

Where Female Narratives Meet History:  
Michèle Roberts' *The Looking Glass*

Ayako Mizuo (水尾文子)

Michèle Roberts (1949- ) is one of the key contemporary British women writers who are engaged in the representation of the maternal body in fiction. Half-English and half-French, Roberts illustrates a figurative sense of the mother in the pursuits of her characters for identity in novels. Throughout her writing practice, Roberts sees language as the tangible representation of the body, particularly the female body. In an essay "Post-Script" (1994), she writes: "I want to write in a way that relishes language, its materiality like paint. The language is what matters. It has, is, body" (1998; 198). "Materiality" is the key to understanding Roberts' philosophy as a writer. Fictional writing for Roberts is thus a tangible act of filling in maternal absence. She continues: "Writing feels like pulling something out of my insides; I've made it inside, now must draw it out, put it out" (1998;200). Such an act as "pulling something out of my insides" suggests the act of a mother giving birth to a baby. In an essay "On Imagination" (1994), Roberts also writes that "we learn to use language as a kind of birth into absence" (1998; 20). Linking an act of writing with maternal fertility, an archetype of feminine identity, Roberts explores the possibility of representing the maternal body through language in fiction.

Roberts' fictional writing practice reveals itself to be her challenge to the literary canon which she believes fails to emphasize the tangible representation of the maternal body in language. Roberts declares this in an interview with the *January Magazine* after she published *The Looking Glass*. She says: "I want to put the body always into language. I was brought up in a tradition of reading and thinking at university that, in a sense, left the body out" (2001; 5). By questioning the conventional writing practice which has "left the body out," Roberts underlines the significance of writing the body in fiction. She goes on to say that inscribing the female body in fiction is her aim of writing:

I'd been a Catholic and the body is very scorned in Catholicism—particularly the female body—I wanted to rescue the body and cherish it and love it and touch it and smell it and make it into language. Make language actually a body, as it is to be human. That's one of my aims, I think. (2001; 5)

By using the verbs deriving from sensory organs such as “touch” and “smell,” Roberts dramatizes the physicality of the female body in writing. Hence, representing the physicality of the female body in language is the key to understanding Roberts' writing practice.

*The Looking Glass* (2000), as well as *Fair Exchange* (1999) which portrays social history in the time of Enlightenment, offers a fictional re-creation of past periods. *The Looking Glass* constructs a set of female narratives, paralleling aspects of the lives of Gustave Flaubert and Stéphane Mallarmé, both canonical French writers/poets of the nineteenth century. In her acknowledgements, Roberts notes that “this novel [. . .] is partly inspired by details from the life of Mallarmé, as recorded in the biography of Mallarmé by Jean-Luc Steinmetz, as well as by details from the life of Flaubert, as recorded in his own letters, and as celebrated by Julian Barnes in *Flaubert's Parrot*” (Acknowledgements). In fact, Gérard Colbert, a character in *The Looking Glass*, has in common with Flaubert's and Mallarmé's lives.

*The Looking Glass* consists of the narratives of five female characters: Geneviève, Millicent, Isabelle, Marie-Louise, and Yvonne, women involved with a poet Gérard. Geneviève is the key narrator; her narrative is inserted several times in the novel. Geneviève grows up in an orphanage in Etretat. She is a storyteller for other orphans. Adopted by Madame Patin, Geneviève starts helping out in Madame Patin's café in the seaside town of Blessetot. As a maid to Madame Patin, Geneviève becomes an audience of Madame Patin's storytelling. The mermaid tale which Madame Patin tells uncovers a shocking ending for Geneviève, and the mermaid in Madame Patin's tale is recurrent in Geneviève's narrative throughout the novel. When her affair with Madame Patin's husband is revealed to Madame Patin, Geneviève runs away from Madame Patin's house. Almost drowning herself in the sea, Geneviève is saved by Gérard and is taken to his house where his mother Madame Colbert

and niece Marie-Louise live. The narratives of Millicent, Marie-Louise's governess, and Isabelle, Gérard's mistress, disclosing their hidden passions and desires for Gérard. A maid to Madame Colbert, Geneviève not only narrates Millicent's and Isabelle's passions and desires for Gérard but also gradually discloses her own desire for Gérard.

