

**Dialogism and the interrogation of social, ontological and aesthetic  
orthodoxies in the writing of Margaret Atwood**

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## Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis has been composed by myself, and is a record of my work. No part of it has been submitted for any other degree except as specified.

Candidate's Signature:

## Acknowledgements

I express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr Michelle Keown and Dr David Salter, who have guided me in my critical thinking with their inspiring comments and suggestions. This thesis would not have seen the light of day without their help, expertise and meticulous reading. I will always be more than indebted to them.

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## Abstract

This thesis offers a psychoanalytic reading of dialogism and the interrogation of social, ontological and aesthetic orthodoxies in the writing of Margaret Atwood. It draws, in particular, on the psychoanalytic and narratological theories of Julia Kristeva in order to demonstrate the various ways in which Atwood collapses or challenges boundaries between self and other, and art and social reality.

Chapter one discusses Atwood's explorations of cultural plurality and gender politics in terms of her enduring interest in cultural, ontological and geographical borders and boundaries, drawing upon Kristeva's theories on the potential of poetic language to transform social relations. The chapter explores Atwood's representations of female subjects located on social borders and peripheries, as well as her interest in the environment, which is focused upon the geographical borderlands of Canada as postcolonial space, and upon animals as victims of human cruelty and domination.

Chapter two focuses on dialogic relationships and transpositions between different semiotic systems in Atwood's texts, with reference to Kristeva's adaptation of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on dialogism. Kristeva incorporates Bakhtin's theories into her own unique theory of intertextuality, which provides a useful model for assessing the extent to which Atwood dramatises possible harmony between opposed entities through intertextual processes.

Chapter three focuses upon hysteria in Atwood's work, examining the way in which various hysterical female characters in Atwood's writing embody the potential for the transformation of conventional semantic and ontological systems, foregrounding the discourse of hysteria as a means by which to challenge social and psychological repression. Drawing upon the work of Sigmund Freud as well as Kristeva, the chapter investigates the extent to which the incomplete, failed work of hysteria (as Freud analyses it) paradoxically opens up a possible model for representation that goes beyond binary oppositions and dominant discourses.

Chapter four explores processes of identification brought about by the experience of love or empathy, focusing upon various kinds of inter-relationships explored in Atwood's poetry. Foregrounding corporeality as a means by which to transcend rigid social oppositions and conventions, and even the species barrier, Atwood reviews the logic of power relations through an exploration of interactions between men and women, mothers and children, and humans and animals, exploring the ways in which intersubjective identification or the dissolution of the human ego serve to collapse the boundaries between self and other.

Chapter five examines mourning and melancholia in Atwood's writing, using the melancholic's multi-layered and fluid subjectivity as a focus for exploring various kinds of ontological and textual complexity and indeterminacy. As I will argue, although the melancholic (according to psychoanalysis) is fixated upon death, in Atwood's writing the melancholic's ambivalent relationship to social and semiotic structures also opens a route to establishing new socio-textual relations, and the process of artistic creation is identified as a means by which the melancholic subject re-establishes meaningful relationships with others. This chapter also explores the ways in which Atwood's writing interrogates generic distinctions between fiction and autobiography by featuring artistic narrators/characters who incorporate aspects of their own lives into their artistic creations.

Overall, then, this thesis investigates the ways in which Atwood's writing explores the human subject, and the literary text, as sites of dynamic transformation, arguing that her work poses an ethical challenge to conventional understandings of social relations, ontology, and processes of signification and artistic creation. Through its focus on signifiers and the speaking subject of psychoanalysis, Atwood's work constantly pushes at the boundaries of human ontology, searching for a means by which social relations might be transformed through the transcendence of inequality, oppression, and conflictual opposition.

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## Abbreviations

Abbreviations used in the thesis for major works by Margaret Atwood

<i>AC</i>	<i>The Animals in That Country</i> . Toronto: Oxford UP, 1968.
<i>Alias</i>	<i>Alias Grace</i> (1996). London: Virago, 1997.
<i>BE</i>	<i>Bluebeard's Egg</i> (1987). Vintage, 1996.
<i>CE</i>	<i>Cat's Eye</i> (1987). London: Virago, 1990.
<i>CG</i>	<i>The Circle Game</i> . Toronto: Anansi, 1966.
<i>HT</i>	<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (1985). London: Vintage. 1996.
<i>JSM</i>	<i>The Journals of Susanna Moodie</i> . Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970.
<i>LO</i>	<i>Lady Oracle</i> (1976). Virago Press, 1982.
<i>Negotiating</i>	<i>Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
<i>PP</i>	<i>Power Politics</i> . Toronto: Anansi, 1971.
<i>In search</i>	<i>In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction</i> . Ottawa: Ottawa UP, 1997.
<i>SP</i>	<i>Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995</i> . Virago Press 1999, 2000.
<i>SW</i>	<i>Second Words: Selected Critical Prose</i> . Toronto: Anansi, 1982.
<i>Survival</i>	<i>Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature</i> . Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
<i>THP</i>	<i>Two-Headed Poems</i> . Toronto: Oxford UP, 1978.
<i>YAH</i>	<i>You Are Happy</i> . Toronto: Oxford UP, 1974.

## **Introduction**

This thesis offers a psychoanalytic reading of dialogism and the interrogation of social, ontological and aesthetic orthodoxies in the writing of Margaret Atwood. It draws, in particular, on the psychoanalytic and narratological theories of Julia Kristeva in order to demonstrate the various ways in which Atwood subverts or challenges conventional approaches to the relationship between human subjects, and between art and social (or material) reality.

Throughout her literary career, Atwood has maintained an interest in the politics and aesthetics of power relations, whether between nations (exploring, for example, the neocolonial relationship between the U.S. and Canada), or between individual human subjects. As I will demonstrate, although Atwood has explored various forms of interpersonal conflict and suffering in her writing, she has always worked towards an aesthetics of rapprochement which might transcend the boundaries and borders that divide human subjects or nations. But Atwood isn't simply saying borders should be transcended: they can also be positive and enabling. For Atwood, the process of transcending boundaries and borders is fluid and provisional. As Atwood herself remarks, 'There are boundaries and borders, spiritual as well as physical, and good fences make good neighbours. But there are values beyond national ones' (*SW*, 392). Although I will touch upon issues of national and cultural identity (as explored in Atwood's work) at various points in this thesis, my primary focus will be upon the way in which Atwood posits art and the artistic imagination as means by which to challenge the binaristic structures that regulate social behaviour.

