Chapter 13
The Last Temptation of Marion Woodman: The Anorexic Remainder in *Bone: Dying Into Life*

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I

More than a decade after its publication, we have only begun the task of reading Marion Woodman's cancer narrative, *Bone: Dying into Life* (2000). The fact that a fuller understanding of the journal selections collected under that vivid title is still in its infancy should perhaps come as no surprise, since Woodman herself opens the book by warning against reading it too quickly. What risk is evoked here? When time is of the essence, as it surely is amid the experience of the mortal illness that the book chronicles, why is "speed" necessarily the enemy of consciousness (xii)? Among many other things, *Bone* is a labour of love—both an account of Woodman's profound love for her husband, Ross, whose Afterword graces the book, and a memory of her struggle to "surrender" to the amorous embrace of Sophia, the demanding but finally benevolent goddess of consciousness who forms "the still point" (ix) of her life and work. But the book *is* a labour, the first-hand record of an agonistic subject-in-process, the outcome of which is unknown and unknowable—even if there are voices in *Bone*, as I want to argue, that suggest otherwise and that clamour for a punctual form of knowledge where none may be had. All that is certain is that today, happily, in the shadow of her cancer, Marion Woodman thrives—not in spite but because of the travail of soul and body that she describes in *Bone*. She often characterizes this labour as a form of parturition or giving birth to herself, although these metaphors of reproduction vie uneasily in the text with figures of disavowal, loss, and emaciation. This ambivalently executed work includes the creation of *Bone* itself, whose pangs of remembrance and imagination are enacted on every page. Like its author, the text is a case of dying into a life that is marked in advance by the violence and conflict of its origins.

We need to trace these mortal and mortifying marks if we are to understand the book at all; to read *Bone* closely and slowly, just as Woodman bids us in her prefatory remarks, will mean first of all resisting the temptation to erase these signs of struggle and incompleteness in the name of what is perhaps too quickly or too triumphantly called "life." Woodman is dying into *life* … but nothing could be

less certain, less available to thought than the nature of this newly won existence. To this day, Woodman loves, teaches, and writes. She is alive, but as the title of her book puts to us, that quickened condition remains complexly interwoven with death and with forms of irreducible loss for which there may be no recompense. *Bone* is difficult to read because the radically reconfigured life that it describes and incarnates—the flesh made word, so to speak—is arduous: at its most far-reaching and self-searching moments, and there are many of these, *Bone* evokes a form of living that is not a thing or a substance that could be touched or brought to the light of consciousness, but a way of being-in-the-world, a resoluteness towards an ungraspable future that the mortally ill subject endures at the moment that it is summoned to keep watch over death. The vigilant "life" into which Woodman dies, or rather, is "dying," is not so much a place or destination as it is a time, or a timeliness, which she repeatedly captures in the words of Hamlet: "the readiness is all."

But ready for what? That may well be the wrong question, since it threatens to make the uniqueness of the moment of sheer facility that thrives at the heart of *Bone* answerable to something particular, as if one knew with a kind of visionary illumination and certainty not only *that* which was coming but also the clear direction of the path leading towards it. We might remember that Hamlet's phrase, "the readiness is all," does not mean that he moves from indecision to decision; it is rather a question of progressing *from* the abstention from decision (which is just as much a decision) *to* the more radical condition of in-decision through which all new decisions must pass if they are genuinely to be new. It would be fairer to the nuances of Woodman's text to say not "ready for something" but more starkly, "being-*ready*," dwelling in a state of tensed anticipation, by turns joyous and fearful, for the *arrivant*, for the *coming* of who knows what. Precisely what one must be ready for is not a query that needs to be answered in advance: the readiness is *all*. Somehow the experience of cancer induces this productively unstable condition in Woodman, even if there are moments in *Bone*—to which I want to draw readers' attention—in which metaphors and myths of certitude threaten to tempt her away from the wisdom of Hamlet. The most difficult thing of all, it turns out, is not the cancer that attacks Woodman's uterus or the treatment that ravages her body, but choosing in freedom to live without absolute surety—which is to say, in the book's Keatsian idiom, *dying into life*. As she argues, cancer opens the way for her "to be strong enough to surrender certainty. To leap into the mystery" (233). Readiness is therefore not passivity but rather an agile alertness, an active reluctance either to reach anxiously after fact or consent to the assurance of the given; it is not a state of self-possession so much as a species of willing dispossession, a relinquishing of the need always to possess oneself and thus to know ahead of time what one's future and what one's future self will look like. This explains the uncanny rightness of the scene with which *Bone* concludes: Woodman is swept away by the irrepressible sound of the Dutchmens' tubas, and although her heart pounds and her spine cracks and her husband looks on in astonished horror, she casts herself into the unknown, at once unsure *and* preternaturally calm—as if

coming to the realization that the jump is not the means by which to get from one place to the next but is itself the destination.

If Woodman's mortal illness is a "gift" (xv), it is a gift of honouring radical uncertainty; it is a gathering up of the courage to reject the consolations to be found in the idealizations, abstractions, and projections that in effect relieve the subject of the agony (but also the pleasure) of its responsibilities and decisions. A great part of *Bone*, especially its most pressingly affective moments, comes in the form of a prayer to Sophia—and we now see why. For prayer can only authentically *be* prayer if it is made in the midst of incertitude, in the profound openness to the unknown. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues,

> This suspension of certainty is part of prayer …. If I knew or were simply expecting an answer, that would be the end of prayer. That would be an order …. No, I expect nothing like that. I assume that I must give up any expectation, any certainty, as the one, or the more than one, to whom I address my prayer, if this is still a prayer. (2005, 231)

