization of the story to the place women have occupied in social and literary discourse. By shifting our focus to the power structures at work in language and the laws of art, the female flat character becomes more complex: she now works as a disruptive liminal figure between female stereotypes and multiple representations of female subjectivity.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article examine la façon dont la convention littéraire du personnage « plat » est réinventée et transformée dans la nouvelle de Kirsten Thorup intitulée « Crazy Marie » et dans celle de Solvej Balle, « Alette V., » en une figure ou trope féministe qui suspend ou perturbe les représentations, souvent clichés, de personnages féminins dans les œuvres de fiction modernes. Le personnage *plat,* terme fabriqué par E.M. Forster, est une création sous-développée conçue pour personnifier « une seule idée ou qualité. » Basé sur la poétique d'Erin Mouré qui propose que la préposition est le signe de la femme « parce que dans le langage, elle [la préposition] n'a aucun pouvoir et ne peut exister seule, » cet essai critique compare la valeur donnée au personnage « plat » dans l'organisation hiérarchique du récit à la place que la femme occupe [et/ou a occupé] au sein des discours sociaux et littéraires. En portant notre attention sur la structure du pouvoir qu'on retrouve dans le langage et dans les règles de l'art, le personnage « plat » féminin devient plus complexe : il fonctionne en tant que personnage liminal positionné entre les différents types féminins et les représentations multiples de la subjectivité féminine.

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I was born in the circus. I play the flat man.
My voice is flat, my walk is flat, my ironies
move flatly out to sock you in the eye.
("Flatman [1st draft]"—Anne Carson)

Og hun holdt altid hånden for munden, når hun snakkede, som om hun ville fange ordene med hånden, inden de kom for langt ud og kunne ramme nogen.
("Skæve Marie"—Kirsten Thorup)

By the time any reader growing up in English Canada is old enough to have her imagination organized by high school English classes, she has probably begun to learn about the differences between flat and round characters. Although a novel requires flat people as well as round, she is told, the round ones in all their freshness and incalculability are an author's big achievements (Forster 81). They are the ones to identify with—they are the most like you.

As the female reader becomes more familiar with the tragic lives of modern heroines, however, she finds it less believable that an incalculability and freshness can be found there, or that fiction will act as a mirror to her experience. Rather, she finds her experience misrepresented or not represented at all. Although such heroines are often complex and compelling, there is an over-arching predictability to how their fates play out. Their suffering contributes to the recycling of female types, and they are the sites upon which men work out the fears and desires of their particular Age. It is true that people who have been without access to public discourse (women, the poor, people of colour) have been portrayed as round characters, according to conventions of character development; however, there remains a discrepancy between the lives of people subordinated in a culture and how they have been represented in fiction. As round characters they are still projections of the dominant ideologies of the day and have confirmed, even through difference, the Ego of the privileged reader. This reveals a flaw in the prevailing assumption that the round character is, by definition, life-like. This character, as an embodiment of dominant discourse, often does not account for the many varied voices in a culture that are always threatening to rise up and puncture its skin.

Having been disappointed by the "well-rounded" heroine, female readers may become more and more curious about the possibilities of the flat character: in an act of mimicry, the usually subordinated character can take an affirmative role. Re-imagined as a specifically female figure, the flat character becomes an allegory for art's cliched one-dimensional depiction of women, while also acting as an agent for a self-conscious prose (prose that draws one to the surface or the page and thus the constructedness of characterization). This figure's potential

to "flatten" the "well-rounded" heroine, by drawing attention to the constructedness of all characters in art, gives the flat character a more complex role than it has had at any previous time: once the life-like heroine is exposed as only a bundle of codes and conventions, she can begin to be dismantled. This makes way for more experimentation with female characters in art. The suggested violence of this is important to note. As the above quotation from Anne Carson's poem suggests, a slippage in language can have a violent effect on the reader: ironically, it is not the *fat* man (round character), but the *flat* man (character) that is "striking."