A key aspect of this challenge is offered through Atwood's dialogical

approach to interpersonal and artistic communication, and these aspects of her work will be explored with particular reference to Kristeva's adaptation of Mikhail Bakhtin's narratological theories on dialogism. The theoretical framework of the thesis is primarily based, however, in Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories, focusing upon her unique blend of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory as a means by which to analyse aspects of Atwood's work. Of particular interest are her theories on 'aesthetic forgiveness,' a process which works towards social harmony through a recognition and acceptance of difference and alterity, and her notion of 'poetic language' (as expressed in various art forms) as a means by which to challenge the binary structures of the socio-symbolic realm (as elaborated in the work of Jacques Lacan).

My argument for an aesthetics of rapprochement and 'forgiveness' in Atwood's work seems particularly timely, given that a large proportion of existing academic scholarship on Atwood focuses primarily on the prevalence of violence, death and existential isolation in her work. In *Second Words*, her 1982 collection of critical writings, Atwood describes writing as an 'act of faith' and an 'act of hope, the hope that things can be better than they are' (349), and although some Atwood scholars (discussed further below) have acknowledged the more optimistic aspects of her work, many have read her recurring focus upon death and human suffering as signs of a prevailing nihilism and negativity. However, I will argue that when considered through the prism of Kristevan psychoanalysis, Atwood's exploration of human suffering and interpersonal conflict opens up a route to reconciliation and renewal. Significantly, in *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), a collection of essays (formerly lectures) focusing upon the status and function of the writer, Atwood

argues that a confrontation with death and suffering is essential to the artistic process: 'writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light' (xxiv). She describes the writer as 'a grave-digger' who unearths and expresses other people's fears, fantasies, anxieties and superstitions (*Negotiating*, 26), and while many of these elements touch upon disturbing elements of human experience, it is important to recognise that Atwood also sees this 'grave-digging' process as creative and regenerative. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, Atwood's writing posits a dynamic and transformative relationship between author, reader and text, expressing a belief in the potential of writing (and other artistic forms) as a means by which to transform existing social structures. In Kristevan terms, Atwood's 'poetic language' becomes a means by which to challenge the binarisms which structure social relations. In *Second Words*, she explicitly expresses her belief in the potential of art – or the imagination – to transcend oppressive socio-political structures, arguing that 'Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings' (397), and that as a writer, she possesses three vital attributes which allow her to pose a challenge to oppressive orthodoxies: 'a human imagination, the power to communicate, hope' (*SW*, 397). She has argued that the writer has a responsibility to confront and challenge social inequalities, arguing that '[i]f we cease to judge this world, we may find ourselves, very quickly, in one which is infinitely worse' (*SW*, 332-33). Yet although Atwood has argued for the importance of writers confronting and challenging existing social realities, she is not suggesting that art is merely a description or 'reflection' of social reality, nor does she posit any straightforward process of communication between author and reader:

as she argues, 'once the writer's finished, the primary relationship is not between the thing written and the writer but between the thing written and the reader' (*SW*, 344). As this quotation suggests, a key element of Atwood's aesthetic radicalism is located in her postmodernist or poststructuralist approach to artistic creation, in which the 'author' becomes an amorphous and often elusive figure in her works. In *Negotiating with the Dead* Atwood adopts the figure of Lewis Carroll's 'Alice' to symbolise 'the doubleness of the writer,' who transforms 'reality' through the imaginative and artistic process (32). She argues that literary works explore 'enhanced fact,' 'a realm that is neither fact nor fiction, but perhaps both' (*Negotiating*, 118). Atwood's interest in 'doubleness,' I would argue, extends not only to her analysis of the figure of the writer/artist, but also to her exploration of various forms of split subjectivity in her writing. Many of her narrators and characters are socially marginalised figures, often riven by psychic disorders such as hysteria and melancholia, but as I will demonstrate, this focus on split subjectivity can be contextualised within the wider context of Atwood's interest in duality and plurality as a means by which to challenge and transcend oppressive social hierarchies and oppositions.

Before going on to elaborate the various kinds of dualities, borders and boundaries in Atwood's work which are explored in subsequent chapters of this thesis, it seems appropriate at this point to review some of the major trends and currents in existing Atwood scholarship, introducing some of the key critical perspectives which intersect with the major theoretical preoccupations in my thesis. Many of the critics surveyed here are invoked in later chapters of the thesis, where it will become clear to what degree my arguments draw upon, and depart from, these existing critical perspectives.

It is important to note first of all that a number of critics have identified the prevalence of split or divided subjects in Atwood's writing. Critics have approached this topic from a variety of theoretical perspectives, drawing variously upon psychoanalysis, feminist psychoanalysis, postmodernism and literary stylistics in particular. Sonia Mycak's book-length study *In Search of the Split Subject* (1996), for example, explores the 'divided self' in Atwood's novels with reference to psychoanalytic and phenomenological theory. Focusing on character analysis, Mycak foregrounds the construction of the 'I' or the 'self' in Atwood's work, arguing that Atwood elaborates various forms of intersubjective relations in which 'the divided self becomes the decentred subject' (Mycak, 25). My approach in this thesis is similar to Mycak's in that it uses psychoanalysis as a basis for analysing the representation of subjectivity (and particularly the split subject) in Atwood's writing. However, my arguments go further than Mycak's: where she focuses primarily upon character analysis, I am more interested in the potential for dialogue and social transformation which is embodied within the (split) 'speaking' subject in Atwood's work. My analysis is, therefore, more focused upon textuality and processes of signification in Atwood's work: I explore the mobile signifier and the dialogical aspects of utterance in Atwood's texts, interpreting subjectivity or identity as a site of dynamic transformation. This approach therefore combines narratological and psychoanalytic theory, hence the relevance of Kristevan theory to my analysis of alterity and split subjectivity (which result from the subject's primal separation from the mother) as a basis for establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Where Mycak analyses Atwood's writing from a more generalised psychoanalytic perspective, a number of other critics have drawn upon feminist

psychoanalysis in their investigations of her work. In her book-length study *Strategies for Identity* (1994), for example, Eleonora Rao explores Atwood's questioning of the notion of a coherent and unified subjectivity within a specifically feminist context, arguing that the 'flexible structures of being' embodied in Atwood's female personae represents a means by which they are able to accommodate disorder (xxii). Rao argues that Atwood's exploration of heterogeneity is grounded in her belief in the unstable, amorphous status of the ego, and she locates Atwood's work within the context of poststructuralist or postmodernist fiction that calls for 'a re-evaluation of heterogeneity, alterity and difference' (xviii). Although Rao argues that Atwood's exploration of subjectivity can be considered in terms of psychoanalytic models in which ego-division enables a mobile and flexible identity, rather surprisingly she does not, in her feminist analysis of Atwood's work, discuss the ways in which Atwood resists stereotypical representations of female identity. I address this lacuna at various points in my thesis, arguing that Atwood's subversion of gender stereotypes is a key aspect of her critique of social divisions and oppositions.