Focusing on the recurrent metaphor of a mermaid which first appears in Madame Patin's tale, this paper discusses the way in which Roberts explores female narratives to represent the body in *The Looking Glass*. In an interview in 2003, Roberts talks about the narrative structure in *The Looking Glass* in these terms:

Male poets have been so central I thought that this one[Gérard] could be at the centre of the novel but like the hole in the Polo mint. [. . .] I liked the idea of the centre of the book that wasn't there—like a doughnut. (5)

*The Looking Glass* does not contain Gérard's narrative. In spite of this absence, Gérard is spotlighted through the disclosure of passions conveyed by the female narratives. "The idea" which she emphasizes in the interview is the way in which Roberts attempts to establish as female narratives. I would argue that, by challenging the conventional perspective of feminine identity and deploying an alternative narrative structure, Roberts emphasizes that female narratives always entail the tangibility of the body.

### I. The Mermaid Tale and Female Selfhood

*The Looking Glass* explores the legitimacy of female narratives. Roberts attempts to achieve this explanation by undermining the conventional elements of tales. The metaphor of a mermaid plays an important role in Roberts' pursuit of female narratives in the novel. The mermaid tale which Madame Patin tells Geneviève demystifies the male perspective of female identity as an ideal figure. Madame Patin's mermaid tale opens with the description of the mermaid's feminine beauty: "The mermaid had long golden hair, green eyes, and cold white arms. She was half-woman, and half-fish, a beauty who was also a monster" (24). In the tale, the mermaid— "a beauty who was also a

monster” —lures men into drowning in the sea. Finally, a young man captures the mermaid in a net with his friends and slaughters her in a cruel way: “He cut her throat with his knife. She jerked and thrashed, then died” (25). Roberts continues: “The wide wound gushed red, the blood flowing over her as though it dressed her in a red vest. Still streaming blood, she was hung up in the church porch for all the world to see” (25). By killing the mermaid, men destroy the mystified image of feminine identity. By such verbs as “jerked” and “thrashed” as well as the repeated image of “blood,” Roberts emphasizes the physical pain from which the mermaid suffers. The mermaid is no longer a mystified figure for men. One could argue that this mermaid tale demystifies the association of feminine image and male power. The slaughter is tangible.

The cruel ending of the mermaid tale could be understood as suggesting two conflicting possibilities. On the one hand, the slaughter of the mermaid foregrounds male authority over women. The mermaid embodies feminine identity without autonomy. This mermaid tale frightens Geneviève “because I thought I knew what it meant, and also I didn’t know. My body seemed to know, in silence, but not in any words that ever came easily into my mouth. The mermaid could not speak and neither could I” (26). By the phrase “I knew what it meant, and also I didn’t know” Roberts emphasizes that as an audience to Madame Patin Geneviève does not have an authorship. Geneviève’s speechlessness thus implies her loss of authorship; the mermaid’s speechlessness implies her loss of autonomy. It could be argued that Roberts dramatizes male authority in reality, the hegemonic social context. On the other hand, the ending of the mermaid tale could be read as rather positive in the sense that the ending demolishes the male construction of an ideal woman. Madame Patin’s mermaid tale dramatizes the tangible representation of the female body. In spite of such cruel expressions of physical pain, the mermaid is nonetheless represented as a tangible entity. By making the mermaid in the tale tangible, Roberts challenges the mystified image of a woman, which has long been established by male-centered social paradigm.