The subtlest form of the Demon Lover with whom Woodman must wrestle in *Bone* is the trickster who would transform prayer into its parodic semblance—"an order," a determinate plan or myth or even metaphor, in which Woodman had surrendered not certainty but her freedom to decide either for certainty or uncertainty, death or life. At the point that *Bone* becomes programmatic, at the point that it declares itself most sure, it threatens to become nothing more than an elaborate version of "A Patient's Guide to Radiation Therapy" (100)—the name of the withered and withering instruction manual that Woodman indeed folds into the narrative of her book, as if to inoculate itself with the very kind of idealizing and emaciating discourse that it does not wish to become. A particular determinable faith in a particular determinate promise: that is the danger of religiosity with which *Bone* flirts, and at those points, I want to suggest, it is half in love not with dying into life but with its unsafe mimic—with easeful death, and thus with living *for* death. "With cancer," Woodman says in the book's opening sentences, "I discovered how much dying it takes to get here" (xi)—*here* being that no man's land of decision and responsibility where, precisely, there are no absolutely obvious instructions, no assured path or "patient's guide" leading one safely or predictably from *here* to *there*, from the sorrow of the actual to the reassurances of what Woodman calls the "archetypal dimensions" (113) of existence. It is instead a state of radical freedom: "I am alive," Woodman announces at the book's conclusion. "I am free … to live … to die" (241), she says, pacing her declaration with ellipses that figure forth the blank contingency of decision, the momentary absence of all plans, programmes, and metaphors that lies at the heart of every determination that makes a claim to freedom.

With Woodman the stakes are typically high, and because of that the book in which they are raised obliges its most attentive readers to proceed with caution. For various reasons, however, not everyone is or can be so circumspect. Not

everyone is willing or able to follow the winding path that is Woodman's ongoing journey of consciousness and something other than consciousness. Yet this is not the difficulty to which Woodman first draws our attention in the book. In her Foreword she characterizes *Bone* as hard-going not because of the wrenching scenes that are to follow—some of which even her husband Ross finds impossible to read—or because of the sobering realization that death is not opposed to life but the very matrix in which life and freedom have meaning. The problem that initially concerns Woodman is that her readers will find it difficult to make sense of the book's idiosyncratic narrative form, and in particular the peculiar co-existence of different verbal and visual languages in one textual space. To be sure, the body of *Bone* is itself already a heterogeneous text, its sometimes wild excursions into the psyche's undiscovered countries barely kept in check by the journal entry dates that implacably sound off through the narrative. These dates are the chronological stitching-points that knit the fabric of this story together, and in effect prevent it from pulling itself into pieces, so ferocious is the mortal struggle at its core. But this is only part of what makes the volume "complex" (xii), as Woodman says. For the journal entries comprising the bulk of the narrative compete and cooperate with an elaborate out-work: photographs, illustrations, and images, as well as fragments drawn from poems and scattered psychological and philosophical writings in various hands. All of these materials function as a gloss on the text and form its elaborate "margin" (xii)—or rather one of its margins. What worries Woodman is how her readers will negotiate both these borders and the emotional and intellectual hinterlands that they mark. We are never sure if these extra-textual voices and perspectives are avatars of the author, externalizations of her inner life, or whether in their otherness they speak for and out of spaces of alterity by which Woodman is herself haunted—"new images," as she says, "that I don't yet comprehend" (xii). Do the marginal remarks confirm and amplify what is being said in the body of the narrative, distilling what is being experienced into memorable epigrams and summaries? Or do they allegorize that body, spiriting away its complex local densities with answers and lessons that are *grafted* onto the book's central narrative from a wholly different place?

"If the rumblings in the margins seem disruptive to the text, then you, as reader, need not be slowed down," Woodman counsels: "Skip them" (xii). Why dwell at all on this question of haste—and in a text that elsewhere avows an ambiguous faith in "the speed of bone" (221)? Why suggest to readers that the gloss itself should be glossed? I think that this is Woodman's quiet way of calling attention to the fact that the book is replete with borders, and that a great part of reading her work involves the question of how to traverse its verges of thought and feeling. That the material on the margins is more significant than Woodman at first seems willing to admit is evident in her quick change of heart about the matter. Contradicting her initial advice to her readers, she tells us that by passing over the text's margins too quickly we risk repudiating *Bone*'s most urgent details. "We are now moving at a pace that is dissolving the world into an abstraction before *we can take it in*," Woodman writes, her buried metaphor of ingestion reminding

us of the connections that obtain between slow reading and eating slowly, on the one hand, and the fast life and an indifference to sustenance, on the other. "If the marginalia slows you down, it is doing what I intended, knowing what it has done for me" (xii; emphasis added). This is a book with which to tarry, then, and not one whose insights can be taken up or cast off without remainder.

As if to ensure that we work hard at reading *Bone*, it is a text that is replete with margins, many more than the already complicated partitions dividing Woodman's journal entries from their glosses. Literary criticism in the shadow of deconstruction has taught us that the difference *between* the body of a work and its glosses almost always repeats and reproduces differences *within* each field. It is those interior partitions, perhaps less legible than the boundaries dividing Woodman's autobiographical voice from the voices of the others that she draws into her circle, to which I want principally to attend. It may be that Woodman's focus on the text's obvious, formal divisions displaces—hides, but also remembers—the analogous strata unsettling the integrity of the body of the book, and throwing into question some of its more strident claims for wholeness. In other words, the formal split between *Bone*'s body and marginalia is expected to bear away evidence of more substantial self-divisions rippling through the text. To say the least, these differences call for a *slow reading*. Friedrich Nietzsche demanded such deliberation when it came to reading writing that mattered—not the only point in *Bone* in which Woodman's work resonates with that of the German philosopher whom she otherwise derides as ushering in a world without god and without sacred books (see, for instance: Nietzsche 1997, 6).

This is the sort of interpretation that I want to bring to bear here, making tentative steps towards parsing the intricacies of Woodman's illness narrative, this, by dwelling less on its large features—its insistent arc from disaster to triumph, crucifixion to resurrection, or death to life. If we read *Bone* entirely from Sophia's perspective, everything about Woodman's psychic life is answerable to the lucidity of consciousness. But what would it mean to reverse the perspective—turn the telescope around, as it were—and to see Sophia from the point of view of the localized eddies that swirl inside *Bone*'s overall narrative and that trouble the Apollonian surety about its author's metamorphosis that is evoked by its very subtitle? What mutinous remnants haunt this extraordinary story of health and illness, loss and recompense, mortality and divinity, disrupting the economies of spirit that reconcile these terms in elegant dialectical "spirals" around Sophia's "still point"? A slow reading is a way of being in the world that ratifies the presence of these leavings in our lives, and affirms their productive and restless place amid our tempting dreams of untrammelled integrity and purposiveness. These are dreams that Woodman's book pursues, but not without a palpable degree of ambivalence. Far from being a well-wrought urn, unequivocally confident in its findings, *Bone* is a text that is riven with self-differences—and in this way it earns the right to say, as it does in its opening sentence, that it is a "book about living, not dying" (xi).

