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The Biggest Modern Woman in the World: Canada as the Absent Spouse

smaro kamboureli

June 20, 1974

Dear Momma:

... I feel I am acting out America's relationship to the Canadas. Martin is the imperial egre while I play the role of genteel mate who believes that if everyone is well-mannered, we can inhabit a peaceable kingdom. That is the national dream of the Canadas, isn't it? A civilized garden where lions lie down with doves. I did not see the difference until I married Martin. We possess no fantasies of conquest and domination. Indeed, to be from the Canadas is to feel as women feel - cut off from the base of power. Oh Momma, I am finding housewifery difficult. Why didn't you tell me it is more work than being a spieler?...YOUR ANNA (1983, p.273)

Anna is the protagonist of Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. She is the Canadian giantess who has her maidenhead ruptured by a Canadian dwarf holding an icicle (p.35); who first mates with the Canadian giant Angus McAskill - 'Aye, lass. I've been saving myself for the likes of you' (p.58); who marries the American giant, Martin Van Buren Bates - he confesses to her, only a mere five years after they get married, that he is 'not capable of manly spending' (p.297); who falls in love with and gets pregnant by a short Australian, Apollo Ingalls - 'Apollo,' [she] murmur[es], 'I am making you grow' (p.296).

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Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, published in 1983 and taking place between 1846 and 1888, is a novel that desires to be postmodern and Victorian as well as fictional and historical at the same time. This generic ambivalence of the novel is prefigured in its title. The modernity of giantess Anna Swan, the biggest woman of the world, is the analogue of the text's generic and thematic desires. Modernity as a concept in this novel exceeds the aesthetic norms we traditionally associate with modernism and postmodernism to include sexual and national politics.

Modernity in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* embraces any element of otherness that threatens the doxa of established forms of society, sexuality, art, and national unity. It forces the categories of gender, genre and politics in Guattari's and Deleuze's words 'into the sphere of extremes' (xvii), producing thus

an economy of discourse whose only defining measure is what resists the logic of numbers and of boundaries. Anna's own gigantic size is the yardstick of that kind of economy. P.T. Barnum, at whose museum of freaks in New York she reaches the height of her fame, bills her at 8'1", but Anna admits that she is 'definitely less. In New Annan, my mother told friends I was 7'9"... I put my height at 7'11½". It's an educated guess' (p.8). Later on in the novel, Apollo attempts to persuade her that she is shrinking. These and other measuring discrepancies, including those of the length of her birth canal - is it 17", 22" or a mere 12"? - and of her lovers' penises - 'there is a correlation', Anna claims, 'between the size of a hand and the size of what makes a man a man' (p.5) - do not only give us a glimpse into the scientific bent of the Victorian mind, but also illustrate how a world as Rabelaisian and 'modern' as that of Anna's thrives on the very inconsistencies that threaten to undermine its unique status.

Modernity in the world of Anna Swan is welcomed and applauded only insofar as it remains on the stage of Victorian theatres and circuses entertaining an audience that feels titillated and at the same time self-satisfied in its normalcy. This artistic status of modernity in the novel, while being deliberately parodic, exposes how ineffective art could be if it tried to remedy social malaise; it also reveals the tentativeness of the audience's relationship to art and the precarious position of the 'modern' artist in Victorian society. When this kind of modernity attempts to flow onto the street, into the life of a small town, in a sexual relationship, or even inside the private world of Queen Victoria's court, it is immediately acknowledged as something disturbing that has either to be kept at a safe distance or to be completely appropriated. It is this audience's ambivalent response that grants the modernity of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* its high allegorical status. Allegory, in this respect, doesn't merely suggest the double semantic function of telling a story; it also suggests the semiotics of otherness, be it the otherness of discourse, gender or nation. Allegory in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* shakes up the textual ground of the story so that the characters double-speak - often without knowing it.

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The historical aspects of Susan Swan's novel start with the author's last name and large height that she shares with her historical protagonist. Both Swans are from Nova Scotia, but, 'unfortunately,' as the author says in her preface, 'neither her descendants nor my relatives have enough information on our backgrounds to establish a connection'. Despite, however, this historical gap between our tall author and gigantic character, the two Swans, through a postmodern twist of history, discourse and onomastics, are brought together by their acts of writing.

Swan shows in this novel how within the markers of difference between history and fiction resides a logic of identity which authorises the postmodern writer to unveil a truth that demystifies its own absolute and terrorising status in human history. Susan Swan inscribes her historical other, Anna Haining Swan, within those historical gaps that denied her modernity its full expression.