Mirrors emphasize the significance of the mermaid as a figure capable of representing the tangibility of the female body. Roberts employs mirrors as a reflection of what one really is. When she starts living at Madame Patin’s, Geneviève writes: “when I wanted to forget myself in safety, and day-dream,

I could, and then when I needed to know where I was again I had only to glance in the glass and see the frowning girl that was me” (11). She suggests that the mirror reflects reality, exactly as she is— “where I was again.” The image of a mermaid recurs when Geneviève looks into a mirror later in the section. Geneviève’s narrative goes on: “Mirrors are supposed to give you back yourself as you are, but my self-portrait was incomplete” (94). What Geneviève means by the “incomplete” aspect of her self-portrait seems to be the very body of feminine identity. She continues: “The mermaid had had a mirror. She had been able to hold it between her legs and discover whatever it was she had there, even if that could not be told in the story” (94). The very body of feminine identity is referred to as the private parts which Geneviève finds “between her legs.” I am suggesting that, by referring to the private parts as such, Roberts attempts to emphasize the significance of the hidden parts (not just in a literal sense!) of feminine identity in inscribing the female body in fiction.

In an essay “Seeing Differently: What Self-Portrait Might Be” (1996), Roberts suggests that a mirror empowers a mermaid by helping her see what she really is. The image of a mermaid with a mirror is a significant metaphor in Roberts’ writing practice. Roberts begins her discussion by describing how women have traditionally been seen as the object of gaze by painters:

The painters compliment the beauty languishing in front of her mirror, render the silk and softness of her naked flesh, but they also warn, admonish. Beauty means power. Be careful. Take beauty away; confine her to the bedroom. (1998; 173)

The power dynamic between painters and a mermaid is ambivalent. Roberts shows the painters’ conflicting feelings toward a mermaid. “The painters” see a mermaid as an ideal feminine figure and “compliment” her. Nonetheless, they try to keep a mermaid under their control— “confine her to the bedroom.”

“The bedroom,” implying the false representation of sexuality, could be associated with the female body.

By questioning the conventional perception of a mermaid described in art or in a tale as such, Roberts suggests that with a mirror, a mermaid can disclose

the multiplicity of feminine selfhood. She writes, "Inside her, many selves jostled in a dance" (1998; 174). A mirror thus overturns the mystified image of a mermaid constructed by men and reflects the very body. By pointing out many aspects of the mermaid's selfhood (1998; 174-75), Roberts writes that the mermaid could see even the private parts of her body through a mirror:

"She looked into the mirror, searching for the parts of herself she couldn't see. The parts usually kept hidden" (1998; 176). She notes that the mirror discloses the hidden aspects of female selfhood. "Herselves" emphasizes many aspects of female selfhood. Roberts concludes the essay by arguing that with a mirror, the mermaid perceives her selfhood without the influence of male power. She writes: "[The mermaid] could begin with absence, with ignorance, with not-knowing. It made her free, not to know who or what she was, to start from there [. . .] There was a self that did not yet exist, a body that had not yet been born" (1998; 176). Equated with "ignorance," "absence" could be read in a positive sense in this context. "Who or what she was" refers to the male perception of the mermaid that is similar to the painters' perception. Roberts explores the possibility of the mermaid constructing "a self" or "a body" by herself.

The metaphor of mirrors has often been referred to in feminist theoretical discussions on women's positionality within the hegemonic social context.<sup>1</sup> Many discussions use the metaphor of mirrors as an indicator of patriarchal power over women. Virginia Woolf analyzes the role of women as the metaphor of mirrors in *A Room of One's Own* (1928). The mirror, stabilizing the self and urging the patriarchal determination of the feminine, paralyzes the feminine simply as an object, and more precisely, the object of man's gaze. Woolf writes: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (45). Woolf argues that the mirror produces the effect—man's superiority over woman—on which a patriarchal world is founded. In this paradigm, woman is merely the medium of male empowerment: an object. The point of patriarchal symmetry is, therefore, not the inferiority of women but the superior feelings of men toward women. Woolf implies that man takes advantage of the stabilized image of woman in the mirror. Woolf continues: "For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks;

his fitness for life is diminished" (46). "Tell(ing) the truth" could be associated with female narratives.

