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"I" and "You" as fragile fabrications of the imagination: Betty Roland's *The Eye of the Beholder*

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Abstract

Betty Roland (1903–1996) is perhaps best known as a career dramatist for stage and radio in Australia and the United Kingdom. But Roland was also a prolific contributor to a print-culture that encompassed the influences of other countries in which she travelled, worked, and lived. These included (Stalinist) Russia in the 1930s, England in the 1950s, and Greece in the 1960s. In fact, there are few zones of literature into which the Australian-born Roland did not venture between the late 1920s and 1990. Her body of work comprises, for example, three volumes of autobiography, a travel memoir, four children's books, four romance novels, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as film and comic book scripts. Roland's artistic temperament, liberal social views and left-wing political stance, meant she was a part of male-dominated bohemian cultures and radical art theatre movements in Sydney and Melbourne in the 1930s and 40s. Her auto/biographical book, *The Eye of the Beholder* (1984), which is the subject of this essay, is ostensibly a study of Montsalvat, an artist's colony, which was established in 1935 near Melbourne, Victoria. However, the book is principally concerned with Roland's love–hate relationship with the colony's founder, Justus Jørgensen. Roland writes herself into the time and space of Montsalvat to create an auto/biographical script where "I" and "You" are reimagined and brought together. In Roland's retrospective narrative, past selves are objectified through the act of writing them in the present. As a consequence, the boundaries between auto/biography and fiction are blurred.

Keywords

eye, betty, beholder, fabrications, fragile, you, i, roland, imagination

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“I” and “You” as Fragile Fabrications of the Imagination:
Betty Roland’s *The Eye of the Beholder*

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Betty Roland (1903-96) is perhaps best known as a career dramatist for stage and radio in Australia and the United Kingdom.¹ But Roland was also a prolific contributor to a print-culture that encompassed the influences of other countries in which she travelled, worked and lived. These included (Stalinist) Russia in the 1930s, England in the 1950s and Greece in the 1960s. There are few zones of literature into which the Australian-born Roland did not venture between the late 1920s and 1990, both to meet the demands of her chosen career and to support herself and her daughter, Gilda Baracchi.² Roland wrote articles for newspapers, and numerous women’s magazines, comic strip dialogue (*Girl, Swift*) poetry, short travel stories and film scripts (for example, *The Spur of the Moment*, said to be the first Australian ‘talkie’, in 1931 under the name Betty M. Davies). Her works also include three volumes of autobiography, *Caviar for Breakfast* (1979; revised 1989), which recounts her experiences in Russia, *An Improbable Life* (1989) and *The Devious Being* (1990). In addition there is a travel memoir, *Lesbos the Pagan Island* (1963), four children’s novels and four Mills and Boon romances. All of Roland’s books are out of print.

The Eye of the Beholder, which tells of the comings and goings of painters, poets and sculptors in the early days of Montsalvat (‘my salvation’), the artists’ colony at Eltham near Melbourne, Australia, also forms part of Roland’s remarkably chequered *oeuvre* and is the subject of this paper. The book is Roland’s account of the “self-styled philosopher and founder” (1984: 11)³ of Montsalvat, Justus Jørgensen (1893-1975), crosscut with experiences and events in the author’s own life from 1928 until the late 1970s, many of which are reproduced in her autobiographical trilogy.⁴ Roland was 77 years old in 1990 when the last volume of the trilogy was published. The three books are created from memory, self-penned diaries and journals. When taken together, they provide a fascinating insight into the

burgeoning modern cultures of the various countries in which Roland worked and lived over an extended period of time. In part at least, the texts paint a picture of a feminine self informed by international travel, social bonds and left-wing political affiliations, but does so from the perspective of a woman forever on the outside looking in. A particular focus of the texts is Roland's relationships with the three men who mattered most in her life: her ex-husband Ellis Davies, her communist lover, Guido Baracchi, and the master of Montsalvat, Justus Jørgensen whom she names as the one she understood least but "had the most profound effect on [her]" (11). Read as a biography, *The Eye of the Beholder* is an interpretive understanding of the philosophy of life, marriage and (in)fidelity espoused by Jørgensen, his influence on the people who helped him to build Montsalvat and Roland's reconstruction of her love-hate relationship with him. As Roland tells it, Jørgensen was an enigmatic, boastful man possessed of a seductive personal magic that was powerful enough to override his ruthless treatment of others and bind them to him. This paper addresses the complexities of Roland's backward looking view of Jørgensen's complicated nature, conceptualised within a narrative frame of reference that involves the interplay of power relations between writer and written subject. As Nicole Moore writes:

... Jørgensen's life and family history is the text's extensive time frame, and the most ordinarily biographical sections of the book are those detailing his ancestors and his life before Roland knew him. Their lives interconnect, of course, but operate also in opposition. The shifts between them are power struggles, a fight for authority as Roland exploits her presumed status as biographer to justify departure from that role into autobiography. (1991: 36)

Roland wrote *The Eye of the Beholder* whilst living at Montsalvat between 1972 and 1979, drawing extensively on an array of memoirs, letters, diaries and journals made available to her by Jørgensen and Helen Skipper, his long-term mistress and mother of two of his children. Helen was the youngest daughter of one of Montsalvat's early pioneers and

financial supporters, Mervyn Skipper, an author of children's books as well as editor and cultural critic for *The Bulletin* magazine in the 1920s and 30s. Apart from those already mentioned, Roland makes no sharp distinction between the influence of other men and women in her life. She does, however, acknowledge that much of the inspiration for *The Eye of the Beholder* comes from Mervyn Skipper's journals. Skipper was a participant, observer and chronicler of life at Montsalvat from the colony's earliest days until his death in 1958. According to Roland, he admired Jørgensen to the point of worship. She also claims that without Skipper's patronage Montsalvat "could never have been built" (48). In Roland's account, Skipper filled his life with family, work and Jørgensen. As she puts it, he was "an avid listener who noted everything Justus said, quoted him on every possible occasion and wrote flattering accounts of him in the *Bulletin*" (97). But, as Roland has it, Jørgensen repaid Skipper's admiration by behaving like a bully towards him, declaring for example, that his bouts of ill-health were just "a convenient excuse for being a failure" (102). For Roland Jørgensen's tokens of disrespect were a "handy stick with which to beat" (101) Skipper and disrupt the equanimity of his family.

Roland's opposition towards what she saw as Jørgensen's capacity to dominate and control the lives of those who helped build Montsalvat is evident throughout the book. However, her private letters conceded the vulnerability of her position as the chronicler subsequently chosen by him to write its history.⁵ There was, she feared, a very real possibility that she would be alienated from the commune, and the friendships she had made over many years destroyed, if her observations of life there were seen to be too harsh, or to stem from a desire to cut Jørgensen down to size.⁶ But rarely in life do such opportunities present themselves to a writer. Having been given Jørgensen's blessing to make use of the papers held in the colony's archives proved too tempting for Roland to resist. Instead, Montsalvat became the setting for

the exercise of auto/biographical narrative power and for a story she came to see as her “spiritual duty” to write.⁷

To produce her version of life at Montsalvat under Jörgensen, Roland referred to her own diarised and recalled experiences linked to a transcription of the writings of others, among them Jörgensen’s wife Lily as well as Mervyn Skipper and his wife Lena. Roland’s methodology meant that she acted as assembler, reader, author, editor and narrating subject, to produce a recognisable “revised real” (Gilmore 2001: 125) version of how Jörgensen acted out his authority within a self-styled bohemian environment. Simply put, Jörgensen’s invitation established Roland’s authority to rework disparate literary discourses, extensively peppered with her own, to create a type of afterlife for the authors of the documents he made available to her. In the process of writing about others, she wrote about herself in relation to them, to produce an auto/biographical script in which the “I” and “You” were brought together in the performance of narrative. Indeed the performative nature of the text is made clear by the inclusion of a list of “Dramatis Personae” (np) even before the story begins. Given this, and as the title of the also book suggests, it would be a mistake to assume that Roland’s narrative follows an auto/biographical code which invites readers “to trust it, to take its observations at face value” (Davey 1997: 127). Rather, like many other forms of storytelling, whether on the stage or on page, a self-conscious exercise of the imagination is in play – to the full extent of the pun..