E.M. Forster, who coined the terms *round* and *flat* character in *Aspects of the Novel*, uses Moll Flanders as an example of a character who is round because her experiences are true to daily life. She "gives us a slight shock…the thrill that proceeds from a living being" (66-67). However, Forster's argument for realist fiction—that Defoe delivers the hard facts of living and not the author's theory of morality (66)—does not take into account the many assumptions and biases of both author and reader on how to compose and interpret these facts.

Carson's poem suggests that what makes a character real is not the successful transfer of life to the page, but the confrontation between the reader and the page. There is still that "slight shock"; however, it now comes from the reader realizing she has stumbled on an *l* between the *f* and the *a*. Having her attention drawn suddenly to the surface of the page reminds her that characters are not simply picked from life, but made out of language. As well, because she has expected the circus character to be the fat man, the reader is made to see the part *she* plays in actualizing and re-enforcing conventional characters and stereotypes. This is the potential job of the flat character in contemporary fiction: appearing as the unexpected subject, it shakes the habits of reading and writing which makes way for further experimentation in characterization.

In this paper I will explore how contemporary women writers are making use of the flat character's potential. I will focus on short stories by Danish authors Kirsten Thorup and Solvej Balle in whose stories flat characters are given a central place. I will argue that this experimentation is relevant to feminist discourse by using Hélène Cixous's observation that a character is only a name we give to a restricting set of ideological codes (384), and suggest that the use of flat characters by Thorup and Balle allows for an almost anarchistic leveling of the codes that make up the conventional female heroine. I will then argue, backed by the poetics of Canadian poet Erin Mouré, that there is a hierarchy to the various components of a literary work and that by redistributing the value given to these components these authors allow for new ways of reading female characters.

If the reader pursues her niggling suspicions, she may be lucky enough to unlearn what her early education taught her about the relationship between life and fiction. Cixous points out in her essay, "The Character of Character," that characterization is not simply a transference of subjectivity to the page, because

a character is always produced by a restriction of the imaginary. (By "the imaginary" Cixous means material "that is subordinate to" but also "enters into and supports" the symbolic. We can think of it as a kind of disruptive but creative subconscious activity.) This restriction is usually made by a consciousness "which conventionalizes, evaluates, and codes so as to conform to set types, according to cultural demand" (384). Forster unwittingly exemplifies this "aegis of masterdom" (384) when he discusses the battle that goes on between an author and his characters. He comments nervously about the unruliness of characters, remarking that they are often "engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book" and that if they are given complete freedom they will "kick the book to pieces" (72). This seems to suggest a fear of the "imaginary," as it is conceived by Cixous. Forster needs the author to be the master of the text, and so asserts that a character must be entirely knowable by the author (69), a recognizable figure to identify with and an agent to govern art in all its familiar, privileged forms: that which, when combined, Cixous calls the "visible, delimited, framed [and] comforting stage" (387).

When considering the difference between people in life and people in books, Forster bases the division between them on the observation that "a novel is a work of art, with its own laws, which are not those of daily life, and that a character in a novel is real when it live in accordance with such laws" (69). However, because Forster does not question who has made, and what defines, these "laws of art," this term "real" becomes problematic. Forster says a character is "real" when its novelist "knows everything about it" (69). However, Forster's author does not interrogate his own limits of knowing—how his own "character," the subjective position he writes from, is also controlled by a greater authority: the language and concepts of the dominant ideology. The language we use in life, and the language we confront in art carries the same biases and ideology. To separate the laws of art from those of life, relieves the author from interrogating his role as a go-between. As Erin Mouré points out, the argument for this separation-of-worlds comes, curiously, "mostly from those whose norms are most transparently reflected in the social order" (1994 18). By once again not addressing the biases of the author or reader, Forster allows the cultural norms to remain unchallenged which, in turn, allows the laws of art to remain static, and the writer and reader to remain "locked up in the treadmill of reproduction" (Cixous 387).