II

Sophia is the name that Woodman uses to describe the dissenting work that she conducts on behalf of the "feminine," which is the wisdom of the ages that she marshals to resist the predations of abstraction and idealization—the seductive yet suicidally destructive impulses that she identifies with the "masculine" and for which she blames modernity's sorrowful inability to bring living and dying into a meaningful convocation. These impulses, she has observed throughout her writings, form and deform the culture at large, but *Bone* is unique for exploring the extraordinary degree to which they have continued to shape her own psychic life. Among other things, Sophia means authentically *embodied* life, life lived in a manner that apprehends and prizes the subtle knot of spirit and flesh that is, as Woodman says, every person's "birthright" (168). How does one come to see and grasp this "patrimony" and make it one's own? The "body-soul work" that is a mainstay of Woodman's practice as an analyst and as a teacher has been largely devoted to nurturing this ennobling and healing task in others. The objective is not so much a decisive breakout to a wholly different universe—for where or what could that transcendent place be?—as a circuitous *return* to that universe's otherwise obscured and wounded heart. To dedicate and to re-dedicate oneself to the labour of consciousness *is* this movement of circling recollection; Sophia is therefore not a single location towards which all consciousnesses move (which would make her indistinguishable from the Christian God Woodman abandons in childhood) but, as it were, the curvature of psychic space in which the soul is given the opportunity to fashion itself.

Bone is a testament to the project of Marion Woodman's own soul-making. This is a project that was always already underway in her life but it takes the trauma of her cancer and the immanent prospect of her death to give its centrality to her life a new imperative—as if she were confronting its demands and intuiting its significances for the first time. This is the "gift" of her experience with illness, the rich but unhappy endowment that comes her way unexpectedly and without declaring itself as such. As Plato teaches, resolute attention to and concern with death (*meletē thanatou*) is what awakens the self to itself and to the need to gather up its parts into a meaningful whole. He suggests that true thinking is in essence nothing more than this act of vital self-possession before the prospect of one's death. In the words of the Czech philosopher and human rights activist, Jan Patočka (whose work Jacques Derrida reads so closely in his book, *The Gift of Death*), "the concern of the soul is inseparable from the concern for death which becomes authentic concern for life; … life is born from this event of looking death in the face" (in Derrida 1995, 16). Looking back at Woodman's *oeuvre* from the vantage-point of *Bone*, I am not sure whether all of her work isn't *mortified* in this way, a testimony to the possibilities of dying into life whose antecedents can be traced to Socrates's argument in the *Phaedo*. What makes *Bone* stand out among Woodman's other published writings, however, is the frankness with which it admits to the need for her to pursue this reparative and constitutive work in her

own life—and thus for the healer to heal herself. As she confides in her journal entries, helping others recognize their "covenant with Sophia" (14)—and thus to live a more fully realized life—had somehow led her to disregard the importance of reaffirming the same compact in herself. This irresponsible distraction from what Woodman calls her "own truth" (17) is counted as one of the causes of her cancer, and so the difficult path back to consciousness begins there, in her sacrum, where the disease appears literally and metaphorically. Like Apollo in Keats's *Hyperion*, the process of dying into life is characterized as the advent of a new dawn. The dense opacity of her tumour forms the dark background against which Woodman sets the clarifying powers of her evolving consciousness. Under the blaze of its ultimately incontestable light, she comes to discern the patterns that organize her existence and that give meaning to the anguish of her illness.

Woodman is the first to admit that a great part of herself resisted this illumination, but the overall psychological momentum of *Bone* is irrefutably one from unconsciousness to consciousness, repression to self-transparency. It is the light that enables her to parse the obscurities of the world and therefore to transform it into a truly liveable place; "consciousness makes the difference" (12), as she says, between being an ego that submits to fate, and an ego that cooperates with destiny. Step by step, Woodman brings into view not only the inner significance of her cancer but also, more powerfully, the ways in which her illness forms a part—indeed a crucially important part—of a larger voyage of consciousness begun when she was a child. "I am seeing the archetypal dimensions that have forced me towards wholeness against my will," Woodman observes; "I see the progression of spirals through which I have moved upward and downward, higher into spirit, deeper into grounding …. What an incredible map I seem to have followed!" (113). In her account of the radiation chamber, Woodman affords us a glimpse of what it means to dwell within the darkest depths of the vale of soul-making; but *Bone* does not find its centre there. Instead, in moments that surprise Woodman as much as they offer profound reassurance, she finds herself occupying a vantage point on her own life that is nothing if not divine—a placeless place from which Woodman glimpses both the centre and the circumference, the local details and the large design, the still point and the spirals around which the widening gyres of her life are oriented.

It is only because of the incandescent light of consciousness that Woodman is able to apprehend her experience with cancer not only as the traumatic destruction of the body but as the prelude towards a subtler and more fully realized mode of embodied life: as Woodman says in the opening words of *Bone*, the "shattering" effect of her illness is the means by which she assumes a path to "wholeness." There are many moments in *Bone* in which this unity is not a state to be desired but a deed to be celebrated; indeed, the book *as* a book, as a crafted story that gathers together the strands of Woodman's life and weaves them into a meaningful whole, stands as both a figure for and testament to this accomplishment. Its articulate achievement contrasts with the ragged cry of pain that it also subsumes within its covers. In the details of the narrative, we see how the light of consciousness

brings much-needed clearness to being-ill, this, primarily, by locating Woodman's experience with cancer amid a larger significance that would be all but invisible to ordinary sight. Going into her surgery, Woodman has the first intimations of this design: "[M]aybe this is the sacrifice of my feminine organs to prepare me for the next step—to release me from all physical mothering," she muses, "to release me into a new vibration in my body" (17). Through cognate narratives of purposiveness, the senselessness of disease is compelled to yield sense: the cancer is "a lesson to be learned" (5); it is the means by which her body makes itself into an "instrument" (105) that forces her to come to consciousness. For a month after the radiation treatment, there is nothing—the blank space in Woodman's diary entries speaks volumes. Then the narrative of the book starts up again, and even in her disoriented state—"still not sure who has emerged," she confides to her journal—Woodman finds much needed consolation in the outlines of an archetypal "map" of the territory ahead: "felt the crucifixion this year, and the tomb, and Easter Sunday" (132), she writes, transforming bare survival into redemption and resurrection. In a testament that makes the highest possible claims for the powers of metaphor (for Woodman, they are in the end responsible for healing what the physicians cannot cure), we are invited to take these consolatory figures seriously.