The voice of the text is retrospective, authoritative and unmistakably Roland’s. Yet many of the sets of ideas she presents as arising from the records of witnessing individuals are ‘spoken’ in her absence, their meaning grasped only in relation to Roland’s chosen discourses

of representation. What readers are presented with, is an imaginative discursive construction whereby the distinction between the auto/biography and fiction becomes blurred. Donna Bennett puts it well when she observes that “the act of constructing a biographical narrative is, by its nature, already an act of fictionmaking” (1997: 203), a fiction of a fiction, if you will. Given the desire of any writer to tell a good story, it is impossible to know how much or how little of Roland’s auto/biographical narrative involves gaps, the refining of events for dramatic effect, or the collusion between non-fiction and fiction. It might also be argued, however, that despite her use of first person singular “I” Roland’s reconstructive interpretive process has the effect of introducing a certain “we-ness” into her narration that confers communal rather than individual control over her writing of the Montsalvat story. By simulating thoughts and words that were not her own, Roland effectively “disperses herself into the past, into the stories of others” (Smith 1993: 100) as signifiers of her ever-changing sense of self as a social being. The multi-layered discursive practices of the narrative not only reflect the current position of Roland as the teller of the tale but also transform the subjective “I” or all-seeing, authoritative “Eye” into a socio-culturally connected “We”. Such a “We” comes out of a “profusion of positions [which] recognize the textuality of [women’s] autobiographical identity” (Gilmore 1994: 40) as negotiated, or (per)formed socially, within and across time and space. The result is a dramatic and at times traumatic story about the part Roland claims to have played in the private and public lives of people, described in immuring terms by Mervyn Skipper’s eldest daughter, Sonia, as Montsalvat’s first “inmates” (2005: 88).⁸

The story opens with Roland’s attention-capturing confession that during her lifetime 64 men had made love to her,⁹ a bold revelation which appears directly opposite a photograph of a portrait of her, painted by Sir John Langstaff in the early 1930s. In contrast to the author’s

confession of sexual wantonness, Langstaff gives us a demure “Betty”, a smartly dressed, well-groomed, prim and passive young woman with her eyes averted from the artist’s (viewer’s) gaze. The placement of Roland’s spicy disclosure alongside Langstaff’s more angelic representation of her creates a discordant sense of unity where the words on the page make a mockery of the painted image. The lack of fit between the two also signals the ambiguity which haunts all artistry as well as the range of representational forms within which identity may emerge in the course of a lifetime. Roland’s divulgence is enticing and may well encourage readers to surmise that what follows promises to be a candid account of her lived experiences not previously made public. Such apparent openness also grants Roland a level of credibility which endures in autobiography when understood as the reality of a past life recalled and relayed by a narrating self from a position in the present. Yet the conflict between written text and painted image also highlights the fact that just as words on a page assume an authority they do not necessarily have, Langstaff’s portrait is merely a reflection of the artist’s view of his subject. In the light of what she admits (or maintains) about her sexual escapades, the painting does not depict Betty Roland’s version of herself and in fact presents her as something she proclaims she was not. This seems to suggest that readers (beholders) should not lose sight of the fact that the account Betty Roland gives of herself as the autobiographical “I” of the text is every bit a fragile fabrication as its biographical “You”, Justus Jörgensen, the perplexing Master of Montsalvat.

Justus Jörgensen and the birth of Montsalvat

Jörgensen – “Jorgy” or “Norway” to his friends – was the Australian-born son of a Norwegian sailor, Simon Jacob Englehardt, and Nora Schieber, a once aspiring opera singer and the daughter of a Melbourne architect. Jörgensen was born into a Catholic family. As his niece Jenny Teichmann observes, Jörgensen had been moulded by the church but had rejected

its authority whilst still believing “in the *possibility* of rightful authority” (2005: 38), a credo which Roland asserts he put into practice at Montsalvat.¹⁰ In 1916 Jörgensen met and became a pupil of the Scottish-born Australian artist, Max Meldrum (1875-1955). Well known for his “fiery disposition” (132), and his competitive and quarrelsome nature (Teichman: 2005, Sparrow: 2007), Meldrum was a pioneer of the Australian Tonalist painting system in post-World-War 1, Melbourne. Among his other followers, who were known as “Meldrumites”, were artists Colin Colahan, Archie Colqhoun, Arthur Monday and Clarice Beckett, to name but a few. All of these artists came together in the formation of Montsalvat and each achieved a degree of prominence in Australian art circles.

As a Meldrumite, Jörgensen was a member of male-dominated Australian bohemia of the modernist *avant-garde* era of the 1930s and 40s. Roland’s artistic temperament, liberal social views and left-wing political stance, meant that she also was an accepted part of the same bohemian cultures and radical art theatre movements in Sydney and Melbourne. The Australian bohemian tradition is generally thought to have begun in the 1860s with the English immigrant, larrikin, man about town and author, Marcus Clarke (Kirkpatrick, 1992). Bohemia in the Clarke tradition was practised by ensuing generations of artists and writers keen to foster a masculinist philosophy of erotic idealism and empathy for the environment. Jörgensen’s love of the environment stemmed not from Australia, however, but from a desire to continue a love affair he had with Burgundy in France where he travelled as a young man. As Colin Colahan observes, “Justus fell completely in love with Burgundy. Montsalvat was a child of this love” (cited in Teichmann, 2005: 5). During a visit to Montsalvat in 1941 Roland describes its French-Gothic-inspired buildings and the great hall in particular in fantastical terms as “improbable, incongruous, majestic [...] a piece of medieval Europe in the Australian bush” (157).