Forster tells us that characters are real because they are convincing; however he fails to closely examine *how* a character becomes convincing (69). Of course, a character is convincing to a reader because it fulfills the laws the reader has learned from society, not just art. As Mouré tells us, "writing is always and forever a social practice. The varying discourses in a society either shore it up or challenge it. And 'discourse' isn't something you walk away from when you set down your pen" (1994 18). The laws of art and life have always been mixed, and form a contract between reader and writer which, as Mouré suggests, is a collaboration

that should be constantly questioned and re-examined. Forster never stops to ask which group of people is being convinced by the "real" character; we should be aware that what is considered real is something "that women have never inhabited as whole beings; it has never been formed by [their] desire" (1988 92).

Therefore, to create a figure in fiction that is real and convincing to members of a female audience, we must not look only to the talent of the writer who can convince through the unproblematized "rules of art," but also to a writer who makes evident in her character formation the difficult contract real women have been forced to forge with the Symbolic: "the order of discourse" (Cixous 384). Women, in their relationship to discourse, resemble the flat character in its relationship to the text: it is the devalued figure whose meaning is understood only in relation to others; while everything in a story tends to move around a round character, the flat character is there only to serve the round one (Forster 71-81).

However, while the round character may appear to have more power in a story, its importance depends upon the guarantee that it is ultimately knowable, and to that extent subservient to the author and reader (Forster 69). The flat character, in its staunch refusal to be rounded out, is free from such finitude—and, like a devalued historical individual, has the ongoing exciting potential to rise-up and challenge social, linguistic or aesthetic convention. In its flatness, it reminds us of what has been left out of the story and that, as Mouré puts it, "language [is] a collection of assumptions…a whole collection of paradigms, and there's no real rootedness in it apart from context, from what you do with it" (Denisoff 128).

Erin Mouré has compared how a sentence is organized with how citizens are placed in a culture; by doing this she reminds us that in Western Literature not only subject matter, but also form and style, have been cultivated predominantly by a male tradition. This essay will extend, to the realm of fiction, Mouré's argument about the semantics of the poetic line. For Mouré, the culturally devalued parts of language are female: "as if the preposition is the woman's sign because it is relational. But it can't get anywhere, because in the language it has no power, & can't exist alone" (1988 97). The hierarchy in our social structure is mirrored in the way we read a sentence: we read for nouns and verbs first. Their relationship to each other is where the "so-called 'power' of language resides" (1988 93). I suggest that there is also a hierarchy at work when one arranges or analyzes the elements of a story: setting and plot conventionally rely on, and so are subservient to, the characters that occupy them or push them forward, respectively; and round characters are generally valued over flat ones.

Forster reinforces this hierarchy when he suggests, in his playfully condescending tone, that flat characters are servants to the author, that "they are very useful to him [and]…have not to be watched for development" (74). While round characters are described as having hearts and minds, flat characters are "little luminous discs of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither" (74).

Forster's rhetoric clearly shows that levels of power are involved when we talk about how a story is organized, and that he thinks an author must try to maintain authority over his characters.

Mouré proposes that we disrupt conventional language structures by making the disempowered (female) elements central forces in a work. By re-arranging the hierarchy, one may "change the weight and force" of a language. This will not "*necessarily* make a women's speaking possible" but, Mouré suggests, "to move the force of any language, create a slippage, *even for a moment*" will at least expose that language's aim is always toward convention and cliché and this must constantly be challenged (1988 98).

In both Kirsten Thorup's "Crazy Mary" and Solvej Balle's "Alette V." we find that flat characters occupy a central position in the narrative. This is rare, and the times we have seen it before—in the novels of Charles Dickens for example—the characters have always been subservient to the author's voice (Forster 76); this is not the case in Thorup's and Balle's work. Jørgen Veisland says that Thorup's characters are marked by "an empowering solitude" which is "positively conceptualized; it is a re-construction of the Self and a purging of dependency" (100). This empowering solitude may be viewed as a direct result of their combined flatness and centrality: Forster says the flat characters "remain in [the reader's] mind as unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances; they move through circumstances" (74). We may view this arrested development as a solitude that works as a means to break away from social and narrative determinism. They refuse to grow, to appear lifelike, which is also a refusal to represent the prevailing ideologies of their Age.