The self-achieving consciousness is monumentalized in *Bone* as a courageous convocation with Sophia. Under these mythic conditions, the remnants which resist consciousness or inhibit the apprehension of the divine marriage of soul and body can be figured as perverse. Indeed, not to accede to Sophia's light is experienced as a form of weakness, even cowardliness and apostasy. When Woodman balks at giving herself wholly over to alternative therapies that have been urged upon her by others, for example, she feels answerable to Sophia's all-seeing eyes. "I need to acknowledge that in my December 12 session with Jean I could not get by the *ifs*, and therefore could not surrender to the wisdom of the limbic system, as Jean encouraged me to do …. Fear is still stronger than faith. Forgive me, Sophia" (82). Here and elsewhere in *Bone* Woodman describes her continuing attachment to conventional medicine in terms of trepidation, irresponsibility, and perfidy—as faults requiring a kind of confession to a superior power. It is in moments like these that we see that the incandescence of consciousness not only positively illuminates the ultimate purposiveness of the nature of things; it also negatively brings a normative gaze to bear on the heart's reluctance to give itself too quickly over to that design. The aura of impotence and failure that attends Woodman's self-castigations reminds us that the claims *Bone* makes for light and clarity in the face of death are not only Apollonian but also residually masculinist inasmuch as they associate perfectly understandable hesitations with "fear," and strength with acts of heroic self-possession. But facing death need not necessarily be described in these judgmental terms as a test of the psyche's willingness and ability to triumph over doubt and self-difference. As the cultural theorist Gillian Rose wrote prior to her own cancer death, it was philosophers like Martin Heidegger who taught us to believe that "being-toward-death" was properly a matter of attaining "'a supreme

lucidity and hence a supreme virility.'" Against Heidegger, and, indeed, against a tradition of life-writing going back to Plato, Rose opposes the very different thought of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the proximity of death is "'foreign to all light'" and "'absolutely unknowable'" (Rose 1996, 133). Levinas is not interested in the subject who comes into a form of stringent clarity by steeling itself for death; it is the mortality and suffering of the *other*—and this includes the other that is also oneself—which has precedence in human life, and which deprives the self of its pretensions to mastery (see, for instance: Levinas 1998).

Levinas invites us to revalue the alterities that lie beyond and before consciousness, and to treasure their traces as evidence of our radical singularity, mortality, and unknowability. For him, we are never more ourselves than when we are most vulnerable, and thus calling out to the other for justice and responsibility. In Heidegger, by contrast, the potent philosophical subject seeks total self-sufficiency through heroic self-assertion and the disavowal of the other. In a way that has complex resonances with Woodman's project, Levinas characterizes this ascetic way of being-in-the-world as a refusal either to eat or to demonstrate a need to eat: "*Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry," he writes (Levinas 1969, 134).[1] Committed to the radiance of Sophia and the labour of consciousness, however, Woodman's book approaches Levinas's insight into the anorexic remainder haunting philosophical idealisms about facing death with caution. In her hands, what refuses to be brought into the light of day is more often banished to a deeper darkness; hence the degree to which *Bone*'s narrative is moved along not only by inclusive affirmations but also by sharp disavowals. For example, Woodman characterizes her surgery as "the letting go of something that is finished in order to move into new life" (58). Moving forward, her primary task is to make sure that this renunciation penetrates to the profoundest part of herself; and she adds: "How then to let go? How to be sure at the unconscious level that I am letting go?" (58), as if the searchlight of consciousness could sweep into the farthest corners of the psyche. On the eve of entering the radiation chamber, Woodman's resoluteness is again expressed in the form of disavowals: "Your task right now is to let the old thinking go, flush the toilet, accept the love, walk free" (124). On the Christmas Eve following her radiation therapy, she revels in a vision of the wholeness of the nature of things: "God/Goddess in every living thing—the totality of the universe" (218). But in the next sentence, we see that this totality is at best a qualified one, for it is constituted by the refusal of part of itself: "The old questions won't matter; the old answers will be obsolete" (218). When Woodman receives the diagnosis of a metastasized cancer from Dr Thomas, she prays to Sophia for, among other things, "the steadfastness to reject sentimentality" (184). As Woodman repeatedly says, the voyage of consciousness is for her a voyage of ongoing reduction, of bravely purging what is deemed to be inessential and burdensome. "Simplify. Get rid of all conflict" (205): these are the categorical imperatives of her newly

1 "*Dasein*" is the term Heidegger uses to name the barest structure of the being of human being.

embodied life, a life of light, lightness, transparency … and above all, *evacuation*: "the letting go—the clearing" (28).