What Jörgensen had come up with was an architecture that spoke of the intertwined nature of Australian and European colonial histories bound up with a need to define his sense of self and place at the intersection of both. The distinctive mixture of materials and styles of the Montsalvat buildings, set as they are within a consequentially transfigured Australian landscape, nevertheless strike a false note. They speak of what author Michael Ondaatje has termed colonial bastardy (cited in Boehmer 1995: 130), of a hybridised aesthetic arising from cultural displacement for many people of European origin in the twentieth century. It is no small irony that it is not for his paintings Jörgensen is best known today, but for Montsalvat, a world arising from the traditional European bourgeois values which, as discussed below, he claimed to reject. That said, Sonia Skipper cites Australian modernist artist and Montsalvat resident, Arthur Munday, as saying Jörgensen was “90% an ordinary man and it is the 10% we find interesting” (2005: 130). Additionally, in his foreword to Roland’s book, John Olsen describes Jörgensen as “an extraordinary man, full of the contradictions that a measure of genius brings with it” (1984: np), a further comment which suggests Jörgensen was seen as exceptional on some level at least.

Visionary or Monster?

In her memoir *My Story*, which was published 21 years after *The Eye of the Beholder*, Sonia Skipper recounts various activities on the site which, for her helped to weld individuals into a community. The picture Sonia Skipper paints of early Montsalvat is of young, willing-to-work, enthusiastic students full of laughter and fun. As she tells it, Jörgensen’s students acquired many skills, from sex to sculpture, to leadlight window-making whilst serving the Master’s interests (2005, 80).

In the opening pages of *The Eye of the Beholder*, however, rather than representing Jörgensen in language that aligns him with fun, learning and diverse kinds of physical activity, Roland only just falls short of painting him as a monster capable of cruel and violent acts. She makes it clear that, in her experience, Jörgensen showed himself to be a man who consistently abused his followers psychologically and verbally. Roland's view is that Jörgensen's mistreatment of his devotees, both male and female, epitomised unacceptable authoritarian-based values and actions which, historically, have been a central structuring feature in patriarchal colonial societies. There are numerous studies that address this issue. (see for example, Ashcroft Griffiths Tiffin: 1989, Bhabha: 1990, McClintock: 1995, Said: 1978, Spivak: 1999, Young: 1990). Roland comes to hate Jörgensen (195) for his tyrannical divide and rule politics and, for her, confusion and distrust were the lived realities of Montsalvat's residents (205, 212). Yet, as mentioned earlier, Roland also states that, Jörgensen, (11), was one of just three who "had made any lasting impact" (11) or had sufficient influence on her to be meaningful in her lifetime. This leads to the supposition that her sense of self as consequential was grounded in relation to him and his reception of her, both as a woman and a writer. But as Sonia Skipper observes, painting, not writing, was the abiding passion of Jörgensen and his followers (2005: 47), just as it had been for the Meldrumites, whom Roland describes as congenial but discriminating. As she writes:

friendly [...] and warm though their welcome was, there was a barrier through which I could not pass. Perhaps that was because I was a writer, not a painter, therefore not of the elect. Not that it mattered very much, I was happy to be allowed to sit on the fringes of the circle, listening and learning. (64)

The denial of exclusion as a point of resentment towards the Meldrumites is very much at odds with Roland's life-long struggle to be accepted as a writer who had earned a place in the

sun. As such, it reinforces the pattern of unreliability and lack of self-scrutiny evident in the representational trajectory of Roland's text, further examples of which are given below. At the same time it suggests that Roland was wont to follow the values, assumptions and expectations of women's "proper place" in a world dominated by men. What I am suggesting is that Roland's repeated acceptance of a secondary role to men coheres to gender conventions which help to maintain women's oppression under patriarchy. For, if only by default, Roland presents herself as a passive outsider, a woman whose efforts to belong to the Meldrumites and participate in a group of equals, met with "limited success" (64), yet went unchallenged. When considered from this perspective, Roland's dramatic representation of her failed attempts to be embraced on equal terms by Jörgensen may have lead her to "a tempest of emotion that it amounted to physical pain" (200), but had less to do with women's rights than how, historically, women have learned to be social beings.