Her fictionalisation of history and historicisation of fiction is introduced in the opening chapter of the novel, entitled 'Spelling', which announces that *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is about to tell her own story:

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

Anna's intent 'to tell all' echoes Susan Swan's intent to retrieve Anna from the relative anonymity she lapsed into after her death in 1888, but at the same time it contradicts the postmodern method the author uses, a method which by definition effectively denies the desire to master totality. For what the author writes both repeats and distorts history, as what Anna narrates both affirms her status as THE BIGGEST MODERN WOMAN OF THE WORLD and undermines the effectiveness of her modernity. The 'never-before-revealed autobiography', which Anna promises to be her 'final appearance', is her swan song as a *spieler* while comprising, paradoxically, the first 'big' literary publication of the other Swan, the author herself. This conflation of beginnings and endings, of fiction and history, is in keeping with the novel's intertextual treatment of gender and national politics.

Anna's swan song appropriately opens and ends in an elegiac tone; she concludes her 'autobiography' by stating 'I have accepted my destiny. I was born to be measured and I do not fit in anywhere. Perhaps heaven will have more room' (p.332). The fact that Anna transfers her desires for self-fulfillment into afterlife indicates the tone and content of her autobiography; her gigantism thwarts her desires. Her attempt, however, to take hold of her life by telling her own story is equally frustrated. 'The testimonials and documents by friends and associates', which Anna uses in order to give her autobiography greater authenticity, create a hiatus for the reader, for it is never explained how (or whether at all) she has access to them. Letters to her by her parents and Angus and newspaper accounts about her performances are naturally in her possession; but the excerpts from the journals of Apollo and Martin interspersing her writing, while revealing their chauvinism and manipulative behaviour, are undoubtedly the author's own intrusion and are meant to undermine Anna's authorial control of her narrative.

These anti-autobiographical elements at once emphasise the Victorian epistolary form and the postmodernism of the novel. What they also emphasise, however, is that Anna is only the writer of her autobiography, not its author. The author remains her namesake other, Susan Swan, whose authority is not simply an extratextual given but an authority exposing Anna's own problematic relationship with the male and institutional authorities in her life. Interestingly

enough, Anna does not even have the last word in her autobiography; the novel's epilogue consists of statements by her mother and Anna's American neighbours; most importantly, Anna herself submits her narrative to her American husband Martin 'to amend and publish... as I do not have much time left' (p.332). Martin doesn't bother to amend Anna's memoirs, for if he had he would have certainly amended her unflattering portrait of him. But this giving away of her words suggests her inability, perhaps a reluctance, or a not knowing how, to be the sole subject of her discourse.

It is highly ironic, but in keeping with the novel's allegorical layers, that Anna, who becomes in her life the subject of curiosity and admiration of large and illustrious audiences, fails to become the subject of her own discourse. This is most evident in the spiels written for her by her literary agents that she delivers during her lifetime. The few spiels that she blurts out herself strike a foreign note as they are about matters she has simply memorised: 'There, it was out: the forthright lecture voice I used to divert jesters', Anna notices as she stands in the lobby of Hotel Astor, New York, during her first encounter with Barnum:

Allow me to clear up a few misconceptions about the Canadas, which are thought to be a technically backward dominion, important only as a massive exporter of wheat and timber....

Contrary to the opinion of the rest of the world, which sees us as a backwater of medical research, the development of cough suppressors is a major scientific field in my country as well as a philosophical principle (p.69).

Obviously, and to her credit, the sixteen-year-old Anna wants to assert her Canadianness, which she fears threatened by Barnum's enterprising will. But if she succeeds at all as a Canadian here, her young female voice is totally consumed by the male rhetoric she employs.

Even when she speaks off stage, Anna invariably uses a voluble rhetoric inappropriate for the occasion; this is what she 'hear[s her]self say', for example, while resting at a little Nova Scotian inn after having exposed by accident her ankle to the public: 'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, FRIENDS AND PASSERS-BY: Forgive me. My body is showing' (p.24). Anna does not control these rhetorical outbursts, but although they become the source of her own ridicule, they are the only way through which she has her own voice heard. She can never exceed the carnivalesque world of freaks. Her inability to possess language is similar to her failure to come to grips with her private self. Even when she is not on stage or in the salons of princes and other moguls but in the privacy of her bedroom writing in her journal, Anna lacks any sense of a cohesive self.

Yes, I was a GENUINE SHOW-BIZ CELEBRITY who found no forum modern enough to suit my talents and who has written this authentic account to entertain you the way I could not during my career as a professional giantess. A good performer has many spiels and I have three up my long sleeve to delight and astound (p.2).

Her autobiography is obviously geared toward a public audience and her aim is to entertain others, not to apostrophise herself. Anna fails to distinguish between

public and private discourse. This may be problematic *vis a vis* the genre of autobiography, but it does not come as a surprise given Anna's artistic aspirations and the allegorical nature of the novel.