But is this sort of voiding simplification possible, or, for that matter, self-evidently desirable? In one of the book's most affecting moments, Woodman recalls how her mother, on the threshold of her death, lets go of her beloved daughter. Unable to say goodbye to Woodman in person, she leaves a fragment from Shakespeare to speak on her behalf. Written out in her "beautiful handwriting," the scene her mother chooses is from *Julius Caesar*: "If we do meet again, why, we shall smile," Brutus says, bidding farewell to Cassius; "If not, why then, this parting was well made" (58). Does it matter that Woodman's mother casts their separation as one between two virile but imaginary men? In the world of actual mothers and daughters, are partings ever "well made"? Through Woodman's eyes we see what it feels like to be the remnant, the one who is let go, and from that reversed perspective it is obvious that the cut, as "beautiful" as it is, and perhaps because it is so "well made," is dissatisfying because it unfolds with otherworldly perfection. Compelled to play the role of the remainder, Woodman objects and pushes back: "I wanted you to die my way," she recalls; "God had another way" (58). So much is said in this cry from the heart: to be sure, there is anger at losing control over her mother's life, a sense of being pre-empted both by her death and by the way in which she said good-bye; but there is inconsolable grief too, not only for the loss but also for the incalculability and inaccessibility of that loss, the sorrowful realization that the mother's departure from Woodman's life cannot be economized into something that is "well-made." For can the psyche ever "simply" have done with any part of itself, much less a part of itself to which it is so deeply attached that only the extremity of a mortal illness can loosen those binds? Perhaps it is the prospect of death that prompts these fantasies of cleanly perfect divisions and reorganizations of life. Or is this faith in the purgative powers of renunciation itself an idealism of the sort that Judith Butler (1993, 27–55), Jacques Derrida (1989, 1–43), and others have associated with fantasies of achieved mourning work—work in which the psyche imagines that it can, through the heroic effort of repudiation, part with its losses without ever looking back? Is it the case that all partings are melancholically incomplete, but some forget this messy and discomforting fact, and become triumphantly mournful? These questions seem worth asking of a text which is so palpably haunted by what *remains*—beginning with the book itself, whose effect is vividly, permanently, and publically to *remember* what its author deems worthy of being abandoned and forgotten. That the book was written at all puts to us that at the very least Woodman is unwilling to disavow her disavowals, the result being that she remains connected, psychically speaking, to the very things that she has given up. She avows them, but in the negative form of renouncing them. The look forward to what she calls her "new life" is literally written in the form of a sustained look back at the "old."

Many other left-overs trouble the book's strident demands to let go: the marginal materials that Woodman at first disdains ("Skip them," she says, as if they were a meal that she could avoid), but then acknowledges as an important part

of the body of her book; the physical and psychic spaces from which Woodman's cancer was cut and burned, all absent presences forming and deforming her life; the lingering effects of the radiation on her body and spirit, including the literal and metaphorical scars she bears; the memories of her dead friend Mary, whose anguish at being alone before death Woodman remembers in order to forget (67); the sounds of the "groaning" and "weeping" patients and family members that waft unbidden and unstoppably into her head as she lies in her "radiation tank" (131), all the intimations of otherness haunting the edges of her consciousness; the loss of her beloved brother, Fraser Boa, the grief for whom, as Woodman herself admits, lies locked up in her own flesh and thus the object of a melancholic return rather than a mournful having-done-with (7). Consider too the break with the oncologist, Dr Thomas, which happens at a crucial turning point in the course of the recovery from her illness. Of that split Woodman tells us emphatically that she "hold[s] no resentment, no anger" (205). Yet she chooses to reproduce her formal letter of discharge to Thomas in its entirety, thereby preserving the renunciation of the physician even if the physician himself is renounced. And then there is the striking image of herself as her own remains, her "body going back to dust." "Think of our compost heap in which earth does go back to earth" (184), she writes in her journal, folding metaphors drawn from the burial service into more familial and domestic terms. Up until this point in the book, the move to the beautiful new house on Sydenham Street in London, Ontario has figured forth the birth of Woodman's embodied psyche; not surprisingly, given the logic of sacrifice that governs the book's narrative, this move is accompanied by a decisive disavowal: "only essentials going to the new house," she insists: "Move into the new life. That is where it is to happen. High ceilings, light, a garden, fresh air, fresh sunlight, new hope" (28–9). But Sydenham, like the psyche for which it is a metaphor, is not only this scene of space and illumination, for we learn that out back, away from the light, the home's cast-offs ferment in the darkness and also make their claims on Woodman's thoughts. For a strange moment, Woodman allows that the protected home is also a kind of cemetery or bone-yard, exposed to an otherness for which there is no conscious apprehension: "This is not metaphor," Woodman flatly says; "so be it" (184). Although untranslatable into the idiom of the archetype, the "compost" nevertheless asserts its rightful place in the nature of things.

The tensions surrounding the irreducible remainder that limns consciousness without necessarily being drawn into its light become perhaps most apparent around Woodman's characterization of the surgery to remove her "carcinoma of the endometrium" (15). "My baby was born by Caesarean section and disposed of," she writes, self-consciously rejecting the diagnostic terminology of the physicians, "—but a baby, nonetheless, that forever changed my life" (167). Woodman has just told us that the "metaphorical connection between birth and death is very strong in [her] … psyche" (167), perhaps to prepare us for this strange way to imagine the nature and fate of her cancer. But it is worth noting here how even Woodman's language strains to accommodate what it has been being asked to

explain metaphorically: the growth in her uterus must be cut away, all traces annihilated if she is to survive her illness. But at the same moment as Woodman speaks of "disposing" of the cancer, it is refashioned as a spectral "baby" who is figuratively speaking dead to the precise extent that it remains alive to Woodman's memory. The literal act of having-done with the tumour competes with the figural translation of that act into a violent giving-birth; yet the cancer remains, to the extent that it resists its too easy sublimation into the form of a "baby," even one that is stillborn. Nothing could more powerfully call for being cast off than the cancer, yet Woodman experiences that saving rejection as an abortion that allows her to recuperate her loss as a loss of *life*—albeit a monstrous and fatally parasitic life, without coherence and quite possibly at the far side of the recuperative powers of metaphor. In the end, the cancer surgery that forms the literal ground for these elaborate figures insists itself, this, by throwing into relief the macabre over-reaching of Woodman's metaphors. Bordering on the hallucinatory, these figures possess consolatory power for Woodman, but from the readers' perspective they call attention to the hyperbolic demands that Woodman's archetypal understanding places on her illness—and to the ways in which her illness can resist those demands, bringing the edifice of metaphor crashing down to earth. Of the cancer we might indeed also say, "This is not metaphor. So be it."