According to Roland, Jörgensen saw himself "as a compound of Socrates, Freud and Jesus Christ" (160) and was an egotistical rule-maker who believed himself to be above his own rules. As she tells it, his controversial marital arrangements revealed a masculine philosophy bound up with sexualised gender codes which saw him become "more admired than condemned" (160) by students and wayward, mistress-keeping husbands alike. In Nicole Moore's view, the ways in which Roland "both perpetuates and undermines [Jörgensen's] sophistic homilies and prescriptive ethics, and her occasional tributes to him, grudging and so apparently honest, reflect her own status as his candid recounter" (1991: 37). It can also be argued that the identity Roland prescribes to Jörgensen as the authoritative "I" who writes him as "You", is grounded in her (re)construction of him as a gendered subject within male dominated social rhetoric of what constitutes "natural" masculine and feminine behaviour. Male and female identities alike are formed within patriarchal politics which, over time, have

reproduced the patterns and processes of inequality reflected in the everyday lives of women. In Roland's account Jörgensen was particularly prone to using his mistress Helen Skipper as a pawn to reproduce Montsalvat's inequitable power regime. In Roland's view, Jörgensen deployed a colonising discourse of control based on fear whenever Helen hesitated to embrace his rules of obedience. Witness Jörgensen's response to Helen on one such occasion: "there's nothing to compel you or anybody else to stay here, but while you're here, you'll obey me" (195). Jörgensen's threat emphasises Helen's marginal position within the Montsalvat family and given her view of him as a self-styled God, it is no accident that Roland chooses to contextualise it within the Scriptural phrase: "if you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Roland does recount some happy times in the early days of Montsalvat but claims that the inhabitants, both male and female, endured increasingly harrowing experiences as time went by. As she has it, this was particularly so for Jörgensen's wife Lily (who suffered from multiple sclerosis) and his mistress, Helen Skipper, both of whom lived at Montsalvat in separate cottages. Ever the dramatist, and not without a touch of cruelty, Roland writes Helen Skipper into the role of Jörgensen's chief concubine whereas his wife Lily, whom he married in 1925, plays the part of "the Number One wife in a Chinese household" (162). Roland records painful, dramatic scenes involving Jörgensen's brutality towards his women, inside and outside marriage, at which she claims to have been present as both observer and participant (198). We read of moments when Jörgensen's maltreatment of Lily and Helen made Roland hate him to such an extent that she "longed to strike that calm, complacent face, to choke the words back into that arrogant throat" (195). Roland's expressions of rage towards Jörgensen may be construed as a reaction to her failure to shift the balance of power and bring order into what she presents as the chaos of life at Montsalvat. As noted above, she describes Helen Skipper, a favourite of Roland's, as often on the receiving end of Jörgensen's relentless and unexplained objections to her right to have her

opinions heard. In Roland's view, Helen was trapped in a script written for her by Jørgensen. Much like herself, Helen "was being lacerated by conflicting emotions" (198). Yet, according to his niece Jenny Teichmann, "their love affair lasted for the rest of his life" (2005: 19) and Helen was accepted by Jørgensen's wife Lily (Roland, 1984; Skipper, 2005; Vanderkelen, 2002).¹¹ How pseudo-polygamous relationships might be responsibly reconciled within the contrasting realms of individual desires and conventional morality became the focus of Lily's life work, even at the expense of her ever-deteriorating health and well-being. If we are to believe Roland, in the closing years of her life Lily even came to preach Jørgensen's philosophy of the inevitability of extra-marital sexual attractions and to proclaim his genius to the end (321).