Anna's parents register her in a college to become a teacher, but as she says, 'I do not see the point of teachers' college when my interests lie in theatre' (p.54). She badly wants to play high drama written by Broadway writers, but, because of her size, her only venue is Barnum's museum of freaks where she plays farce and melodrama to non-appreciating audiences and harsh reviewers. She posits her autobiography, then, as her first, and last, serious attempt at art. But the drama she reveals there flatly documents rather than re-creates her life experiences. Anna doesn't know how to write an autobiography because she hasn't had a private life. She is denied access even to the genre, as recent feminist critics have argued, most conducive for the experience of her gender. Her freakishness lies not so much in her gigantic proportions as in her 'modern' desire to assert her femaleness in a world dominated by Victorian men and mores.

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Anna's gigantic body with its disproportionately small head hides a dwarfed female self. Her biology, paradoxically, becomes an allegory of the traditional strictures imposed on the female body. Since the beginnings of her relatively short life - she dies two days before she would turn forty-two - her large size has accustomed her to public scrutiny. Her notion of selfhood is identified with public spectacle. Despite many of her misgivings about the 'show-biz' life, Anna can't imagine herself being someone other than a performer. Her philosophy that 'life is a performance and all moments are dramatic' (p.332) contradicts her confession that 'Alas! It's hard for a woman like me to escape into a private world' (p.95). Although she is fully aware it is her physical size that grants her fame and wealth and which also determines her destiny, it takes her many years of public life and disappointments to realise that it is her female gender that frustrates her dreams. 'As for me,' Anna says early in her career, 'I saw my growth as a symbol of my power and energy and expected others to envy me for it' (p.11). Daring to see her Victorian womanhood as a symbol is already a transgression that she will never get over. It is Anna's very modernity - namely that she doesn't shy from displaying her 8'1" frame, but instead makes a career out of it; that she expects to be treated as a normal and, more than that, that she expects to have her voracious sexual appetite fulfilled, that keeps her locked within the web of the public gaze.

The measure of Anna's modernity becomes most apparent in her relationships with men and in her strong sense of national identity. Whereas in the world of Barnum's freaks and Apollo's circus Anna is seen as a commodity, in the world of normals she is transformed into an allegorical being who exceeds both sexual and national boundaries. In both worlds, she remains a displaced woman. When her dwarf neighbour finds her urinating in her father's field, he exclaims: 'Do you

know what a boundless universe lies inside you, Anna?' (p.32). Anna doesn't quite know at this point - she is only fourteen - but she is soon to find out that it is this 'boundless universe', the 'highway uncurling in her great physique' (p.33) and not her soaring soul that will inspire men to colonise her.

As a Canadian woman, Anna becomes an allegory imaging the vast Canadian landscape, her personal difficulties depicting the problems of pioneers represented in the novel by her parents. The allegorisation of Canada as woman evokes female passivity, a passivity which is played out in the sexual politics of Anna's life. As a woman with an immense body, Anna allegorises female otherness and the ways in which it threatens man's confidence in his phallogocentric power. Whether Anna is treated in the novel as a sexual or political allegory, she embodies the discomfort and uncertainty alterity induces.

When we begin to examine Anna's sexual relationships with three men representing Canada, the United States and Australia, it becomes evident that male response to sexual otherness in the novel allegorises, and parodies, national difference. We can measure the success or failure of these relationships only in relation to each other. The idea of nation is defined in correlation to other nations, alterity thus becoming the only measuring device of national identity.

'It is a tradition in the Canadas: when in public, self-efface!' (p.24), says Anna, who has a deeply rooted sense of Canadian identity. Paradoxically, however, Anna as performer emulates this Canadian trait only in theory. This is one of the main reasons why her relationship with the Canadian giant Angus fails. Angus has known but rejected the American values of the Rabelaisian world of freak museums and circuses in the United States for the quiet pastoral beauty of his Nova Scotian landscape. During their first love encounter, Anna is astonished to discover that, although the 'fit was snug', his organ was a mere foot in size. 'At fifteen,' Anna says, 'I didn't know that I was as much in charge of my sexual ecstasy as the man.... Had I known, I would have shown Angus how to rub me.' What is, however, even more astonishing for Anna is what Angus expects from her upon the completion of their intercourse: 'Now you'll have to marry me, Annie, and settle down to farm life.' Who would deny that Angus is an honourable Canadian, but this is not the honour Anna desires. 'I wanted to be a show-biz personality - not a rural drudge' (p.58). Although these words don't mark the end of their relationship, which is to last for another two years, they do sever Anna's relationship with her nation. Angus's philosophy, which he expounds upon in his many letters to Anna when she lives in New York, is, paradoxically, full of echoes of the Emersonian faith in self-reliance - of course insofar as it is practised in the backwoods of Canada. Canada, for Anna, will forever remain a desired but absent spouse.