Woodman often characterizes her disavowals as a stripping down, "letting irrelevant matter go …. Lightening up, simplifying in order to concentrate on essentials" (112). Fleshless "bone" is the book's metaphor *par excellence* for this emaciated purity. But one cannot read these figures of refinement and deprivation (and refinement *as* deprivation) and not also see the striking similarity between the principle means by which Woodman renews her covenant with Sophia and much less felicitous forms of renunciation that are explored in the text. For isn't the psyche that takes pride and pleasure in "lightening up" and "letting go" not also in some spectral sense an anorexic psyche? Does the fiercely reiterated desire to buoy herself up through a process of divestiture not mimic a more archaic lust operating in Woodman's psyche, the thing of darkness that she struggles to acknowledge as her own? Is the path of unburdening simplification—a path that is undertaken, precisely, in the name of turning from "old eating patterns, old patterns of relationship" (40)—not evidence of the survival of these patterns, a repetition of the addiction to perfection, albeit in a finer tone? "When I *was* anorexic," Woodman tells us, "I always felt that starvation brought me close to God. It brought me close to death, a Demon Lover, whose radiance lured my senses into a life so exquisite I yearned to escape gross matter" (62; emphasis added). By safely locating this condition of disavowal in the past, Woodman repudiates the will to repudiate, lightening herself of the burden of the craving for lightness that once controlled her life. But is the irrefutable lucidity of consciousness, the clarity that it offers to Woodman in her darkest hour, not itself a form of this seductive "radiance"? As she puts it, "Starvation is a metaphor for getting out of an impossible situation—death to the old and maybe hope for the new" (81). In its local context, Woodman is thinking both of herself as a younger woman and that

aspect of her present self which, in agreeing to undergo the killingly destructive radiation treatment, "colludes" with the desire to withdraw from life. But does this account of starvation not also exactly describe the process of dying *into* life—the move from the "impossible situation" of the cancer diagnosis and treatment, through a period punctuated by increasingly demanding renunciations ("death to the old"), all in expectation of "hope for the new"?

This is a difficult and counterintuitive thought, to be sure, but provoked by a book that brims with such possibilities and that does nothing but encourage them in its readers. An anorexic remainder haunts Woodman's myth of feminine consciousness as its dark semblance. We see this most clearly near the book's conclusion. On New Year's Day, 1995, Woodman feels "caught between two worlds, trying to move into new imagery, still not knowing what's in the bones in my back" (221). Then, a flash of certainty and a flood of images: "One thing I do know: I am no longer ashamed of having been anorexic. I yearned for lightness; I still yearn for lightness. Lightness is freedom—freedom from the heaviness of too much stuff, too many words, too heavy a pull toward inertia …. I yearned for bone—the lightness of bone, the stark reality of bone, the speed of bone, the beauty of bone" (221–2). It would take a great deal properly to unpack the complexities of this admission, but for the purposes of this argument it is important to emphasize not only Woodman's unexpected turn towards embracing—rather than forsaking—her anorexic impulses, but also the unblushing surefootedness with which she makes this turn. With respect to her anorexic desires, she is here more like a woman who seeks the thing she loves, than one who flees from something she dreads. Elsewhere in the book, Woodman prides herself in the hard-won consciousness that anorexia means falling prey to the seductions of the Demon Lover, "the pathological idealism" that "continues to murder the feminine that cherishes life" (216). But on New Year's Day comes a clarity about the nature of that clarity, a consciousness not about the seductive powers of the Demon Lover but about the consciousness that makes those powers visible. "[B]one … bone … bone … bone": the self-conscious tolling of the title of the book puts to us how Woodman herself grasps the uncanny resemblance between the yearning for lightness that is anorexia and the cherishing of the feminine that is the covenant with Sophia. As Woodman tells us in the next sentence, honouring the "feminine, right here and now in my body, my bone" is inevitably caught up in the labour of "letting the weight of possessions go" (222). The greatest threat to consciousness is that in its ferocious quest to unburden itself it falls over into the idealization and wasting abstraction that it abhors. For the dark side of taking on the beauty and speed and lightness of bone in the name of escaping what feels like inertia can also mean the *skeletalization* of the psyche. The very title of Woodman's book inadvertently remembers that discomforting possibility.

"Let your last remnants of your yearning for God-like perfection go," Woodman notes towards the end of her book, calling for a final and therefore monumentally decisive act of renunciation. But does a fully-embodied life lie on the other side of that perfect release … or does death? In the name of what, if not another kind of

ascetic purity, is this summons made? What but another way of being in the world whose rarity and worth is predicated on the disavowal of those elements that are deemed to be a contagion? All disavowals in *Bone* have in a sense been a prelude to the casting off of these "last remnants," the disposal of all that remains—or is imagined to remain—between Woodman's partly unconscious earlier life and the authentically realized existence that awaits her in the face of death. "Cherish your imperfect humanity," she continues: "Die into life" (207–8). Insofar as the call to consciousness is also an expression of this "yearning" for "perfection," Woodman here finds herself at a profound limit. *For the very act of disavowing the seductive desire for flawlessness re-inscribes the arc of that desire anew*. The "last remnant" is last in the sense of being irreducible because it is produced and reproduced by Woodman's impulse to lighten herself of its weight.

Perhaps it is no accident that this is the moment when Woodman most pointedly recalls the origins of her book's subtitle in Keats's poetic fragment, *Hyperion*. As she says, "I hope I can 'with fierce convulse / Die into life'" (207). We should recall that in the third, uncompleted book of *Hyperion*, Apollo, the young sun god, attempts, like Woodman, to come into consciousness with the assistance of the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne. Apollo's new life is obscurely connected not to the disavowal of the past but to its conservation. At the moment that Apollo passes from a twilight state of hiddenness into brilliant visibility, he suffers pangs that evoke childbirth even as they conjure up death—a tortured transitional moment that naturally speaks to Woodman and explains why these lines in Keats are ones to which she returns several times in her book. But what is not remembered about the Keats passage also haunts her use of it. For *Hyperion* breaks off at this point, and was abandoned by the poet, as if in writing these words down something unexpected had dawned upon him. Has Apollo and the creator-poet for which he is an idealistic figure in fact ascended to a higher mode of being? Keats is not altogether confident in the answer to that question, as ferociously pressing as it is to him on this, the eve of his own mortal illness and in the shadow of his brother's death. The poet-creator struggles to be born, and to divest himself of the dreamy naiveté of the pastoral in which he had once found comfort, however illusory; but at the point of that parturition a terrible doubt falls across his path, a sense that his own declaration of authenticity rings false, tolling him back to his sole self. What is this virile "life" into which he so grandly aspires to die? In turning to the classical language of *Hyperion* Keats exchanges the language of the pastoral for that of epic. But is this necessarily the progress towards enlightenment that it feels at that moment to be? Or has he simply moved from one mythical universe to another, exchanging abstractions but describing this exchange as the triumph of life, the violent leap *from* a dead (because lifeless) world *to* a living one that dies? The fact that the poem breaks off at this point is perhaps the most palpable answer that Keats could give—it is the way the poem abstains from answering; and in that self-fracturing gesture, *Hyperion* signals an inconclusive attachment to the world of Apollonian light towards which it turns so expectantly. Keats's speaker lays