In her book *Margaret Atwood's Power* (1993) Shannon Hengen also examines Atwood's work from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective. Highlighting the fact that the Lacanian framework of the Imaginary and the Symbolic inscribes the logic of economic and political power in language, Hengen argues that for Atwood, language is always connected with power relations. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's theories on the subversive power of language, Hengen argues that 'Atwood's writing reviews the possibilities of mobilizing power and love by conceiving them anew' (16). Hengen draws in some detail upon Kristeva's theories

on poetic language, arguing that Atwood's writing evinces 'the ability to revise language, notably the term power' (Hengen, 1993: 17). These are arguments which I take up at various points in the thesis.

Shuli Barzilai and Isabel Carrera Suarez have similarly explored issues connected with language and enunciation in their feminist psychoanalytic approach to Atwood's work. Barzilai argues that the female narrator's distrust of words in *Surfacing* (1972), for example, reflects her refusal to be identified by patronymic markers of identity, and in this context, it is significant that the narrator remains unnamed. Barzilai analyses the narrator's resistance to linguistic circumscription in Lacanian and Kristevan terms, viewing it as a 'rupture with the Name-of-the-Father,' the Symbolic (Barzilai, 2000: 69). In analysing Atwood's short stories, Suarez, on the other hand, focuses more generally on the relationship between the subject and language. Arguing that Atwood 'represents the self by reducing it *symbolically* to language' as a means by which to interrogate the putatively constitutive role of language in identity formation, Suarez focuses in particular on Atwood's female personae, arguing that they demonstrate aspects of 'the self [which is] process/ result/ place' (Suarez, 1994: 243).

In her book *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988), Linda Hutcheon introduces two further critical approaches which are referenced in this thesis. Firstly, Hutcheon analyses Atwood's exploration of Canada's 'borderland' status within the context of national identity and international relations, an issue which I take up in chapter one in particular. Hutcheon, along with other critics such as June Schlueter, have read the fact that Atwood places her personae on edges and peripheries in terms of Canada's 'borderline' status as a settler colony bordering on the more powerful U.S.

This type of reading is supported by comments Atwood has made in *Survival* (1972), a book-length study of Canadian literature in which she describes the marginal status of Canada and Canadian literature. Building upon these arguments, Hutcheon argues that since Canada is built on a history that defines itself against the cultural and political 'centrality' of Britain and the U.S., Canada's political and national identity is therefore defined by its marginal or peripheral status (Hutcheon, 1988b: 4). Hutcheon's analysis draws upon Marshall McLuhan's definition of Canada as a 'border line case' (3) due to its ethnic diversity and geopolitical indeterminacy. McLuhan reads Canada's 'border line' status positively, as an enabling source of creative power and energy, and Hutcheon extends this analysis, arguing that Canadian national identity is defined by its plurality and regional diversity, and by the dynamic interplay between 'centre' and 'margin' (Hutcheon, 1988b: 4). I will draw upon these arguments in chapter one of this thesis in particular, suggesting that Atwood's writing deploys a similarly complex approach to Canada's 'borderland' status. In Atwood's writing, Canada's geopolitical marginality is often explored through metaphors of the frontier, where that which is marginal and peripheral can paradoxically take primacy over that which is 'central'.

A second – and related - theoretical strand in Hutcheon's text is her postmodernist analysis of Atwood's writing: she argues that the various contradictions, divisions and dualities in Atwood's work can be analysed in terms of the tension between art as kinetic process and art as static production that is a feature of much postmodernist writing (Hutcheon, 1988b: 139). According to Hutcheon, it is through a metafictional awareness of this tension (between stasis and kinesis) that Atwood's works become the epitome of the contradictions of postmodernism, and

she identifies various examples of various artist-figures in Atwood's work who emphasise and embody these contradictions. While my thesis is more heavily inflected by psychoanalysis rather than postmodernist theory, it does engage with Atwood's interest in metafiction and artist-figures at various points, elaborating on some of Hutcheon's arguments where appropriate.

In the 2005 second edition of her study *Margaret Atwood* (first published in 1996), Coral Ann Howells introduces two further critical approaches to Atwood's writing which are referenced in this thesis. Firstly, she analyses Atwood's writing from a literary stylistic or narratological perspective, exploring Atwood's interest in language and narratology, and discussing the ways in which Atwood's narrators blend realism and fantasy in the process of storytelling. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this thesis also engages with stylistic or narratological approaches to Atwood's work, drawing specifically upon Bakhtin's and Kristeva's poststructuralist perspectives on textual construction. The second aspect of Howells's argument which is relevant to this thesis is her interest in the ethical, humanist aspects of Atwood's writing. Admittedly, Howells (like Hutcheon) does engage with the postmodernist aspects of Atwood's approach to artistic construction, emphasising the ways in which Atwood challenges and subverts realist conventions, thus (as Hutcheon puts it) 'destabiliz[ing] things we used to think we could take for granted when we read novels' (Hutcheon, 1988b: 21). However, while acknowledging that Atwood's writing engages in postmodern 'play' and subversion, Howells also argues for an ethical, humanist dimension to Atwood's writing, contending that Atwood attempts to define 'what it means to be human' (Howells, 2005: 2) and that her fictions are the product of 'a combination of engagement, analysis and critique of the

changing fashions within feminism' (Howells, 2005: 17). In exploring the interplay between the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Atwood's writing, Howells states that it is through the understanding of human beings that Atwood challenges conventional attitudes towards categories such as nationality and gender. In his analysis of Atwood's poetry in particular, John Wilson Foster has also analysed the dialogue between aesthetics and humanism in Atwood's work, arguing that Atwood's awareness of 'an underlying connection deeper than minority membership' is central to her poetic vision (Foster, 1977: 5).

