

Praise for *Oppositions*:

‘Gaitskill’s intuition ... borders on clairvoyance. Her prescience is agenda-free, but it’s her exceptionally discerning writings on women ... that make one wish she had (or even wanted) her own syndicated newspaper column’

Kate Bolick, *New York Times Book Review*

‘As in her fiction, Gaitskill sees everything ... [These] essays further establish her as the important critical thinker she’s always been. Her extreme sensitivity makes her one of the most reliable witnesses to life in the US’

Chris Kraus, *4Columns*

‘Gaitskill uses compassion as a conduit for interpretation’

Larissa Pham, *Nation*

‘Gaitskill has a gift for traversing taboo territory with a subtlety that’s sometimes downright Jamesian ... She draws on her personal experience to crack the veneers of the social codes and sexual ambiguities we all navigate’

Boston Globe

‘Mary Gaitskill never fails to transport her reader ... These essays not only embrace but define their subjects, making you rethink the way you interact with the things around you in a much more meaningful way’

Newsweek

‘Expect to never look at any of her subjects the same way again’

Cosmopolitan

‘A beautiful, thought-provoking work that cements Mary Gaitskill as one of the sharpest critical thinkers and most important cultural critics of our time’

Bustle

‘[Mary Gaitskill] says the things you didn’t know needed to be said until she says them, and only then do you know what you’ve been missing’

Buffalo News

‘Immersing yourself in [Gaitskill’s] world for a page or three has the bracing aliveness of throwing yourself into almost-freezing water’

Columbus Dispatch

‘Mary writes with startling, otherworldly clarity, peeling back the surface of things we might think we understand to peer into the slippery psychological realities underneath’

Big Think

‘Gaitskill’s biting tongue and literary pyrotechnics make for a delightful combination’

Booklist

‘This collection of essays spanning two decades has the same fearless curiosity about the human psyche that Gaitskill exhibits in her fiction, along with the same unerring precision of prose ... The pages burst with insight and a candid, unflinching self-assessment’

Publisher’s Weekly (starred review)

Praise for Mary Gaitskill:

‘No writer is sharper about the fickle exigencies of desire’

Alexandra Schwartz, *New Yorker*

‘Gaitskill’s prose has never been cold, that’s only what it has been called; and her writing has never been about the absence of emotion so much as its unapologetic abundance. She resists sentimentality not by banishing feeling to the white margins with understatement but by granting emotion enough space to misbehave’

Leslie Jamison, *Bookforum*

‘Ambiguity – the inseparability of light and darkness, love and pain, nurture and destruction, progress and regress – is her métier. The question she seems to ask again and again, and with astonishing force ... is how to feel, how we *do* feel’

New York Times Book Review

‘Gaitskill’s strange gift is to unfold emotions, no matter how petty or upsetting, and describe them with disarming patience for their stutters and silences, their repetitions and contradictions. The result often feels both primal and electric, something like a latter-day D. H. Lawrence’

Chicago Tribune

‘Gaitskill writes with visceral power, with what sometimes feels like an exultantly destructive energy ... The fierce artistry of Gaitskill’s writing, its weirdly graceful introduction of the sublime into the sordid’

Kathryn Harrison, *The New York Times*

‘Gaitskill’s work feels more real than real life and reading her leads to a place that feels like a sacred space’

Boston Globe

‘The range of Gaitskill’s humanity is astonishing and matched only, it seems, by a desire to confront readers with the trembling reality of our shared ugliness’

LA Times

‘A thrillingly talented writer’

Joanna Briscoe, *Guardian*

‘Gaitskill is more than a gifted storyteller. She is an enchanter’

New Republic

‘Gaitskill’s willingness to ignore common wisdom and consider controversial and complex questions from different viewpoints is a true literary pleasure’

Kirkus starred review

Gaitskill is a formidably gifted, astute writer’

Sunday Business Post

OPPOSITIONS

SELECTED ESSAYS

ALSO BY MARY GAITSKILL

The Mare

Don't Cry

This is Pleasure

Veronica

Because They Wanted To

Two Girls, Fat and Thin

Bad Behavior

Lost Cat: A Memoir

Da Capo Best Music Writing 2006 (editor)