For Roland, such was his dominance that Jørgensen had succeeded in moulding the identities and thoughts of his mistress and his wife as thoroughly as would a Svengali and was incapable of turning a blind eye to the pain he caused (207). Yet Roland's own inability to acknowledge the pain she may have inflicted upon some of Montsalvat's women is evident when she writes:

There were men, a lot of men, chiefly the husbands of my friends. There were also casual affairs with men I scarcely knew. I went to bed with anyone who happened to appeal to me [...] it can be said I made no enemies and broke no hearts, neither did I destroy a marriage, possibly because I did not care enough to do so. (117)

Roland attaches no remorse or meaning to her past sexual escapades and instead chooses to embrace indifference as a way of explaining them in the present. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that Roland had "made no enemies" as a consequence of what she claims were insignificant sexual dalliances with the husbands of her friends. And in fact the author contradicts herself when, earlier in the narrative, she speaks of Sonia Skipper's hostility towards her because of a fleeting affair she claims to have had with Sonia's father,

Mervyn. Indeed Roland's narrated self reaches preposterous proportions when she claims she never knew why she received little positive support from Monstevat's women (209) as she saw herself as the "ladylike influence that would bring about transformation in [their] lives."¹² Yet clearly contradicted here is Roland's notion of herself elsewhere in the text as the archetypal seductress who locates her success with men in the narcissistic methods of the harem; a woman who possessed "what it takes to attract" them (Moore 1991: xi). At this moment, in contrast, Roland chooses to turn a blind eye to her self-confessed sexual promiscuity and focuses on Jørgensen's bullying influence which, as she saw it, infused all aspects of the lives of his wife and mistress to such a degree that they lacked any sense of self worth. Once again Roland's autobiographical model of selfhood is called into question as the picture she paints of herself is of a woman whose psychosexual identity involves self-deceit. In the story of the past she remakes in the present, she becomes simultaneously "I" and "You", an individual with context dependent, oppositional needs and desires which are difficult, if not impossible, for reader and writer alike to reconcile.

The Views of Others

Later publications have produced very different versions of the Master of Montsalvat to Roland's with regard to his exercise of power and domination within the boundaries of the commune. In her *The Cruel Man* (2002),¹³ Melbourne socialite Sue Vanderkelen reveals that she was another with an idealised view of Jørgensen's philosophy of life. Vanderkelen only adds to the puzzle of the strange attraction he held for men and women alike when, for example, she writes of Jørgensen's extra-marital relationship with Helen Skipper:

Not for an instant did they, those otherwise upset and violated parents, imagine that Justus had taken the loose and easy path in the matter of himself and Helen. They realised that Justus was a courageous thinker, evolving a moral code of his own, rigid and difficult, a perilous course through a hostile world of opposing values – a world of sheep who fear change. Justus knew only too well that he had to reconcile the

growing love between Helen and himself not only with [his wife] Lily but with Mervyn and Lena. If Helen decided to throw her lot in with his, then her family [and Lily] would have to follow. There would have to be an understanding and an acceptance all round. (Vanderkelen, 2002: 164)

For Vanderkelen, Jörgensen's ideological position on sexual relationships, known as his "theory of consideration" (Roland, 1984: 92) "was not the road to self indulgence, on the contrary it was the opposite course" (Vanderkelen, 2002: 43). As she has it, Jörgensen was concerned with the irreconcilable nature of people's struggle against the erotic stimuli of the world around them *vis à vis* the demands of orthodox morality (Vanderkelen, 2002: 42-43). Whilst he may have advocated freedom in matters of love and sex, in Vanderkelen's view irresponsible permissiveness was not a part of Jörgensen's pedagogy. In support of this perspective, Sonia Skipper states that "most of [Jörgensen's] discourse was about responsibility and understanding one's actions and reactions in a relationship; and about the problem of guilt and repression which derive from a religious upbringing" (2005: 169). The perceptions of both Skipper and Vanderkelen suggest that a form of blindness existed in relation to the double standard applying to specific inequalities in the lives of men and women of Montsalvat. In fact they permitted and indulged the kind of male fantasies played out by Jörgensen under the veil of responsible domestic order. It bears noting that Roland, Skipper and Vanderkelen, as well as Jörgensen himself, were the products of a generation strongly influenced by Freud's theory of sexuality which, for some, functioned to affirm the primacy of masculinity – the law of the father – to the disadvantage of women. When addressing Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, in which Freud figures largely, Pam Morris observes he was seen by some second-wave American feminists "as the propagator of a reactionary theory of sexuality functioning to confirm and sustain masculine dominance and prescribe women's inherent inferiority" (1993: 94).¹⁴ Jörgensen's authority-driven discourses

of morality contain all the hallmarks of masculine cultural processes of domination, or phallocracy, under which women's sexual behaviour was, and continues to be, judged.