This solitude revolutionizes both the role of the flat character, and the role of the heroine, and it is the key to the lure and power of Thorup's and Balle's characters. The most striking element common to both stories is the characters' lack of engagement with the social world. In Balle's "Alette V.," Alette V.'s work as a street artist requires that she be in constant contact with people—but she feels akin to no one. She is constantly travelling to major cities in cycles dictated by the seasons (not the market), and she never settles into a place she inhabits. She seems to move amongst people and objects with equal indifference and skill, never touching or disturbing things unnecessarily (1996 78-79). We never hear mention of her having lovers, family, or friends.

Marie, from Thorup's "Crazy Marie," lives alone, near the poverty line, and presumably in Copenhagen—though it hardly matters since she seldom moves outside the few blocks in which she conducts the routine of her life: from her job at the laundromat, to the flower store, to the supermarket, to home. She likes to do the same thing every day and never demands anything of others (1995 76-77). She takes lovers but does not particularly enjoy them. She is able to save money but wants nothing. Her apathy acts as a parody of Forster's flat character that has "no pleasures" and "no private lusts and aches" (Forster 73). We are told that

Marie is not hurt when guests do not show up for dinner, repeatedly. She waits for two hours and then clears the dishes away. In this way, she avoids becoming the wounded, judgmental female type who acts as the moral centre for the story. Although Marie is shocked into a confrontation with her bodily existence—her love-making is followed by a splotch of red blood that disrupts her washing and whitening routine at the laundromat—she remains a character who prefers disappearing, and she does not want to be on her lover's mind (1995 89).

As radical social outsiders, both Alette V. and Marie avoid the watchful expectations of the male gaze and the conventions of female gender performance. Their solitude (or rather, social ineptitude) has made them oblivious to the roles they are expected to fulfill as women. The rich, white-haired gentleman who is Alette V.'s final client is clearly a figure meant, at least in part, to represent the most powerful level of society and its longstanding ideologies. However, his gaze that judges Alette V. as mad and a monstrosity (1996 83) also falls upon the bronze cast Alette has made of him, which in some mysterious way exposes this tradition of power and unnerves the man of "høje alder" [great age] (1993 97; 1996 83). The dynamic between wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, is not lost on the reader, but it is not what we most remember. Instead, we recall Alette V.'s unique and antisocial goal and final act which does not allow one to view her as a victim of her gender—although her death is a parody of the representation of woman-as-object. I will return to this goal later.

Marie's oddness also saves her from stereotyping and victimization. She does not like to cook and so does not feel called upon to do more than dump a can of food on a plate when she has male company. She does not register that her promiscuity may be perceived as prostitution, or that her boss's exploitation of her is part of the stigma of being a woman in the blue collar workforce. Marie and Alette V. are so strange that we must reconsider their social remove, which we might normally read as a naivety that has led to victimization.

Female figures, especially, are expected to symbolize the hearth: the traditional site of the quest narrative that the hero departs from and later returns to, transformed. However, neither Marie nor Alette V. has any interest in making a home, and this is emphasized throughout both stories. We cannot find this symbolic centre in either narrative. Marie's apartment is littered with mis-matched furniture: lamps are hung where there is no need for them (1995 76). Alette V. takes lodgings in vacant lofts and empty warehouses, and she "fore[tager] sjældent reparationer og føl[er] aldrig trang til at forandre noget i rummene" [rarely (makes) any repairs and never (feels) the urge to alter these rooms] (1993 93; 1996 79). By its absence, the traditional site of femininity is exposed as fraudulent. Most of Marie's possessions are from her childhood and Alette V. simply leads a nomadic life, which makes it impossible to collect anything.