OPPOSITIONS

SELECTED ESSAYS

MARY
GAITSKILL



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Contents

LIVING

A Lot of Exploding Heads: On Reading the Book of Revelation	3
The Trouble with Following the Rules: On “Date Rape,” “Victim Culture” and Personal Responsibility	10
The Bridge: A Memoir of St Petersburg	27
Worshipping the Overcoat: An Election Diary	47
Leave the Woman Alone!: On the Never-Ending Political Extra-Marital Scandals	53
Learning to Ride	62

WATCHING AND LISTENING

I’ve Seen it All: Thoughts on a Song by Björk	73
Remain in Light: On the Talking Heads	78
Imaginary Light: A Song Called “Nowhere Girl”	83
Victims and Losers, A Love Story: Thoughts on the Movie <i>Secretary</i>	88
Beg For Your Life: On the Films of Laurel Nakadate	97
The Easiest Thing to Forget: On Carl Wilson’s <i>Let’s Talk About Love</i>	104
Icon: On Linda Lovelace	110

READING

Mechanical Rabbit: A Review of <i>Licks of Love</i> by John Updike	125
Dye Hard: On <i>Blonde</i> by Joyce Carol Oates	132
It Would Not Be Wonderful to Meet a Megalosaurus: On <i>Bleak House</i> by Charles Dickens	137
Somebody with a Little Hammer: On Teaching “Gooseberries” by Anton Chekhov	150
This Doughty Nose: Norman Mailer’s <i>An American Dream</i> and <i>Armies of The Night</i>	156
She’s Supposed to Make You Sick: On <i>Gone Girl</i> by Gillian Flynn	167
The Running Shadow of Your Voice: On Nabokov’s <i>Letters</i> to <i>Véra</i>	174
I Cannot Get Out, Said the Starling: On <i>Lolita</i>	182
Acknowledgements	201

OPPOSITIONS

SELECTED ESSAYS

Living

A Lot of Exploding Heads: On Reading the Book of Revelation

I did not have a religious upbringing and for most of my life I've considered that a good thing; I've since come to know people who felt nurtured by their religious families, but for a long time, for me, "religious upbringing," meant the two little girls I once walked home with in the fourth grade who, on hearing that I didn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God, began screaming, "There's a sin on your soul! You're going to Hell!" It meant my friend who, as a kid, was repeatedly exorcised in her mother's fundamentalist church and who still had nightmares about it at forty-five. It meant a thirteen-year-old boy who once told me he believed that God would punish his sexually active classmates by giving them AIDS. When I watched *The Exorcist* in theaters when it first came out and saw adult moviegoers jump up and stumble toward the exits, retching and/or weeping with fear, it was to me yet another bad example of what religious upbringing could do.

My mother, to her credit, told me that "God is love" and that there is no hell. But I don't think I believed her. Even though I have very little conscious religious anxiety, since childhood, I have had dreams that suggest otherwise; dreams of hooded monks carrying huge, grim crosses in processions meant to end

OPPOSITIONS

in someone's death by fire, drowning or quartering; of endless liturgies by faceless choirs to faceless parishioners in cavernous dark churches; of trials, condemnations, sacrifices, and torture; when I wake from these dreams it is with terror. Such things *have* actually occurred, but I still have no idea why they are so deeply present in me. Horror movies and creeping cultural fear are obvious sources, but my unconscious has taken these images in with such kinetic intensity and conviction that suggestion and vague historical knowledge don't seem to have been the cause.

When I was twenty-one, I became a born-again Christian. It was a random and desperate choice; I had dropped out of high school and left home at sixteen, and while I'd had some fun, by twenty-one, things were looking squalid and stupid. My boyfriend had dumped me and I was living in a rooming house and selling hideous rhodium jewelry on the street in Toronto, which is where the "Jesus freaks" approached me. I had been solicited by these people before and usually gave them short shrift, but on that particular evening I was at a low ebb. They told me that if I let Jesus into my heart right there, even if I just said the words, that everything would be okay. I said, all right, I'll try it. They praised God and moved on.