In *The Looking Glass*, identifying herself with the mermaid, Geneviève attempts to explore an alternative possibility. Geneviève is a significant narrator in the novel in the sense that she associates the mermaid tale with the tangibility of female narratives. After listening to Madame Patin's mermaid tale, Geneviève tells herself her version of the ending of the mermaid tale: "only this time she would not die; she would escape; she would dive into the depth of the sea and hide there; she was not speechless at all she shouted out for Madame Patin Madame Montjean to come and rescue her . . ." (83-84). An articulate feminine figure in Geneviève's version of the mermaid tale could be seen as a challenge to the hegemonic social context. Roberts suggests that such an alternative way of being articulate could form female narratives. In the novel Geneviève is forced to flee from Madame Patin's house due to the disclosure of her affair with Monsieur Montjean, Madame Patin's husband (95). She tries to drown herself in the sea: "I plunged onwards, throwing myself under a crest of foam" (154). Yet, she is saved by a poet Gérard (156), and starts her life as the maid of Madame Colbert, Gérard's mother.

## II. Female Narratives and 'woman's sentence'

In the second part of the novel, in which Geneviève serves as Madame Colbert's maid, Roberts presents multiple women's narratives: Millicent's, Geneviève's, Marie-Louise's, and Yvonne's. Millicent is an English governess for Marie-Louise, Gérard's niece. Diary writing is Millicent's way of disclosing the hidden aspects of her selfhood: "all that I cannot utter in public, my criticisms particularly, I shall put down here, I'm writing this for myself, after all" (102). Being in France helps Millicent's disclosure of her selfhood through diary writing. She writes: "I feel France is making me very greedy. Something inside me is starving and shouting" (104). One could argue that being away from the hegemonic social context (England) uncovers hidden aspects of Millicent. The description of her desire as "starving" and "shouting" evokes its tangibility. Yet, Millicent has to confine her tangible passions within her diary. Millicent confesses that Madame Colbert's way of thinking pressurizes Millicent not to articulate her selfhood: "Women's lives, in

Madame Colbert's version, are supposed to be unremarkable. If I were truly the person she thinks I am [. . .] it would be impossible to write this diary because there would be nothing to say" (111). The perception of Madame Colbert on women could be thought of as social perception of women in that patriarchal context. Millicent continues to write that she hopes to be "a poet, who can voice the deepest wishes of the human heart" (111). By hoping to be a poet, she pursues the way of speaking out her own secretive narrative.

Millicent's tangible representation of her selfhood is seen through her desire for Gérard. In a diary, Millicent's description of her desire is associated with the sea, the archetype of the maternal. In the diary, Millicent notes her early impression of Gérard is simply that he is "rather ugly and quite old" (99), but she then notices that she is in love with Gérard (126). Millicent describes:

"Inside me an electric current pushes back and forth. I'm changed" (126).

"Back and forth" represents the rhythm of sex and of the waves. Later on, when she spends holiday with Gérard, Madame Colbert, and Marie-Louise in Etretat, Millicent reveals that her desire for Gérard overwhelms language or "words" : "I could hardly form an opinion let alone shape it into words; I felt tongue-tied and stammering" (144). Equated with the fluidity of the waves, Millicent's representation of her desire conflicts with the linguistic. Nonetheless, Millicent's narrative further suggests that her representation of desire never fails to be connected with physicality. She continues: "Something powerful, a tide of wanting, was drawing me toward him and pushing me back, forward and back, like the rhythm of the sea itself, the waves falling urgently onto the beach" (144). With the expressions of desire, Millicent describes the physicality of the female body. Corresponding to the waves in the sea, the rhythm of Millicent's desire—"pushing me back, forward and back"—is further associated with the metaphor of childbirth, the embodiment of the maternal.