Both manners of living may be associated with youth, or, as previously mentioned, an arrested development that suggests an inability to evolve. This

state of arrest is useful. The developed but problematic "I" of the narrative is confronted by the adolescent "No," that echoes the reader's response to the dominant but insufficient forms of characterization. The un-homey feel of these places points to the vacuity the reader finds when he or she pokes about for some kind of female interiority (depth of character). A work that revolves around a centre, which is no centre—a metaphor that Jørgen Veisland notes, is also present in Thorup's novel *Baby*—suggests an "absence of meaning at the core of the social system" (91). In terms of Thorup's social realism, a meaningful and governing centre may be valuable, but its absence points to the fictionality of centres around which we build systems to live by, and brings us back to Mouré's position on the arbitrariness of language structures.

Marie and Alette V.'s lack of depth may be read as a parody of the passive, excluded female voice; however, their flat refusal to be whole and knowable characters also shifts attention to the liminal stage of development the modern female character is in: her state of shock, her ontological crisis. Forster says that flat characters are "constructed round a single idea or quality" (73). For our characters, that single idea is not limiting but rather assertive and persuasive: a resistance that in its succinctness draws attention to the new directions for female characters.

Marie can be expressed by the single idea: "Hun var ikke sentimental med sig selv" [she wasn't sentimental about herself] (1989 49; 1995 76). This rejection of emotion may be seen as a refusal to take on the role of romantic victim that the reader may think fitting considering Marie's circumstances. This simple line also suggests a total rejection of the female figure of the Romantic tradition that continues to influence modern writing. The social reality of Marie's situation allows a comparison to Emma Bovary, arguably one of the greatest heroines of both the Romantic and Modernist tradition. Like Emma, Marie is both partnered with a foolish man who is mediocre in his field, and seduced by a well-travelled dandy. As is the case in Emma's world, men cannot save Marie from the overpowering constraints of class and gender. Marie and Emma both challenge what the reader expects from a heroine. However, Marie has no romantic notions about herself, no imagined world. Madame Bovary has, at least, desire. Marie resists even this.

According to the Romantic literary tradition, the main solution for a heroine who indulges in passion is death. Romantic literature is littered with dead heroines who function as repeated, punishing warnings to the female reader. Marie may be seen as the embodiment of the trace that this tradition has left on the contemporary female consciousness: desensitization, and a withdrawal from the Romantic imagination. As has already been established, Marie shows complete disinterest in beauty, sensuality, and the aesthetics of the material world.

Marie's "total mangel på interesse for det materielle" [complete lack of interest in material things] (1989 49; 1995 76) may be set against Alette V.'s

disinterest in the metaphysical. Alette V. may be summed up in the idea that "Kunstner var hun ikke. Hun førte mennesker til tingenes verden" [She was no artist. She conducted people to the world of things] (1993 92; 1996 78). Alette V.'s fixation on the materials from the ground cannot be associated with the symbol of Woman-as-Earth-Goddess. Female intuition, and Woman's connection to the earth, are parodied by Alette V.'s scientific relationship to the world of things:

> Så snart hun var ankommet til [en] by…vandrede hun igennem gaderne, rørte ved en mur, mærkede gadernes skråning ned mod havneområdet, hvordan hendes krop hurtigt vænnede sig til brostenenes hældning, aflæste gadernes længde, sidegadernes beliggenhed.
> (1993 94)

> [As soon as she arrived in (a) town she took a walk through its streets; touched a wall; noted the way the streets sloped down to the harbour, how quickly her body adapted to the tilt of the paving stones.]
> (1996 79)

Her response to the world is attuned, but reduced to subtle mechanics.