This interplay between ethics and aesthetics, or material 'reality' and the imagination, is central to my analysis of Atwood's writing in this thesis. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, my arguments are inflected in particular by Kristeva's notion of 'aesthetic forgiveness,' in which poetic language, and the utterance of the speaking subject, carry the potential to challenge and even transform material 'reality.' As Jean Graybeal has argued, Kristeva's theories on artistic creation – including creative writing – are centrally concerned with the ethical dimensions of artistic practice:

It is impossible to read the work of Julia Kristeva without becoming aware of the ethical motivation and orientation of her writings. Kristeva's works are indirect and subtle reflections on the good life, on the constitution of human identity and subjectivity, and on the possibilities for human existence. (Graybeal, 1993: 32)

This thesis takes Kristeva's theories on the ethical dimensions of artistic practice as a central reference point, but as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the thesis also draws upon other aspects of her psychoanalytic and narratological theories. Her adaptation of Bakhtin's theories on dialogism provides a useful model within which to analyse textual relations in Atwood's writing, which mixes different registers, genres and

literary modes in its drive towards rapprochement and the transcendence of hegemonic socio-political structures. Kristeva's theories on intersubjectivity and the relationship between language and gender, on the other hand, are referenced throughout the thesis as frameworks within which to analyse Atwood's critique of social divisions and inequalities. Kristeva's theories on subjectivity and the constitutive power of language can be situated within a genealogy of psychoanalytic criticism, and the contributions of key figures such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein to the development of Kristeva's theories are acknowledged at various points in the thesis. As is widely acknowledged, Kristeva's theories on the potential of the semiotic (a prelinguistic realm associated with the pre-Oedipal union between mother and child) to disrupt the binaristic, patriarchal structures of the symbolic (the social realm, governed by the 'law of the father,' into which the infant enters with the acquisition of language) draw directly upon the work of Jacques Lacan, who himself adapted Freud's theories on gendered identity formation in his poststructuralist analysis of language (see Morris, Grosz and Moi). Where appropriate, this thesis draws upon Lacan's theories on language, and Freud's theories on subjectivity and the ego, in its analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and language in Atwood's writing, but it also acknowledges the ways in which Kristeva's work departs from that of her predecessors, particularly when it comes to the analysis of gender. In particular, Kristeva's arguments that the maternal realm of the semiotic can 'irrupt' into and even restructure the symbolic realm represents a break with the phallo(go)centric bias of Freud's and Lacan's work, offering an enabling model within which to analyse Atwood's exploration of female subjectivity. However, while I engage at various points with the ways in which

Atwood's female narrators and characters occupy marginal or 'borderline' positions, unlike other Atwood scholars such as Hengen, Barzilai and Suarez (discussed above), I do not interpret Atwood's feminism as the locus of her subversive energies.

In his book *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Graham Huggan interrogates Atwood's subversion or 'anti-establishment views' in terms of her feminist stance. Huggan writes:

[Atwood] can be seen, uncharitably no doubt, as something of an establishment subversive, putting forward controversial views that are all the more popular because they are perceived as 'irreverent,' 'unorthodox' or 'unofficial.' In this sense, I would suggest ... that there is something of a staged controversiality surrounding Atwood and her work. Her putatively anti-establishment views have always tended to move with the fashions of the moment. Her work operates as a gauge of white middle-class - predominantly female - fears and anxieties; the oppositional values that she likes to articulate arguably represent an orthodoxy for that particular group. (Huggan, 2001: 216)

As Huggan's statement shows, the limitations of Atwood's 'subversive' qualities are particularly apparent when her work is situated within a feminist context. My thesis attempts to transcend the limitations associated with 'conventional' feminist responses to Atwood's work, instead focusing on the way in which the speaking subject or the workings of a text's unconscious invite subversion and challenge ideological and aesthetic orthodoxies. Indeed, Atwood herself has argued, in response to questions about her 'feminist' leanings, that gender is secondary to the condition of humanity itself:

My bottom line is that women are human beings, a fact that is disputed elsewhere on the globe, and that if they're human beings they also have human rights and human frailties. And then we can go on talking about the rights and frailties but if we don't take 'human being' as the axiom we won't get anywhere. (Atwood, qtd. in Howells, 2005: 19)

Atwood's scepticism towards essentialist approaches to gender studies, I would

argue, is comparable to the stance adopted by Kristeva, who has also expressed reservations about the essentialising qualities of certain types of feminist scholarship. In her discussion of the feminist movement, Kristeva has argued that it is important to resist fixed definitions of female subjectivity. Kristeva's theories on the semiotic as a subversive force that has the potential to disrupt and even reconfigure the symbolic realm, as Grosz observes, seek out 'the different forms of totality and unity' which might be achieved through this dynamic relation between the semiotic and the symbolic (Grosz, 1989: 98). Kristeva's strategy transcends the ideological constraints of more essentialist models of gender. I find this more flexible, dynamic approach to gender extremely useful to an analysis of Atwood's writing, which similarly eludes and critiques fixed and unitary definitions, constantly renegotiating social and aesthetic boundaries and orthodoxies. With the central theoretical tenets of the thesis established, it seems appropriate to end this chapter with a brief overview of the remaining chapters in the thesis.

Chapter one discusses Atwood's explorations of cultural plurality and gender politics in terms of her enduring interest in cultural, ontological and geographical borders and boundaries. Focusing in particular on Atwood's poetry collections *The Circle Game* (1966) and *The Animals in That Country* (1968), the chapter explores her representations of female subjects located on social borders and peripheries, as well as her interest in the environment, which is focused upon the geographical borderlands of Canada as postcolonial space, and upon animals as victims of human cruelty and domination. These issues will be discussed with specific reference to Kristeva's theories on the potential of poetic language to transform social relations.

Chapter two focuses on dialogic relationships in Atwood's texts. Through a

discussion of Atwood's novels *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and her short story collection *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), the chapter investigates transpositions between sign systems in Atwood's work, including the metamorphosis of life into art and vice-versa, in terms of Kristeva's adaptation of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on dialogism. Kristeva incorporates Bakhtin's theories into her own unique theory of intertextuality, which provides a useful model for assessing the extent to which Atwood dramatises possible harmony between opposed entities through intertextual processes.

Chapter three focuses upon hysteria, examining the way in which a range of hysterical female characters in Atwood's writing embody the potential for the transformation of conventional semantic and ontological systems. The life stories of the three female protagonists in Atwood's works *Surfacing* (1972) and *Alias Grace* (1996) and her poetry collection *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), I will argue, foreground the discourse of hysteria as a means by which to challenge social and psychological repression. Drawing upon the work of Sigmund Freud as well as Kristeva, the chapter investigates the extent to which the incomplete, failed work of hysteria (as Freud analyses it) paradoxically opens up a possible model of representation that goes beyond binary oppositions and dominant discourses.