While feeling happiness, Millicent also textualizes a pain from which she suffers through her desire for Gérard. We could argue that it is the scene of Millicent in pain which reminds readers of Madame Patin's mermaid tale. On the next day when she has felt joy—dated "August 10<sup>th</sup>" (145)—Millicent learns from Madame Colbert that Gérard is leaving them the next morning (145). Madame Colbert tells this news to Millicent "idly, as though it were not important" (145). Millicent writes of her feeling as: "my entire body feels



as though it is being torn slowly in two" (146). Her desire for Gérard generates not only the tangible representation of joy but also the bodily pain. Millicent continues: "[Madame Colbert's] words ripped me open: I began to bleed" (146). The tangible description of Millicent in pain could be associated with the description of the slaughter of the mermaid at the end of Madame Patin's tale: the expression "ripped me open" reminds readers of the mermaid's throat being cut, and to "bleed" reminds us of the mermaid's blood when she dies. And, of course, both the ripping and bleeding evoke loss of virginity. Millicent then waits for Madame Colbert, "my enemy" (147), to sleep to go to Gérard's room on the night before he leaves. However, Millicent's attempt is in vain, and her narrative ends with her diary entry on August 11<sup>th</sup> as: "Gérard departed this morning, immediately after breakfast. He shook my hand and said goodbye" (147). Her last journal writes only the above two sentences. Unlike other diary entries, the journal on that day is short without any records of her feelings.

Like Millicent, Isabelle describes her relationship with Gérard through the tangible expression of desire. She becomes Gérard's mistress when her sick husband is going to die (168-69). As with Millicent, Isabelle finds "love's greedy side" (169) through her relationship with Gérard. Isabelle thinks: "Now I starved, wanting him; desire twisted and knocked about in my empty belly, and I had to find a way of feeding myself, filling myself up with loss, provoking and tempting my appetite with memory, gorging on fantasies of a shared future" (169). As in Millicent's description of desire, the verb "starve" emphasizes Isabelle's tangible representation of desire for Gérard, the hidden aspects of female self. With the verb expressing appetites, "desire," "loss," and "memory"—the elements consisting of Isabelle's feelings toward Gérard—evoke their tangibility. Isabelle confirms this point by saying that she understands "how desire fitted bodies with each other like well-cut clothes" (170). By linking "desire" with "bodies," she nonetheless makes her desire tangible. Isabelle's tangible desire is confirmed by the fact that she loves Gérard's sweat (174). Isabelle goes on to think: "I began to understand love as a voyage, travelling constantly towards the other, departing from the beloved in order to turn round and come back, to arrive again" (186). "A voyage" could be associated with the voyage across the ocean. By comparing

“love” to “a voyage” Isabelle’s description of desire is associated with the image of the sea, the maternal.

As in Millicent’s diary writing, Isabelle’s record of her relationship with Gérard helps her disclose hidden aspects of female selfhood as a tangible representation. Calling her journal keeping an act of “writing long, imaginary letters to Gérard every day” (187), Isabelle also recognizes the legitimacy of female narratives. She confesses that this journal writing is “a substitute for being in his presence, an endless conversation with which I indulged myself” (187). Isabelle recognizes that her narrative produces the tangible effect of describing Gérard. Isabelle continues that “yet loving Gérard has turned me into a writer, and this is my love letter to him” (187) although she is not a poet, “a master of language” (187). She also notes that she uses “language that can flow and does not have to stop, a long cry uttered in silence” (187). Later, Isabelle admits that “[Gérard’s] absence inspired and provoked [her] love” (194). Isabelle suggests that, if not authoritative in this social context, female narratives are nonetheless the tangible projection of female selfhood.