She disdains any characterization of herself as a sorceress, or the suggestion that her work has to do with metaphysics, alchemy (the *symbolic* activity of turning base material into gold), or any kind of transformation other than a material one (1996 86). Alette V. is content with cheap materials and the only transformation that interests her is the way weather literally transforms the surfaces of things. The transformation she will come to undergo herself is not psychological or emotional, but physical. Her aim is the exact reversal of the Platonic ideal that everything is moving forward to a transcendence of matter. Alette V.'s life-work moves her away from the ideal and towards the real. She shows that any maker's job is to attend to her materials, to surfaces. When she attends to the formal working of bronze, she does not attempt—as men throughout history have done—to obtain immortality for herself through the hardness and durability of materials: she does not drink liquid gold or build monuments to herself. By refusing to be either sensually involved with the world, or to transcend it, Marie and Alette V., respectively, parody the ethereal/carnal binary that has formed how women are represented in the West.

It is true that both Alette V. and Marie seem like characters with the potential to be round: perhaps it is simply Alette V.'s, penchant for reason and science that makes her emotionally aloof; perhaps Marie's flat "personality" is merely a result of her repression. Marie, in particular, strikes us as a psychological character: she has an intense dream life; when she seems to be falling in love, she becomes agitated and moves outside the imprisoning routine of her life. However, while

these suggestions of depth and change occur, a change of tone in the narrating voice *does not*.

The deadpan narration in both "Alette V." and "Crazy Marie" works as a reminder that characters are not people, and that writing is not the world. Each character's frustrating refusal to be lively foils the reader's attempt to subordinate the character's world to her own. The often short, unadorned sentences and lack of emotional cues, keep the form and style in the foreground so that the tone of the story becomes the true main character. Forster's comment that the "really flat character can be expressed in one sentence" (73) can thus be understood to mean that the character *is* the sentence. There is nothing beyond the surface of the character or the page, except perhaps another surface.

The narrating voices in these stories closely resemble each other. They claim to know the thoughts of their subjects: the behaviours of the characters are closely, but dispassionately, recorded as though these stories are case studies. Though a familiarity is assumed by the narrator/psychoanalyst, the more information that is gathered about the characters, the more mysterious they become. The tone acts as an impenetrable mask and no deep secrets of the psyche are revealed. The clinical narration fuses with the flatness of the character, so that any character development becomes ironic.

This correlation between the surface of the character and that of the work itself, can be related to the Ancient Greeks' use of the tragic mask: "The mask and face were at one in their sufficiency; unlike the modern face and the modern mask, they did not owe their interest to the further realities lying behind them" (Jones 45). In both "Crazy Marie" and "Alette V." the modern, psychological sense of the mask is passed over for a re-interpretation of the Ancient Greek mask that states rather than hints or hides. It is "an artifact-face with nothing to offer but itself. It has…no inside. Its being is exhausted in its features" (Jones 45).

Marie's physical details are so absurd, so unnatural, that we cannot mistake her for a real person. Far from being a hot-blooded heroine, she is more like a puppet or a paper doll:

> Hendes læber var utrolig smukke og svulmende som en nyudsprungen rose, der var hæftet på det blege lidt udviskede måneansigt, der ligesom svævede over kroppen …Hendes overarme var tynde som piberensere, og hendes lår var smalle og hule.
> (1989 50)

> [Her lips were beautiful and full like a newly blossomed rose that had been fastened to the pale, rather indistinct, moon-shaped face that seemed to float above her body…Her upper arms were as thin as pipe cleaners, and her thighs were skinny and bowed.]
> (1995 76)

Her body is a de-sexualized stick that holds her circular mask-like face. Marie's face mocks two motifs commonly associated with idealized feminine beauty in the Romantic tradition: the moon and the rose. The face dominates the description of Marie and, like a Greek mask, seems to "surpass…nature in its lucid isolation of essentials" (Jones 45). Marie's face serves the same purpose as the Greek mask did: to present a type. It offers no hint of interiority, but rather reflects back to the world the Woman it has constructed: full, sensual, an ethereal moon-woman floating over a malnourished body.