Chapter four explores processes of identification brought about by the experience of love or empathy, focusing upon various kinds of inter-relationships explored in Atwood's poetry collections *You Are Happy* (1974) and *Two-Headed Poems* (1978). In many of the poems in these collections, corporeality is foregrounded as a means by which to transcend rigid social oppositions and conventions, and even the species barrier. Atwood reviews the logic of power

relations through an exploration of interactions between men and women, mothers and children, and humans and animals, exploring the ways in which intersubjective identification or the dissolution of the human ego serve to collapse the boundaries between self and other.

Chapter five examines mourning and melancholia in Atwood's writing, using the melancholic's multi-layered and fluid subjectivity as a focus for exploring various kinds of ontological and textual complexity and indeterminacy. As I will argue, although the melancholic (according to psychoanalysis) is fixated upon death, in Atwood's writing the melancholic's ambivalent relationship to social and semiotic structures also opens a route to establishing new socio-textual relations. As I will demonstrate, in Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* (1988) and her poetry collection *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), the process of artistic creation is identified as a means by which the melancholic subject re-establishes meaningful relationships with others. Both texts also interrogate the boundary between the genres of fiction and autobiography, as the protagonists incorporate aspects of their own lives into their artistic creations.

Overall, then, this thesis investigates the ways in which Atwood's writing explores the human subject, and the literary text, as sites of dynamic transformation, arguing that her work poses an ethical challenge to conventional understandings of social relations, ontology, and processes of signification and artistic creation. Through its focus on signifiers and the speaking subject of psychoanalysis, Atwood's work constantly pushes at the boundaries of human ontology, searching for a means by which social relations might be transformed through the transcendence of inequality, oppression, and conflictual opposition.

## **Part I. The signifier: Textuality and Intertextuality in Atwood's writing**

Part I of this thesis focuses upon the dialogue between literary aesthetics and socio-political 'reality' in Atwood's writing. As I will demonstrate, Atwood's work is centrally engaged with dynamic or mobile subject positions that ultimately serve to undermine conventional distinctions between art and social 'reality.' Further, in Atwood's intertextuality, the boundaries of individual texts are permeable, and her works often engage in translinguistic dialogue with other texts and discourses, challenging essentialist definitions of gender and literary 'convention.'

### **Chapter 1. The artistic practice of the speaking subject**

In her writing, Atwood probes the dynamic relation between art and social 'reality' through the speaking subject, who is a function and effect of the social and symbolic order. From her early publications such as *The Circle Game* (1966), *The Animals in That Country* (1968) and *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Atwood has explored the potential of language itself to undermine conventional boundaries between art and social reality, and to question the nature of 'reality' as represented in the symbolic realm. By drawing attention to the constantly shifting processes of signification in language, she posits poetry or art as 'reality in process,' or as a mediation of 'reality.' This possibility is explicitly suggested by the open, dialogic structure of her works, which necessitate a process of interaction between reader and text. This process can be illuminated by a consideration of Kristeva's theories on the potential of poetic language to transform social relations. In this context, textual analysis has the potential to reconfigure social relations, as the

speaking subject becomes repositioned within the socio-political order. Atwood's device of inter-relating poetry and reality, like Kristeva's engagement with the signifying subject-in-process, opens up the potential for a new articulation of reality. I would argue that the identities of Atwood's female personae in particular illustrate her belief in the power of artistic creation to challenge dominant discourses. Through these female speaking subjects, Atwood strives to construct a new social order; her female personae are subjects-in-process, in keeping with the multivalent and suggestive nature of her language. In a similar vein, her uneasiness with fixed literary forms and meanings can be interpreted as means by which to challenge dominant discourses. In order to illustrate the way this challenge operates, my analysis explores rhythmic breaks and images of unstructured space that appear in Atwood's early poems in particular.

Drawing upon the notion of the speaking subject and abjection in Kristeva's work, I wish to explore Atwood's artistic creation as an ethical aesthetic process. The relationship between aesthetic or textual forms on the one hand, and thematic issues on the other, is one of the most persistent and intriguing issues in Atwood's work: aesthetic forms are intertwined with feminist political issues, linking the aesthetic and material realms. While attentive to feminist social agendas,<sup>1</sup> Atwood engages in an artistic practice which Kristeva explains in terms of the genotext, a signifying process in which semiotic traces, such as drives and energies, irrupt into the material

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Marcus' 'Feminist aesthetics and the new realism' provides an enlightening context in which to consider such issues. While exploring the way in which the cognitive role of aesthetics allows for the transformation of experience, Marcus criticises feminist critics' polarization of the relationship between literary practice and politics. To illustrate the way this aesthetic challenge to social and cultural politics operates, Marcus foregrounds Rita Felski's studies on aesthetics in which Felski argues for a rehabilitated literary realism, contending against 'an antirealist aesthetics of textuality' (18). Felski's critique of the 'antirealist aesthetics of textuality' is one example of how empiricist Anglo-American feminism criticises French feminism, which is focused primarily upon the words or language on the page. See Marcus (1992).

'text.' According to Kristeva, the semiotic *chora*, with its pulsating drives and potential to disrupt symbolic forms of representation, is the locus of this dynamic process. When the semiotic irrupts into the symbolic, repressed drives therefore resurface and become manifest within the signifying process. As I will demonstrate, this process is abundantly evident in Atwood's work. However, it is worth exploring Kristeva's theories in more detail before looking at specific examples in Atwood's writing.

Kristeva argues that the *chora*, closely associated with the maternal body, is transformed into the abject, thereby exiled from the symbolic realm. However, when the semiotic irrupts into the symbolic realm, the abject resurfaces, thus triggering new processes of signification and reuniting the speaking subject with the maternal, prelinguistic realm. As Kristeva puts it, this becomes a 'process of eternal return' which challenges the binary oppositions which underpin the symbolic order (Kristeva, 1982: 43). I would argue that these theories, and psychoanalytic arguments about the 'return of the repressed' more generally, provide a useful framework within which to consider the ways in which borders and boundaries are challenged in Atwood's work. By exploring the irruption of the semiotic into Atwood's early poetry in particular, I will demonstrate the genotextual aspects of her writing.