claim to dying into life, but then shudders to a halt, the poem ceasing at the precise moment that it appears to begin, or rather to begin anew.

Keats is a crucial part of the secular scripture informing Woodman's thinking; along with Shakespeare and the Bible, it is his work that she carries with her into the inferno of the radiation chamber. In what ways does *Bone: Dying into Life*, whose title directs us to this crisis point in Keats's life and work, also register a similar crisis—but protect itself from this crisis by remembering it in the form of someone else's words? For I do think that a part of Woodman is wary of the claims made for this life into which she dies, especially insofar as that life demands an ascesis that is structurally indistinguishable from the anorexia of her earlier self, a life which imagines itself as having purged from its subtle body the "last remnant." More than any other Romantic poet, perhaps, Keats resisted the tendency to be blinded by his idealisms, including those most tempting of idealisms—the ones that appear to offer a foolproof escape from idealism. Woodman's allegiance to Keats is, I think, a secret fealty to that difficult insight, even if she appears to take the poet's faith in a wrenching transformation without remainder at face value. Elsewhere in the book there are significant signs, however, that Woodman senses the difference between claiming and actually showing that the enlightened state of the covenant with Sophia is unquestionably superior. Wrestling with whether to take the full course of radiation therapy, for instance, Woodman resists giving herself over to "the power of that machine and the perfectionist mind that controls it" (73). Her friend Pauline objects to that objection, probing the deepest presuppositions of Woodman's stance. You see a killing perfectionism in the biomedical technology of the medical regime, Pauline points out; but isn't your faith in the healing powers of consciousness itself a perfectionism, and thus no less murderously indifferent to life? "'You know,' she said, 'idealization can be a lack of femininity. If you idealize to the point of blinding yourself to what may save your life, that is not being on the side of life, the positive side of the feminine. Blindness is negative'" (73). Woodman's response to the corrosive powers of Pauline's insight is at best noncommittal, and the conversation quickly turns from Woodman's psyche to the psyches of other unnamed "women" (74). But this deflection does nothing to reduce the significance of the interrogation at the hands of Pauline, who is, after all, an avatar of Woodman, an other who speaks for an alterity that thrives within Woodman herself—and thrives to the point that she is given a role in the narrative of *Bone*. Another way of saying this is that if the first person voice in *Bone*—identified as Marion—speaks for an abiding faith in the feminine, she does not and cannot speak for the book as a whole, which, in the form of Pauline, contains a critique of itself. Pauline models a "feminist" consciousness whose principle target is the frightening prospect of a "feminism" that will risk death to be on the side of life.

That "feminism" is surely what Woodman elsewhere calls a "projection." And as she tells us, when it comes to "muster[ing] every ounce of Spiritual Warrior in myself to defend my feminine feelings and values" there are "No projections allowed!" (62). What is revealing is that this declaration of the need to unburden

herself of projections—more "yearning for the lightness of bone"—is made at the conclusion of the one journal entry in which Woodman most calls attention not only to their operation but also to the ways in which they pre-empt experience as much as they give shape and meaning to it. For Woodman has here recalled a trip that Ross makes to New York during the course of her illness; as she claims, even her loving husband must for a time be renounced, "moved off" (62), lest she be distracted from the true path of consciousness. The notion that Ross could in fact be disposed of, even momentarily, seems fantastically unlikely, a fact confirmed by Woodman's own journal entries which re-inscribe his metaphorical presence in his literal absence. While in New York Ross sees *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize winning play about HIV/AIDS—one of the few occasions in *Bone* in which Woodman acknowledges the rich world of illness narratives that informs her own story. Woodman does not see the play herself, and hears of its details only second-hand, through her husband's reporting of them. But the narrative structure of the journal entry in which this occasion is remembered is very telling, for *before* any of Ross's perceptions of the play are even mentioned, Woodman rewrites the play so that it becomes an allegory of the struggle to reaffirm the covenant with Sophia. Ross has told her that "The Great Work begins" is the play's evocative last line, but rather than considering how, in its own context, this turn of phrase grows out the play for which it effects closure, it triggers in her a surge of interpretive labour that drains Kushner's story of its own details and replaces them with a story that sounds uncannily like the story that *Bone* is telling. "The Great Work that is beginning is the realization of the feminine as the bridge between God and humankind," she writes, proceeding to give a brief but detailed analysis of the play's archetypal dimensions. *Bone* overwrites *Angels in America*, and for the moment that superimposition is given the full weight of Woodman's authority as an analyst. Only at the end of this move on the play does Woodman pause, noting—albeit tentatively—that what she has been saying with such confidence may not be fair to Kushner's vision: "But I'm not sure that's what *Angels in America* is about," she concedes.

A week later, in a different journal entry, Woodman returns to the matter of the play, where she more frankly admits that her views about its details were "straight idealization" (70).

> Ross saw a Nietzschean world, a world where there is no god, no sacred book. We are on our own. We have to improvise and do what we can for ourselves. "The Great Work" is the invention of ourselves, even as the play is an invention of ourselves. And as for the angel, she flies on pulleys that we can see, an impoverished homemade creature.