Alette V.'s work fashioning portrait busts for the *boulevardiers* in major cities built on the European model involves her in the question of whether a mask is all surface or works to conceal a depth. Her disinterest in the lives or psychology of her clients, her renunciation of Mankind, comes with her realization that people, rather than sharing her interest in the shifting material surface of the world, "ønske[r] den hvide gips besjælet af deres egne træk og historiens ånd i forening" [want…to see the white plaster enlivened by a combination of their own features and the spirit of history] (1993 100; 1996 85). With the vanity of small-time Constantines, and a little room in their suitcases, Alette V.'s customers can see their own particular and vaguely classical faces staring back at them from the mantles of their homes (1996 85). Alette V. disdains her customers' need to see their likenesses reflected back to them in a mock permanence. The Greek mask with its surface value counters this vanity that served empirical ends; it showed "an imitation not of human beings but of action and life" (Aristotle as quoted in Jones 14).

We know much more about Marie and Alette V.'s actions than we do their inwardness (which is always suspect). Both characters are shown, in laconic description, spending an inordinate amount of time performing daily mundane acts: Marie "gik ud og børstede tænder og vaskede sit ansigt og tørrede det grundigt, så det blev varmt og blankt. Hun åbnede vinduet, rullede gardinet ned og gik i seng" [went in and brushed her teeth, washed her face, dried it thoroughly so it was shiny and warm. She opened the window, rolled down the blind, went to bed] (1989 59; 1995 82); Alette V. "klædte sig af, foldede sit tøj sammen og lagde det på en stol…Hun indstillede et vækkeur til at ringe klokken 7.42 og satte det fra sig på gulvet ved siden af sengen" [undressed, folded her clothes and placed them on a chair…She set an alarm clock to ring at 7.42 a.m. and put the clock down on the floor next to the bed] (1993 103; 1996 88). This emphasis on action over thought and feeling is in keeping with their roles as flat characters.

I have said that both Marie and Alette V. pre-figure the concept of the multi-voiced text. They are figures that mark a shift in how to view the concept of character. However, the empowering solitude, the resistance to convention that is necessary to this transition must inevitably give way to the need for community. Both stories are introduced with quotations that allude to this inevitability. "Crazy Marie" begins with the quotation: "Love will always find you

/ no matter where you hide" (D.S. as quoted by Thorup in English 49). "Alette V." is prefaced with the second law of thermodynamics: "Legemer, der befinder sig i et lukket system,/ hvor der ikke tilføres energi, vil søge mod/ større og større uorden" [Bodies held within a closed system / into which no energy is introduced / will tend towards greater and greater disorder] (1993 89; 1996 75).

The Canadian modernist writer Shelia Watson is often quoted for saying that those with no art, no tradition or ritual, are driven in one of two ways: "either towards violence or towards insensibility" (181-182). Marie and Alette V. are figures whose actions illustrate that women have little art, tradition or ritual that is informed by their desire. They have resisted the conventions of others, but they have not yet firmly established their own communities. This lack leads one to violence and the other to insensibility.

Marie kills her boss, the owner of the laundromat, by stabbing him through the neck with an awl when he threatens to fire her for leaving work for a few hours—for straying from her routine for the first time. We are told early on that no one could tell by looking at Marie that she was in a state of expectation, of preparation that "gjorde det nødvendigt for hende at leve så regelmæssigt og ensformigt som hun gjorde" [made it necessary for her to live as quietly and monotonously as she did] (1989 53; 1995 78). She has been, we are told in the end, preparing for this violent act her whole life. She is the perfect emblem of a transitional female figure—repressed by the grand narrative, and waiting. This final violent act, this hole she makes in the force that represses her, echoes what Cixous refers to as the true subject piercing the narrative (384). Marie has been having long conversations in her head with images on television and with strangers she has seen on the street. This apparent insanity, this talking in the head, may be interpreted as the subject longing for community, and awaiting the many-voiced text.