Roland maintains that, rather than freedom and understanding, Jörgensen's followers suffered a form of bondage whereby they were assigned roles of listeners, never speakers. For her, their needs and desires were always secondary to those of Jörgensen who claimed the right to speak for all at Montsalvat. Roland depicts one particularly harrowing scene involving a heated quarrel in which she questions Jörgensen's authority ~~was to~~ only to incur his wrath. As a consequence, she is left feeling "that [she] had been physically thrashed" (200) and, temporarily at least, loses all her regard for Jörgensen. Nevertheless we can see a level of pleasure to be found in both obedience towards the rule-maker and transgression against him when she goes on to state:

Whatever differences I had had with Justus in the past there had been no bitterness, either on his part or mine, rather there had been a feeling of affection and respect. Now all that had changed and I felt poorer as a consequence". (202)

Roland's reconciliatory comments expose the complex paradox of Jörgensen's influence, in a setting that was supposedly incommensurable with the real world, yet reproduced its social order in terms of gender inequality. For all his faults and outrageous acts, Roland still insists that Jörgensen had helped her to "develop many of the things about [herself] that were worthwhile" (203), a statement that points up the intricacy of her own needs whilst simultaneously revealing women's place in the hegemony of lived experience. Carolyn Heilbrun tells us that statements such as these by female autobiographers are tied to complex images of 'manhood' and 'fatherhood – men to whom women are "connected passionately and intimately, however painfully."¹⁵ In Heilbrun's view, to forgive is a state "which almost all women autobiographers seem eventually to reach [but this] must not be allowed to obscure the great difficulty women have in coming to terms with" (65) men whom they know

are villains but are also sources of love for them.. There seems little doubt that Roland experienced much difficulty in the unravelling of her feelings and desires within the deep history of male privilege that informs the world of representation in all its manifestations. Much like Helen Skipper, its source may well be located in what she describes as a futile struggle to have both her point of view and identity as a writer received with respect by Jörgensen unless *she* observed *his* rules.

Justus Jörgensen was never Roland's lover. She writes that Jörgensen "had no appeal for [her], rather the reverse" (12). But the fact that she returned so often to the artists' colony he established and lorded over contradicts her life choices. What Roland achieved or expected to achieve by clinging to Montsalvat and Jörgensen remains largely a mystery, but at one point she writes:

The people here were in a sense my people, the nearest thing I had to a family. Jorgensen (*sic*), perhaps, the father figure. Doubtless there would be problems, clashes of temperament [...but...] I would no longer have to eat alone and sit alone and watch the sun go down. (243)

In practical terms, Montsalvat represented a safe haven where, as an unmarried mother, she would not be lonely or "suffer [social] stigma" (156). Roland knew well that such was Jorgensen's liberal views towards extra-marital exploits that the presence there of her illegitimate child would very likely be accepted as a manifestation of her artistic temperament rather than as a mark of shame as was the case for many women of her generation. But it also meant she would have to "submit to Jörgensen's authority, fully aware that total submission was the price he would demand" (156). As she puts it, "to submit was not in my nature" (247), and was a price she was unwilling to pay. Roland spent the remainder of the war years in Sydney and returned with some misgivings to Montsalvat to live there for a period of two years between 1948 and 1950. But little had changed. In her view, Jörgensen's idea of a new

and freer way of living in the world remained “nothing more remarkable than the ancient human vice of the strong wanting to dominate the weak” (209). Yet Montsalvat, its people and Jörgensen in particular were important enough to stay in Roland’s memory and find their way into her life writing.

Inevitably, Roland’s story of Montsalvat’s early inhabitants and its founder, Justus Jörgensen, is distorted by the looking glass of time and fastens less to their place in her memory than to the socio-temporal space she inhabited in the act of writing. What does all this say about Roland? For Nicole Moore “by biographying Jörgensen [Roland uses] the power of his reputation to enhance her own status and her own life story” (1991: 37). This is quite likely so, but it can be argued that there is much more involved than this. Was the act of writing also Roland’s way of exorcising ghosts and settling old obligations? Certainly, the liberating possibility of the confessional has resonance here. Was the story she created about Montsalvat a form of therapy that helped to ease the weight of what happened to her over the course of some forty years? What could have drawn her time and time again to Montsalvat, even after admitting that all was not well between herself and Jörgensen? What lies at the heart of the obsession she seems to have had for the people, the place and the man in particular? Was it that Roland could not do without Jörgensen or Montsalvat, relative to an elusive sense of stability and permanence of place in her life as she chooses to remember it (Schick 1999: 21)? Does her story of represent the history of women’s dependent social position and have found themselves trapped in a narrative of survival in patriarchal culture? The answers to these questions seem lost in time but may well lie “in the mass of words” (315) she wrote to give an account of her life within the representational space of auto/biography. In that space, the “I” becomes a textual self which is also a “You” formed across “a network of differences within which the subject is inscribed” (Gilmore, 1994: 85),