Geneviève also comes to represent her passion and desire, which leads to redefine her perception of storytelling. At the outset of the novel, when she is in an orphanage, Geneviève affirms the legitimacy of storytelling: “The nuns always warned against storytelling and day-dreaming, which they said meant lying, an escape from truth. To me it was the opposite. Those bright pictures were the most real thing” (10). “Those bright pictures” refer to Geneviève’s storytelling. However, Geneviève’s perception of storytelling changes when she notices that she loves Gérard. In desiring Gérard, Geneviève dreams of her engaging a relationship with Gérard. She then narrates: “I had told myself the false story, which annoyed the true one, and so the true one burst out and took over, a torrent which could not be stopped. / It began as soon as Gérard had left for Paris” (219). “The false story” refers to Geneviève’s fantasy of marrying to Gérard, and “the true one” refers to their relationship as a maid and a master (219) in reality. One could argue that through her desire for Gérard, Geneviève denounces her perception of storytelling.

What Millicent, Isabelle, and Geneviève are in common is that their narratives are inspired by female desire and that the desire is provoked by the absence of Gérard. In her narrative, Isabelle notices it and writes: “He kept

a woman—me, or someone else—at a distance, so that her absence could provoke him to desire her, to write a love poem” (193). Discussing Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist politics of the body<sup>2</sup>, Lynda Nead writes that “desires” belong to the body: “The body is [. . .] central in the formation of individual identity and is the site of the subject’s desires and fantasies, actions and behaviour” (71). Nead notes that internal elements such as “desires and fantasies” as well as external elements such as “actions and behaviour” belong to the body. Nead’s observation could reinforce my argument that Millicent’s, Isabelle’s, and Geneviève’s narratives in *The Looking Glass* is the tangible representation of the body.

Unlike the narratives of those female characters, Marie-Louise’s narrative is inspired not by Gérard’s absence but by absence in Gérard’s poetry. Marie-Louise notes: “My uncle’s work gives me back my mother. His poems heal and repair the wounds of my childhood” (236). Led by the absence of her mother since childhood,<sup>3</sup> Marie-Louise desires maternal aspects of Gérard’s work. She goes on to write that: “Perhaps poetry in itself is a metaphor, a metaphor of presence, beginning with absence and then making something alive out of it, revealing that emptiness can be inhabited by fullness” (237). The idea of Gérard’s poetry filling in absence in Marie-Louise’s narrative is associated with Roberts’ use of language—“a kind of birth into absence”—which, as I have argued, is always engaged in the maternal.

Are Gérard’s poems associated with the maternal? The narrative of Yvonne, Marie-Louise’s friend and a neighbor of the Colberts, questions Marie-Louise’s view of Gérard’s poems. In her early fifties, recollecting Gérard’s published work, Yvonne thinks: “His famous novella, for example, pretends to understand women, but it idealises them in a really wishy-washy way. Some of the poems speak in a woman’s voice, but to me they all sound exactly like men talking” (262). Yvonne’s objective view as a reader observes a patriarchal slant in Gérard’s work. Yvonne adds: “Only men at that time were considered great writers” (262). “Great writers” are equated with canonical writers. As such, Yvonne’s understanding of Gérard’s work is in conflict with Marie-Louise’s.

Such a gap between Marie-Louise’s and Yvonne’s views in their narratives foregrounds the fact that the narratives are unreliable and subjective. In *Times Literary Supplement* Claire Harman points out this gap by writing that

“the five different narrators enables the novelist to dramatize the problems of telling the ‘true story’, from the passing-on of folk tales to the untrustworthiness of biography” (21). By “the ‘true story,’” Harman emphasizes that each character’s narrative could be ‘true’ in the character’s subjective sense. Yet, one’s (subjective) sense does not necessarily correspond to the (subjective) senses of others. In spite of the unreliability of the narratives, I would argue that the narratives in *The Looking Glass* are all the tangible representation of the female selfhood.