Even though my conversion was pretty desultory, I decided to pray that night. I had never seriously prayed before, and all my pent-up desperation and fear made it an act of furious psychic propulsion that lasted almost an hour. It was a very private experience that I would find hard to describe; suffice to say that I felt I was being listened to. I started going to a bleak church that had night services and free meals, and was attended heavily by street people and kids with a feverish, dislocated look in their eyes. And, for the first time, I started reading the Bible. For me, it was like running into a brick wall.

I was used to reading, but most of it was pretty trashy. Even when it wasn't, the supple, sometimes convoluted play of modern

language entered and exited my mind like radio music—then, of course, there was the actual radio music, the traffic noise, the continual onrush of strangers through the streets I worked, the slower shifting movements of friends, lovers, alliances, the jabber of electricity and neon in the night. All of which kept my mind and nervous system in a whipsawed condition from which it was difficult to relate to the Bible. *The earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said let there be light and there was light.* I couldn't even appreciate the beauty of the words. The phrases seemed like big dumb swatches of form imposed on something swift-moving and endlessly changeable. The form was mute, huge, and absolutely immobile. It made me feel I was being smothered. One clergyman after another would quote from it so intensely, as if its big, majestic opacity was meaningful in and of itself, and I would try to at least feel the meaning if I couldn't comprehend it. But all I felt was that persistent sense of truncation, the intimation of something enormous and inchoate trying to squeeze through the static form of written words.

This feeling became most intense when I read the Revelation. Next to Job, the Revelation is the most cinematic and surreal part of the Bible—it's a little like a horror movie, which is probably why it was relatively easy for a modern teenager to take in: there's a lot of explosions. It seemed terribly real to me; I would walk out into the streets, amid the big buildings in which commerce ground forward, and I would feel the violence, the lies, the grotesque pride, the *filth*, pitching and heaving under the semblance of order. The air would crackle with the unacknowledged brutality of life, and I would feel acutely all the small, stupid betrayals I committed daily, both against myself and others. The angels with their seven stars and their lamps, the beast with his seven heads and ten horns—the static imagery was sinister and senseless to me, and yet all the more convincing for it. I could imagine

OPPOSITIONS

angels and beasts looming all about us, incomprehensible and invisible to our senses the way the images in a photograph would be incomprehensible and invisible to a cat. Their stars and lamps and horns seemed like peculiar metaphors on the page, but, I feared, when the divine horses came down, with their fire and teeth and snake tails, their reality would be all too clear. I lay in my bed and prayed, trying to convince myself of God's love, but my prayers seemed a rag in a typhoon.

Besides, I couldn't help but think it was awfully harsh. Malignant sores, scorpions, fire, men "gnawing their tongues" with pain—I knew people were horrible, but even in my youth I could also see that most people did the best they could. Even as angry and fearful and disappointed as I was, I knew I wouldn't torture people like that, and I didn't see how I could be kinder than God. I was moved when I read, in First Corinthians 13: *Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil, does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.* But I also remember thinking, and love is not pathologically cruel, either.

The rage of Revelation sometimes made my compassion feel weak and mealy-mouthed, but my reservations were not only humanitarian. I was more perturbed by what to me was the mechanical quality, not just of Revelation, but of the whole Bible. You had to worship God in exactly a certain way, according to certain prescriptions—and Revelation hinted that the rules set out in, say, the Ten Commandments, were only one tiny piece of a vast schema in which human ambivalence was simply not a factor.