### **1. I or not I: the speaking subject in *The Circle Game***

Margaret Atwood's first book, a poetry collection entitled *The Circle Game*, was published in 1966, when Canadian cultural nationalism was on the rise. Although the surge of optimism about Canada and its political and cultural

awakening was to be undermined by Quebec separatist activities (in the 1970s) as well as instabilities in free trade, cultural nationalist sentiments are nevertheless widely evident in Canadian literature of this period, including the work of Atwood. Drawing upon her rural childhood experiences, her early writing explores cultural nationalist imperatives through images of the natural world, emphasising the symbolic resonance of Canada's forest hinterlands. Like other Canadian writers of this period, Atwood is ambivalent in her representation of the wilderness, which is as hostile as it is Edenic. Many of Atwood's critics have identified Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971), which explores the transposition of European myths into the Canadian context, as an invaluable source with which to illuminate Atwood's representations of Canadian culture. Drawing upon Frye's notion of the 'garrison mentality,' Atwood has expressed her opposition to the free trade agreement, instead advocating a self-sufficient Canadian economy, and this desire for a localised, separatist identity is central to Atwood's nationalist agenda. Atwood's Canadian nationalism is contextualised with reference to her own sense of marginalisation within particular contexts, such as urbanised Canada or the U.S. In particular, Atwood's conviction that Canada has been ignored by America<sup>2</sup> is distinctive in the formation of her Canadian nationalism. Although Canada and the U.S. have become increasingly interconnected since their independence from Britain, Atwood's attitude toward the U.S. is nevertheless often hostile, as witnessed in her books *Surfacing* (1972) and *Survival* in particular. Atwood's sense of the subordination of Canada to the U.S. and other imperial giants is arguably evident in her explorations of various victim positions in her writing.

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<sup>2</sup> See, Ingersoll (1992), p.78.

Due to Atwood's active engagement with political issues, her work can be read as a form of 'social realism,' and yet Canadian cultural nationalism may seem irrelevant within the globalised postmodern present, in which multinational capitalist networks have undermined national, political, and economic boundaries. Nevertheless, Atwood's writing insistently calls for Canada and Canadian literature to define its national identity and articulate its difference from its Western neighbours.

At this point it seems prudent to consider the appropriateness or relevance of a Kristevan reading of Atwood's work, given that, insofar as Atwood situates herself within a nationalist, postcolonial and Canadian context, the European context of Kristeva's thinking could be viewed as contradictory to Atwood's anti-establishment stance. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in her essay 'French Feminism in an International Frame,' within a postcolonial context, Kristeva's pronouncements upon non-Western nations such as China can be viewed as 'symptomatic of a colonialist benevolence' (161).<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, Kristeva's generalisations about Chinese writing or the 'East' or 'Orient' more generally are offered from a Eurocentric position. Although Spivak's critique of Kristeva's Eurocentrism has some validity, I would nevertheless argue that there are also many affinities between Kristeva's and Atwood's approaches to the interrogation of social and aesthetic boundaries or orthodoxies, legitimising the theoretical approach I have taken in this thesis.

It is important to recognise that the history of Canada is characterised by pluralities rather than uniformity: it is a bilingual, multicultural nation, and its

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<sup>3</sup> 'French Feminism in an International Frame' is also published in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Routledge (1988), pp.134-53. See also Spivak's essay 'French Feminism Revisited' in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London: Routledge (1993), pp.141-172.

relationship to Britain and France is central to its fractured, complicated sense of nationhood. Colonial master narratives, and contemporary narratives of cultural difference, coexist uneasily within Canada's myths of nationhood, and the nationalist claims of settler cultures often compete with those of Indigenous native peoples. Nevertheless, I would argue that a Canadian cultural nationalism has nevertheless emerged from this diversity, and is explored in Atwood's writing. Atwood's early work, for example, explores popular myths of Canadian heritage and identity, engaging with cultural nationalist agendas but also acknowledging the pluralities within Canada's politico-historical heritage. References to Proteus, Frankenstein, and romantic legends in *The Circle Game* and *The Animals in That Country* project Canadian responses to imported European myth. Section iii of 'The Circle Game' describes how Canadian children playfully re-enact their country's colonial military history (McCombs, 1988: 149). The transformation of the narrator in *Surfacing* (1972) specifically invokes the 'loup-garou'- the French word for a werewolf-story that is indigenous to French Canada. *Survival*, which offers an analysis of nature, animals, native people and explorers and settlers, represents Atwood's interest in an historical materialist approach to Canada and Canadian literature.

Atwood's explorations of cultural plurality can be interpreted in terms of her enduring interest in borders and boundaries, and can also be related to her exploration of gender politics and feminism, which serve to challenge phallogocentric models of social reality. Atwood's formative years coincided with the rise of the North American feminist movement, and many literary critics have identified feminist elements in Atwood's work. Atwood herself has acknowledged that her writing is informed by feminist political agendas: she describes *The Edible*

*Woman*, for example, as ‘protofeminist’ (*SW*, 370). Yet while she has expressed support for feminist political movements, Atwood has remained sceptical of some of the more essentialising aspects of feminist theories and ideologies. I would suggest that this points towards a profound contradiction or duality in Atwood’s approach to feminism in her creative writing: while she has engaged with the material realities of women’s experience and the gendered division of labour, she has nevertheless maintained an aesthetic freedom which transcends the limitations of feminist theory and ideology. Although many of her works engage with sexual politics, Atwood’s feminist position is never explicitly defined. I would argue that Atwood’s reluctance to adopt a definitive feminist position in her work is directly related to her interest in boundaries or dynamic relations between art and life, fantasy and reality, reader and text, and by extension, men and women. Her work recognises the existence of categories such as ‘Canadian citizen’ and ‘woman’ at a material level, but her linguistic, aesthetic strategies serve to confound fixed categories and definitions.

Where critics have analysed the aesthetic or linguistic qualities of Atwood’s work, they have tended to relate them specifically to Atwood’s feminism. Shannon Hengen’s analysis of Atwood’s poetry exemplifies this position: she draws upon Kristeva’s notion of poetic language in order to demonstrate the putatively subversive, feminist aspects of Atwood’s work (1993). Sally Robinson takes a similar position, reading Atwood’s use of language specifically in terms of the challenges it poses to phallogocentric systems of signification. As she remarks, ‘Atwood articulates her protagonist’s central problem in terms of her relation to [masculine] language’ (Robinson, 1988: 108). As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Shuli Barzilai’s and Isabel Carrera Suarez’s analyses of Atwood’s work have

also interpreted Atwood's linguistic strategies in terms of the construction of unstable female subjectivities. It is significant that all of these critics have drawn upon Kristeva's theories on poetic language and the semiotic in their feminist analyses of Atwood's work. Focusing upon the subversive potential of poetic language, they typically posit the recovery of the mother as necessary for the establishment of a new signifiatory order based upon female interconnections. In maintaining that Atwood's writing is subversive and feminist, ironically these critics impose restrictions on Atwood's and Kristeva's own subversive aesthetics. As I shall demonstrate, a closer focus upon the speaking subject or the workings of a text's unconscious in Atwood's work is one means by which to transcend these methodological limitations.