but which is never fully known, even to itself. In *The Eye of the Beholder* Roland imagines and imitates a self which performs the roles of subject “I” and object “You”. Her identity is split, re-aligned and sutured between past and present selves to create the desired self-image she would have readers behold. As Liz Stanley observes, however, “the self who writes’ has no more direct and unproblematic access to the self who was, than does the reader” (1992: 61). The same can be said for the reinvented written self who would be. As the “I” of the text, Roland presents Jörgensen as the “You”. Readers are given a composite personality made up of incompatible parts, open to interpretation or decipherment. In the process, she exposes an equally complex and irreconcilable “I” shaped as “You”, a self re-presented and transformed by the act of representation itself. In the confessional opening pages of *The Eye of the Beholder*, the fiction of identity as ever complete and knowable is laid bare as the realignment of ways of seeing developed over time and space. Written word and painted image are shown to be limited in their claims to truth because they emerge from auto/biographical articulations of what terms of value truth holds. This is not to say that either Roland or the artist who painted her portrait, Sir John Langstaff, are indifferent to the meanings the subjects they create may have, or how they might be interpreted. The narratives of life and art clearly have a bearing on each other and there is an element of the untruthful in the telling of any story, whatever the medium. In the book’s closing pages, Roland confesses that after seven years of grappling with “the truth about Justus Jörgensen and Montsalvat” (315) she was no closer to solving the riddle than when she had begun. The truth, it seems, is more complicated than any narrative when trying to come to terms with, or understand, a life. It is possible that Jörgensen came to represent all the beauty and ugliness, the freedoms and restraints of Montsalvat but, in the final analysis, he remained an enigma. What is clear is that, whatever strange alchemy Jörgensen may have possessed, it was he who provided

Roland with all the ingredients she needed to become part of Montsalvat history, re-born, or re-imagined, anew in the act of writing.

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¹ *The Touch of Silk* (1928: revised 1955) is the play which first gave Roland entry into the public arena and is still being performed today. This was followed by *Feet of Clay* (1928), *Morning* (1937) and *Granite Peak*

(1952). One of her unpublished commercial radio serials, *A Woman Scorned* (broadcast in the 1950s), was the inspiration for the television series *Return to Eden* (1985).

² Gilda Baracchi was born on October 13, 1937. She became a film producer and script writer with Australian films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975, *Manganinni* 1980 and *Howling Hill* 1987 to her credit. Her father was Guido Baracchi, a founder of the Communist Party of Australia in the 1930s. Roland and Baracchi never married.

³ Subsequent references to *The Eye of the Beholder* are to this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.

⁴ See Moore, 1991 on this point.

⁵ State Library of Victoria MS10070, Envelope 6. Roland's 1941 Eltham diary, which she made available to the Montsalvat community, contains scathing comments about Jørgensen's arrogance and what she considers as his air of complete omnipotence.

⁶ State Library of New South Wales ML1303/96 Box 1 of 4: Roland's letter to Rosa Ribush dated May 23, 1982.

⁷ SLV MS10070, Envelope 11, Betty Roland's diary p.116.

⁸ Born in 1918, Sonia Skipper's use of the word "inmates" might well be a sign of the domestic confinement felt by many women of her generation or taken as a metaphor for the silencing of women in patriarchal colonial culture. And in fact she describes Monstalvat in Gothic terms as a primitive, cold space, where there was "a lot of freedom in one way, [but] there was only one person [i.e. Jørgensen] who was always right" (2005: 89).

⁹ This was later "updated" in *An Improbable Life* (1989) when she realises the list was inaccurate and increases it to 65 to include a man whom she claims sexually molested her as a child.

¹⁰ This view is mirrored by later commentators (Vanderkelen, 2002; Teichman, 2005; Skipper 2005).

¹¹ The similarities between Roland and her life-long lover, Guido Baracchi bear noting.

¹² SLVMS10070 Envelope 6, p116.

¹³ In Vanderkelen's text the cruel man is not Justus Jørgensen but the artist, Colin Colahan.

¹⁴ It is acknowledged that other feminist critics have advantageously read Freud as an analysis of patriarchal society rather than as a recommendation for it. See for example Juliet Mitchell (1974) *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. New York: Pantheon.

¹⁵ See Moore, 1992 on this point.