Although Anna remains a proud and vocal Canadian for the rest of her life, her rejection of Canada allegorises the extent to which her female expansiveness remains unreadable by her own country. When, despite the many political reservations of her parents, Anna goes to the States in order to realise her dream of performing she jeopardises the distinctiveness of her Canadian identity. While

in New York, Anna functions as the prototype of the Canadian exile; her personal dislocation enacts Canada's historically ambivalent relations to her neighbour. From this point on in the action of the novel, Anna's otherness of body and gender is accentuated by her national otherness. Ironically, in order to become her own signifier, Anna has to erase what she signifies.

The contract Anna signs with Barnum's company signifies the extent to which Canada sells out to the United States. What Anna learns in the education Barnum is contractually obliged to offer her is not only the theories of Darwin, Emerson and Thoreau, but also 'that to be American is the true destiny of each of us' (p.85). Anna does not give in completely to the American Dream, but does end up marrying the Kentucky giant Martin. Martin does not fall in love with Anna herself but with what she represents - providing she couples with him: 'the future of man' (p.172). Martin's dream of a generation of giant Americans epitomises American imperialism. Although their romance takes place aboard the ship taking them to Europe, Anna is not freed from the consuming power of the viewer's gaze; this time, while lying naked for a medical examination, she becomes the object of Martin's gaze. 'In the name of science' (p.170), the doctor allows Martin to peep through a hole. In love with the big and dark gap that he sees, which he calls a 'magnificent foyer' (p.171), Martin is ready to marry Anna at any cost.

They marry but not before Anna loses her voice a day prior to their wedding. The loss of voice doesn't merely signify her loss of independence. The fact that she is reduced to uttering only gurgling sounds and chuckles while she resides in Great Britain allegorises the colonial status of her already dwarfed Canadian identity. It is during this period that Anna has audience with Queen Victoria. A midget at 4'8" and suffering at the time from melancholia, another common female disease at the time, the queen amuses herself by strolling 'in leisurely fashion through' (p.196) the gigantic arch of Anna's legs as menservants lift with tongs her silk skirts. This scene, truly Victorian in its ethos, forces the voiceless Anna to realise that she 'had ceased to exist for [the queen] as a person' (p.195). It becomes clear at this point that Anna's body which scares and fascinates males is far from being a metaphor of imperialism; instead, it parodies the very notion of territorialism. Anna's gigantism deconstructs the codes defining gender and national relationships. By the same token, it is interesting that it is during this period of voicelessness that Anna takes up writing. Her writing, together with her physical immensity that can be ridiculed but not appropriated, compensates Anna for her loss of female and national identity.

Having survived her audience with Queen Victoria, Anna resigns from her wife's role with Martin - who proves to be impotent - but not before she has her first orgasm with a man, a short Australian. Her relationship with her business manager Apollo further amplifies the political allegory of Anna's love life. Their first encounter takes place at Windsor Castle while they are guests of the Prince of Wales. Apollo, who returns to Australia after their stillborn child is seen as a valuable medical specimen - 'female and flawed', as Anna puts it (p.242) 'at 18

pounds and 27 inches' (p.240) - remains the most mischievous, coy and elusive character in the novel. Although he reappears in Ohio where Anna has settled with Martin and resumes for awhile his passionate affair with her, Apollo doesn't share Anna's experience of colonialism. He is a free spirit, a true entrepreneur who knows how to combine pleasure and business. Allegorically, Apollo eradicates the differences between freakish otherness and normal behaviour; a character who translates his displaced condition in America and in Great Britain into a pool of energy, he seems to be unmarked by the imperial and colonial forces. As a politically unmarked subject, Apollo signifies the universal condition that Anna aspires to but never attains. As a male, though, whose organ reconciles Anna to the male species, he is marked by his gender, as Anna is equally marked by her immense body which, by the end of the novel, has become the plane that all imperial forces desire. Markedness in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is identified with unmarkedness; leadership is rewritten as otherness.

Anna Swan's sexual relationships exemplify the 'gigantism and dwarfism of desire'. Her body as a continent in itself exceeds territorial boundaries and defies the Lacanian concept of woman as 'not all'. The Freudian/Lacanian premise that anatomical difference figures sexual difference becomes in this novel an analogue of Victorian colonialism. Anna's gigantism parodies the very notion of imperialism. Her swan song, her last spiel, illustrates that it is her modernity that undoes the sexual and political codes of her life.

I'll finish my own spiel by concluding that Anna allegorises the 'surplus value' in her culture.

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