Alette V. renders herself insensible to extremes by manipulating surfaces, manipulating herself the way she would the materials of her reliefs. She becomes all mask: she uses alcohol to open her pores of her skin to the cold Quebec air; she waits for her body temperature to drop and then joins the world of inanimate things. Once Alette V. becomes "en genstand mellem rummets andre genstande" [just one object among all the other objects in the room] (1993 104; 1996 88) , we are reminded of the cool surface of a modernist painting; one thinks of Piet Mondrian who was both artist and mathematician and whose theory of art is similar to Alette V.'s: the modern impulse in a world sickened by its own images and symbols is to purge the world of metaphor. Alette V. assesses the relationship of things in the room before she lies down. Her desire—like Mondrian's—to reduce everything to simple relationships of colour and form is mimetic of Balle's style which also rejects excessive description and obvious symbolism.

Both murder and suicide happen when the characters come to understand their place and imprisonment within the social order. Once Marie's senses intensify due to love, and she notices her body has become flesh and blood (1995 86), she begins to taste death in her mouth, "en tør askesmag" [a dry, ashy taste] (1989 68; 1995 88) and feel her head (so mask-like before) turning into a skull (1995 88). The suggestion seems to be that to accept love and community one must also accept mortality. It is at this point, when Marie becomes "human," that she explosively understands her subjugation to male power, and kills the owner of the laundromat.

It is when Alette V. is inspired to make portraits out of bronze—like Marie's break in routine, something she can't go back on—that she first understands her place in the social hierarchy. Her work cast in bronze has no market value as long as she lives and sells on the street. She is suddenly forced to realize the limitations of selling her work to the upper middle-class university crowd. They see her work as a novelty, they do not share her love of the earthy world. Once this desire to change material takes over, she is no longer able to migrate. By understanding their relationships to others, by identifying with a community, by becoming slightly rounded, Marie and Alette V., ironically, come closer to entrapment.

When Alette V. plans her final act, her body's transfer into the world of objects, she asks herself: "Hvordan undgik hun, at hendes passage tog sig menneskelig ud, at den fik karakter af en oprivende og alt for menneskelig handling" [How was she to save her passage from seeming human, from assuming the nature of some tragic and far-too-human-act] (1993 101; 1996 86). Alette V.'s desire to be seen exclusively as a material form can be read as her desire to remain an element of the story—in other words, she desires to retain her flatness: she resists the empathy of the one who she imagines will find her (in our case, the reader). Once she is dead we are told that "Enhver ville vide, at brugte de ordet menneske om genstanden ved rummets ene væg, var det et udtryk for manglende præcision, en vane, en mangel på sproglig nøjagtighed" [Everyone would know that to use the word person of the object lying alongside one wall of the room would betoken a lack of precision, a habit, a want of linguistic exactitude] (1993 104; 1996 89). This "want of linguistic exactitude" is exactly the problem that faces the liminal characters of Marie and Alette V.. Marie is called "skæv" [odd] and Alette V. is regarded as "syg" or "gal" [ill or mad] (1993 98; 1996 83) for lack of better words, and due to a lack in how female experiences and desires are traditionally expressed.

However, as Veisland says of Thorup's characters in general, Marie's and Alette V.'s abnormalities and "dialogue with death" are part of "the passage leading to a new ontology, a new status for the subject" (97). Ironically, though Alette V. chooses the stony world of eternal death over the everlasting life of the spirit, we realize upon finishing "Alette V.," the last story in the collection, that it is her body that shows up in the morgue in the first story of the book, which

turns the collection into a continuous loop. Alette's death becomes a continuous life in language. This renewed sense of the flat character has agitated the habits of reading so that Alette's wish is fulfilled. We cannot mistake her for human. Rather, as an object of the imagination, the flat character can be viewed as a stiff sounding board for new ideas—a site for the possibility of an endless refraction of the subject.

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