*

During this time I had a dream which was not about the Bible, but which embodied my consternation about it. In the dream I lived in a house with several other people. We could not get out of the house and our relationships with each other had been pre-ordained, regardless of feeling. Our actions were controlled by a master whom we never saw. One day a man came to visit us, ostensibly for lunch. He was very polite and even friendly, and we were also friendly with him. But it was understood that he was one of the people who controlled us, and the atmosphere was one of pure dread. During lunch, when one of the men of the house seized and killed one of the household cats, we knew it was because our visitor had somehow made him do it. I couldn't hide my horror completely and our visitor looked at me a moment and then said, referring to the mangled body of the cat, "That's what I'm going to do to you one day." I understood him to mean that he was going to rape me, and I said "But I'm married," not because it mattered to me, but because I knew that the only thing that mattered to him was his laws, including the law of marriage. Then I became too angry to go along with this and I added, "Even though I don't respect my husband." Very threateningly—after all, it's part of the law that we love our spouses—the visitor asked, "Do you have sex with your husband?" I answered yes, and it was clear from my tone that I did so in order to obey the law. "That's good," said the visitor, "because your husband is a very intelligent man." Even for a dream, this was a strange moment: there was such a sense of approval for the fact of my husband's intelligence, but it had nothing to do with the man he was; rather the approval was all for the idea of an intelligent man and a dutiful wife paying him the homage of sex. The hellish thing was, within the dream, it was true. Even though I didn't love my husband, I considered him intelligent. And so I said, "Yes, he is very intelligent." I said it for complicated reasons. Partly to please the visitor, whom I was afraid of, but more to make some emotional contact with him by

OPPOSITIONS

invoking a concept he had codified as law, and making him see that I respected intelligence too. The way he looked at me when I said this was also complicated. It was a look of respect for my miserable loyalty to my husband, for my detached admiration for his mind. It was a look that appreciated my humanity, but would only give it a tiny space to live, a look a torturer might give a victim who had just expressed a sentiment the torturer considered noble, but that would not prevent the torture from taking place.

The prison-house of this dream seemed to me to be a metaphor for our human state, the circumstances of our birth into families not of our choosing, and our inability to free ourselves from a psychological make-up learned before we can decide for ourselves what we want to be. The visitor seemed like the God in the Bible who is kind only as long as you adhere to the rules, and who will sometimes decide to punish you anyway. God famously doesn't afflict Job because of anything Job has done, but because he wants to prove a point to Satan.

*

Twenty years later, I am sympathetic with my first assessment; to me, in spite of the soft, radiant beauty of many of its passages, the Bible still has a mechanical quality, a refusal to brook complexity that feels brutal and violent. There has been a change, however. When I look at Revelation now, it still seems frightening and impenetrable, and it still suggests an inexorable, ridiculous order that is unknowable by us, in which our earthly concerns matter very little. However, it no longer reads to me like a chronicle of arbitrarily inflicted cruelty. It reads like a terrible abstract of how we violate ourselves and others and thus bring down endless suffering on earth. When I read *And they blasphemed God of heaven because of their pain and their sores and did not repent of their deeds*, I think of myself and others I've known or know who blaspheme life itself by failing

to have the courage to be honest and kind—and how then we rage around and lash out because we hurt. When I read “fornication,” I don’t read it as a description of sex outside legal marriage: I read it as sex done in a state of psychic disintegration, with no awareness of one’s self or one’s partner, let alone any sense of honor or even real playfulness. I still don’t know what to make of much of it, but I’m inclined to read it as a writer’s primitive attempt to give form to his moral urgency, to create a structure that could contain and give ballast to the most desperate human confusion.

I’m not sure how to account for this change. I think it mainly has to do with gradually maturing and becoming more deeply aware of my own mechanicalness and my own stringent limitations when it comes to giving form to impossible complexity—something writers understand very well. It probably has to do with my admittedly dim understanding of how apparently absolute statements can contain enormous meaning and nuance without losing their essential truth. And it has to do with my expanded ability to accept my own fear, and to forgive myself for my own mechanical responses to things I don’t understand. In the past, my compassion was small—perhaps immature is a better word—and conditional. I could not accept what I read in the Biblical book because I could feel the truth of it in my own psyche. Now I recognize, with pain, a genuine description of how hellish life can be, and that it is not God who “sent” us to this hell.

To me, these realizations don’t mean I have arrived at a point of any real knowledge, but they are interesting as markers of my development. I imagine that twenty years from now, when and if I read Revelation I will once again see it the same, but differently. I will look forward to it.

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