"So much for that projection!," Woodman writes, but "At least I brought to consciousness what I think 'The Great Work' is" (70). Woodman acknowledges that she has simplified and abstracted the play but recuperates her self-conscious surprise at so fundamentally mistaking its content by reassuring herself that even in

error she continues on the path of consciousness. But in context, this seems like a half-hearted justification, especially when set against the more passionate account of the play that Ross provides. Whatever Woodman *says* has happened, these two journal entries tell a somewhat different story. We are most often told that grasping the archetypal dimensions of reality is a matter of holding the illuminating mirror of consciousness up to the nature of things; but here we see not so much a mirror at work, as a lamp, and, as it were, catch Woodman in the act of projecting upon reality what may only be true only in her own imagination. For it is Woodman who is improvising here, not the supposedly deprived characters moving about Kushner's stage, and it is Woodman who self-consciously draws our attention to it. In other words, we are afforded the opportunity to see in Woodman what she eventually sees and regrets in Kushner's play, namely the possibility that what feels like a universal truth, more evidence of how "God organizes our lives" (61), is in fact "an invention of ourselves."

For a brief moment, it is as if the curtain is raised on the work of consciousness and revealed to be a projection—not an account of the nature of things but a device that is "homemade" and that "flies on pulleys." Is *Bone* itself not such a device? In these journal entries about Kushner are we not given a chance to observe the machinery of consciousness, the push and pull of the book's own pulleys? Woodman barely contains that realization about the work of consciousness by associating it with what she dismisses as "a Nietzschean world," a world she experiences as "impoverished." Yet in admitting that her interpretation of Kushner's play is an "idealization" and a "projection," Woodman also tacitly concedes that the myth of consciousness is not without its own impoverishment. *Angels in America*, or rather, Ross's "Nietzschean" view of it, stands as a figure for all that resists the idealizing designs that *Bone* has on reality—that is, as another instance of an irreducible remainder, a remainder, moreover, that is allowed in the second journal entry to "splutter back into life" after having been relegated to the margins by the forcefulness of Woodman's glossing powers. I am not so sure that the notion that, in this world, "We are on our own," and that "We have to improvise and do what we can for ourselves," is nearly as far from Woodman's project of soul-making as her dismissal of it as "Nietzschean" suggests. Woodman wants to dispose of that surprising connection between her book and Kushner's play by locating the latter in a universe of nihilist abstraction, but the fact that it is also a universe that is identified with and filtered through Ross—who haunts the book—reminds us that the world of *Angels* is closer to Woodman's psyche than at first might appear. The threatening if counterintuitive proximity of *Angels* to *Bone* would help explain the preemptive way in which Woodman attempts to assimilate Kushner's universe to her own, only to end up conceding the violence of that move.

What is revealing is that between the two journal entries concerning *Angels*, Woodman circles back to the question of "projections." It is as if in the days between simplifying the play and realizing the violence of that simplification, Woodman is prompted to consider the role of other idealizations in her life and work. We know that the book is about to suffer a seismic shift because Woodman cites Susan

Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* in the margins: "Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning—the meaning being invariably a moralistic one …. The disease itself becomes a metaphor" (67). In many respects *Bone* is written *against* Sontag's influential reflection on the representation of disease—particularly cancer narratives—since it is an exploration of metaphor as a source of healing rather than as a fund of stigmatization. But for a moment Woodman pauses to reconsider this faith, and to allow for the possibility that the work that she is doing in the name of consciousness (which is work whose primary goal is to give meaning to illness, her own and others') also risks moralizing it, fitting it to normative frameworks that coarsen human experience even as it claims to alleviate suffering. Woodman responds to Sontag's observation with a list of "punitive" metaphors by which her own illness has been characterized:

> "It's the father complex, kills the mother, tears out the womb." Or "It's the Negative Mother imprinted on your cells driving you to death." Or "Endometrial cancer is found to have a hereditary factor." Or "You never gave up your grief for Fraser. Your grief is destroying you." Or "Tear things to shreds. Let your rage go." Or "The cancer personality gives all to others and keeps nothing for itself, and when it has given all, it gives more." (68)

What is astonishing about these competing narratives of illness, these different ways of bringing cancer to the bar of consciousness, is that not one is without relevance to Woodman's own project of soul-making. Yet they are dismissed as aggressive denials of her life rather than lucid explanations of her encounter with death. "Projections! Projections!," she exclaims, in a journal entry that is remarkable for being one of the few instances in *Bone* in which Woodman allows herself outwardly to express a flash of anger. As projections, they are improvisations that say much more about the projectors' "love of death" than the ill person's need to live. These are the myths and stories for which the ill subject is cruelly "sacrificed," as Woodman says, but it seems important to say they are also idealizations that *Bone* elsewhere affirms and explores to one degree or another. All of these dismissed stories of Woodman's cancer are also stories that *Bone* tells, even if they are characterized here as explanations of her illness that have been violently imposed upon her by others: the family history of cancer, the melancholic attachment to Fraser, the depletions that she suffers for playing the maternal role with her patients and students, each of these epidemiologies Woodman must also acknowledge as her own. And as she suggests, things get complicated when the sick subject does the most embarrassing thing: rather than dying according to plan, she "splutters back into life" (68)! Woodman is herself an instance of that messy excess, inasmuch as she here demurs the projections for which she is also responsible for putting into play in *Bone*. The projections that she castigates are at once hers and not-hers, familiar and unfamiliar; this is an indeterminacy for which *Bone* seems uneasily prepared, not least because it remembers that Woodman's life is larger than the designs that would explain it. In his contribution to a volume

honouring his wife's writings, Ross Woodman observes that "Marion's life and work resides not in the construction of a masculine system, but in the feminine deferral of it" (2005: 79). Yet Woodman's renunciating gesture threatens at points to take on elements of the masculine system it would rather let go—especially its asceticism, and its faith in a higher orderliness. What saves it from becoming what it beholds are these moments of self-difference, the internal margins where the book interrogates its most passionately held assumptions. Embracing the uncertainty of its own future readings by writing against herself, Woodman refuses the last temptation, the temptation to be seduced by the anorexic requirements of her own system. These are the moments in which her text "splutters back into life."

We have only begun to read Marion Woodman's *Bone: Dying into Life*.

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