In 'This is a Photograph of Me,' one of Atwood's best known poems from *The Circle Game*, the question of the representation of identity is explored in some detail. Through a description of a blurred and grainy photograph, the poem explores two levels of signification, manifest and latent, in order to suggest that precise interpretations of the 'meaning' of a text are impossible. The poem defies logical understanding: the speaker describes a landscape that was photographed after his or her own death: 'The photograph was taken/the day after I drowned' (*Circle Game*, 11). As the unidentified speaker says, she is 'in the center of the picture' but 'under the surface' (*CG*, 11). It is because the speaker occupies two different realms that the representation of her identity is never precise or certain. The speaker herself admits that it is difficult to locate and identify her: 'It is difficult to say where/precisely, or to say/how large or small I am' (*CG*, 11). An indefinable position establishes an

ambiguous and uncertain identity. In an effort to find the speaker, the reader is caught in a trap of double signification. The reader's eyes cannot reach the place in which the speaker is placed, as she is 'in the lake' (CG, 11). This spatial indeterminacy contributes to the poem's atmosphere of uncertainty and ambiguity.

The speaker thus articulates the permeable boundary between centre and margin, surface and 'under the surface.' Absent from the scene, the voice of the apparent speaker in the poem is distinct in its focus upon dialogue<sup>4</sup> that disrupts conceptual and ontological boundaries and facilitates what may be described as a process of thematical and formal 'openness.' There are many linguistic forms and elements in the poem that serve to challenge fixed positions and invite plural readings of the poem. The loose conjunctions, lack of prepositions, irregular rhythms, and the use of parenthesis are prevalent in *The Circle Game*. In this poem, the open structure allows for gaps in meaning that must be bridged or negotiated by the individual reader. The dual modes of articulation in the poem – direct and parenthetical – can be interpreted as an intertextual dialogue between ever-changing signifiers and signifieds, or between the semiotic and the symbolic. As the temporal matrix is reversed or inverted (in that the speaker reveals that 'the photograph was taken/ the day after I drowned' (CG, 11)), the poem defies any fixed or unitary definition. The light through which we might see the speaker is refracted: 'the effect of water/ on light is a distortion' (CG, 11).

Gaps and breaks between adjectives and nouns ('a smeared/ print'), as well as verbs and objects ('as you scan/ it'), also disturb the momentum of the poem, again requiring leaps of interpretation on the part of the reader. The fractured rhythms and

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<sup>4</sup> See Colin Nicholson (1994). His analysis of the poem recognises the working of a speech act within it. As he states, the poem 'opens up dialogic space with the addressee' (12).

structural breaks in this poem, I would argue, are evidence of the potential for subversion of the signifying process, as fixed forms and conventions are reconfigured. Atwood defamiliarises plain and ordinary words, intermingling static verbs and passive verb-forms in a radical refiguration of grammatical structures. As John Wilson Foster has pointed out, 'Atwood's poetic lines, broken off at conjunctions, prepositions and other weak joints, have jagged edges' (12). This process is also evident in 'Journey to the Interior' (CG, 57), where the contours of Atwood's literary landscape are disturbed by metrical irregularities. This process renders familiar objects uncanny, creating 'a circling in an undecipherable forest' which represents the Canadian interior (Foster, 1977: 11). Indeed, the subject or persona of both 'Journey to the Interior' and 'This is a Photograph of Me' is represented as a function and effect of linguistic expression. Atwood's use of poetic language in 'Photograph,' for example, equates the photograph with an indefinable female subjectivity which takes the indistinct form of 'a smeared print: blurred lines and grey flecks' (CG, 11).

Playing upon the notion of doubleness, then, Atwood offers a challenge to conventional representations of subjectivity and identity. In order to interrogate notions of unified and fixed identities, she adopts a Kristevan perspective, focusing on the construction of identity and subjectivity. In 'This is a Photograph of Me,' the significance of centrality itself becomes weak as the speaker is in the centre yet cannot represent herself: 'I am in the lake, in the center/ of the picture, just under the surface' (CG, 11). In her description, the centre is no longer a place that holds everything under its control, but instead represents the plurality of its constituent parts. This reference to the provisionality of the 'centre' embodies the way in which

Atwood challenges notions of stable 'realities' through the process of artistic construction. New modes of signification open up new modes of perception. Since a fixed identity or a closed structure does not express woman's lived experience, Atwood eschews form of representation that purport to 'reflect' conventional social realities. But as is suggested in her portrayal of the centre, Atwood does not mean entirely to deny or efface the notion of a centre. Her notion of the uncertain centre is not so much a negation of centrality itself; rather, she explores the potential of restructuring the text in order to engage in dialogue with marginal positions. Her aesthetic vision is like a mosaic painting: it is made up of individual constituent parts, and yet remains part of an overall structure. To create form from the dynamics of difference or chaos, there must be a dialogue between the periphery and the centre. Being tied to the mosaic of relations which are constantly 'in process,' marginal positions do not merely disappear or exist in absence; they are part of the overall structure. This is why and how Atwood inscribes duality in her conception of the 'centre.' While she acknowledges the existence of binary oppositions, this is in order to open up the possibility for dialogue between different subject positions. As the speaker says, there is a possibility for 'you,' the other, to find her: 'if you look long enough/, eventually/ you will be able to see me' (CG, 11).

Atwood's interrogation of positionality can be considered within the context of Kristeva's arguments on the way in which the semiotic reconstitutes the symbolic. In understanding Kristeva's attempt to destabilise fixed notions of subjectivity, sexuality and identity,<sup>5</sup> it is worth noting the contradictions and paradoxes in her notion of poetic language. As Kristeva states, poetic language involves 'a

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<sup>5</sup> Kelly Oliver's reading of ethical practice in Kristeva's texts explicitly adopts this critical position. In focusing on Kristeva's argument that signification arises out of materiality, Oliver illustrates how poetic language has been recognised by many critics as destabilising boundaries. See Oliver (1993).