While exploring the multiplicity of female narratives, Roberts also challenges the possibility of female narratives within the hegemonic social context. Toward the end of the novel, Geneviève refers to the mermaid again. She takes Marie-Louise to meet Isabelle. In fainting, Geneviève has a daydream of Eve swimming above her head: “Eve swam gaily above my head, floating on her side, one hand waving at me in greeting and the other pointing toward the apple on the tree” (250). “The apple on the tree” implies an apple which Adam eats in Genesis and through which Adam and Eve lose innocence. In this sense, one could argue that this scene anticipates the possibility of female narratives within the social and cultural context which Geneviève confronts.

She then notices that “[Eve] was the mermaid” (250). Associating the mermaid with Eve, Roberts dramatizes the mermaid as the maternal archetype. Geneviève continues:

Sooner or later the mermaid had to return to the sea, which was her only true home. She couldn’t survive on land. She had tried her best but she had failed. No shame in admitting that. Once before she had attempted to go back, but it had been too soon. But now the time was right. (250)

“The mermaid” could be identified with the narrator Geneviève herself; “land” could be identified with the social context. The time when “she had attempted to go back” refers to the time when Geneviève flees from Madame Patin’s café to try to drown herself in the sea. As readers see, Geneviève tells her own narrative in the second part of the novel while she is just a story-teller and an audience to Madame Patin’s mermaid tale in the first part. The sentence

—“But now the time was right”—indicates the importance that Geneviève survives drowning at the end of the first part and tells her narrative in the second part of the novel. The mermaid, the repeated metaphor, returning to the sea in the end implies the difficulty of negotiating female narratives within the social context.

The framework of the novel itself reinforces Roberts' perception of female narratives. *The Looking Glass* opens and closes with Geneviève's description of the sea. At the outset, Geneviève's narrative opens with: “It is the sea I miss most: the music of the dragging time over the loose shingle, shifting it back and forth; the surge and suck of water” (1). The sea embodies the eternity: the tide of the waves is recurrent forever with the rhythm of “back and forth.” This rhythm corresponds to the rhythm of the projection of desire in Millicent's narrative as I have discussed. Overwhelmed by the eternal rhythm of the waves, the chronological sense of time is undermined. Towards the end of the novel, Geneviève repeats her longing for the sea: “I miss the sea at Blesstot; I should like to see it again” (277). She then continues: “Look. We're at the very beginning of our lives. Tell us a story” (277). What Geneviève says “the very beginning” is the ending of the novel. “A story” could be seen as each character's narrative. As such, Roberts associates the image of the sea with narratives at the close of the novel. By so doing, I would argue, Roberts confirms her tangible representation of female narratives throughout *The Looking Glass*.

*The Looking Glass* concludes by leaving a tension between female narratives and the political context. Roberts writes that: “the sea endlessly writing its life into ours and into our stories, and all my fears of telling my story dissolving, insubstantial as sea-froth, sinking away into wet stones, in this early summer of 1914” (277). “This early summer of 1914” indicates not only the only reference of time in the novel but also the imminent outbreak of World War I. In this sense, this reference has enormous impact on female narratives in *The Looking Glass* as Catherine Lockerbie sees it as “a simple date that strikes sudden ice into the reader's heart” (29). Thus, Roberts suggests that history—consistent, authentic story—is in conflict with female narratives at the end of the novel. Compared with consistent, authentic history, female narratives interwoven throughout *The Looking Glass* could be seen as an

alternative history.

### Notes

- 1 Feminist theorists discuss the metaphor of mirrors by way of criticizing Jacques Lacan's hierarchical paradigm between the sexes; for example, Luce Irigaray's discussion in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, *The Irigaray Reader* (6-7), Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (39-46), and Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (86-89).
- 2 Nead explicates and corroborates Grosz's argument that the tangibility of the female body is achieved through the disclosure of the subject without being pressurized by any historical/cultural/social contexts.
- 3 According to Millicent's diary entry, Marie-Louise spends her childhood with Gérard, her uncle, and Madame Colbert, her grandmother, in France. Her father is working in Africa (100). Marie-Louise records in her narrative that she is seven years old when she has Millicent as her governess (226). Nothing is mentioned about Marie-Louise's mother.

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