transgression of position, a reversed reactivation' (Kristeva, 1984: 69). That is, it is necessary first and foremost to access the symbolic in order to reactivate the semiotic. Like a deferred action in which the first event is activated by the second, it is only through the presence of the symbolic that the subversive, assertive forces of the semiotic begin to become evident. Kristeva affirms that the semiotic is a precondition of the symbolic, and yet it functions 'within signifying practices as the result of a transgression of the symbolic' (Kristeva, 1984: 68). While disturbing and unsettling the symbolic through its heterogeneous signification processes, poetic language is therefore also a central constitutive aspect of the symbolic. This model is comparable to Kristeva's definition of the position of the speaking subject, a theory which challenges Derridean conceptions of deconstruction (Moi, 1986: 16). Basically, Kristeva's understanding of subject positioning relies on the concept of the *thetic* – which posits signification as both a denotation (of an object) and an enunciation (of a displaced subject, absent from the signified and signifying position) - which is at odds with deconstructive notions of continually deferred meaning. The Kristevan subject-in-process occupies a position that is at once subversive of and dependent upon the symbolic order, the law (Moi, 1986: 13). This argument is reinforced by the fact that although Kristeva is mainly concerned with semiotic processes which generate dynamic subject positions, she never fails to acknowledge the constitutive power of the symbolic. The *chora*, associated by Plato with the maternal figure or a mobile and provisional process, is not an ordered whole but it is nevertheless subject to 'a regulating process.' As Kristeva put it: '[the process] is different from that of symbolic law but nevertheless effectuates discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again' (Kristeva, 1984, 26). This is the logic

of the abject that returns or resurfaces at points of crisis. She draws attention to the way in which the irruption of drives enables the subject to experience a 'second-degree thetic' (Kristeva, 1984: 50). This concept is clearly stated in her analysis of the Oedipal stage and its putative role in the formation of gendered identity. The instinctual semiotic has been already regulated by its own thetic movement between the semiotic and the symbolic realms, and it cannot subvert the symbolic completely. Kristeva's notion of the thetic differentiates her poetic language from the simple play of the signifier as posited in deconstruction theory. According to Kristeva, poetic language is inflected by heterogeneous elements, yet it does not deny the possibility of thesis.

As I have argued, in Atwood's poem 'This is a Photograph of Me,' it is the speaker, or speaking subject, that disrupts boundaries in the poem. Atwood's speaker here is, to use Kristeva's term, 'a subject-in-process,' a voice constructing a sense of self from a paradoxical sense of absence. The voice initiates a dialogue between the text and the reader. It is only through the reader's participation in the lost landscape of the poem that the speaker can come alive and plead for recognition.<sup>6</sup> Atwood's weaving of a text both for the dead speaker and the live reader challenges established boundaries between art and social reality. Implicit in the word 'scan' in 'Photograph' is the act of seeing, as well as the modern technology that shapes the photograph, or the 'self.' As the speaker is underwater, her existence can be identified when we, the addressees and the readers, 'scan' the water. Atwood plays on the multivalency of particular words: the word 'you,' for example, refers both to the textual subject

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<sup>6</sup> In her analysis of the poem, Brenda Wineapple (1982) identifies the speaker's voice as a contemporary voice, and associates the speaker's plea to transform the landscape and to reformulate the basis of power relations with a feminist struggle that she locates in Atwood's poems more generally.

looking at the photograph, and also 'You,' the reader who peruses the poem. The dialogue thus operates across boundaries between the world of text and the world of material 'reality.' Behind this lies Atwood's aspiration to aesthetic freedom, the ability, as she puts it, to speak of a 'sense of enormous complexity, not only of the relationship between Man and Woman, but also of those between those other abstract intangibles, Art and Life, Form and Content, Writer and Critic, etcetera' (*SW*, 190).

The dialogue between the dead and the living is one form in which this freedom is represented. In this dialogic space, readers are invited to embrace the coldness and stasis that death invokes in the name of otherness, while still inhabiting the world of the living. The elusiveness of the self and the mingling of death and life, whereby the uncanny erupts into the poem, reveals how the text is inflected by the workings of the unconscious. As Kristeva has pointed out, Freud identifies the moment of the uncanny as 'arousing images of death, automatons, doubles, or female sex' (Kristeva, 1991: 188). In keeping with this perspective, Kristeva states that 'uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased' (Kristeva, 1981: 188). This process is evident in Atwood's poem, where water imagery is invoked as another realm within which boundaries are shifted and interrogated. Water has a paradoxical function, fostering life forms, but also drowning the speaker in the poem. This irony is the source of black humour in the poem, but the fluidity of water also becomes a metaphor for the provisionality of borders and boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The water causes the speaker's death, but also points towards a process of rebirth in its very fluidity. Here, and in other early Atwood poems, water is therefore associated not only with death, but also with the maternal

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<sup>7</sup> See John Wilson Foster (1977). For Foster, the aquatic images in Atwood's poems square with her protean poetic imagination. He states that 'nothing is destroyed in Atwood's universe: it simply assumes another space and another form' (8).

body – as amniotic fluid – and with the ritual of baptism, a religious process of ‘rebirth’ and transformation.

Atwood’s poem ‘After the Flood, We’ (*CG*, 12) engages more explicitly with female experience, defining female subjectivity in relation to matriarchal family bloodlines. Atwood’s use of the plural, ‘we,’ in the title indicates boundary-subjects who contain otherness within themselves and raise the possibility of plurality. Recalling the biblical story of Noah’s flood, the poem imagines a world subject to a similarly cataclysmic deluge, in which the unidentified speaker and an unidentified other are the sole survivors. The focal point of the poem is death, but this death presages the emergence of a new form of life. Focalised through the consciousness of the female speaker, the poem posits identification with dead mothers as a means of sensing the emergence of new life. Through her act of ‘gathering the sunken/ bones of the drowned mothers,’ the female speaker is able to hear ‘the first stumbling/footsteps of the almost-born’ and see ‘the almost-human/ brutal faces forming/ (slowly)/ out of stone’ (*CG*, 12). Significantly, her male counterpart neither sees nor hears these things. The speaker’s awareness of death, and her acceptance of the maternal body (as the abject) enacts a process which paradoxically triggers new life, and death therefore becomes a hopeful sign.<sup>8</sup> I would argue that the female boundary-subjects in Atwood’s poem are defined with reference to the maternal body, which does not negate social or symbolic identities, but nevertheless articulates the abject, thus - according to Kristeva’s theories - collapsing the boundaries between self and other.

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<sup>8</sup> See Kathryn VanSpanckeren (1988). VanSpanckeren states that death is one of the dominant themes in Atwood’s writing in which she affirms life through the transformative images of death. Identifying death in Atwood’s works with shamanic performance, VanSpanckeren insists that for Atwood death is ‘a wellspring of creativity’ (189).

At this point, it is worth defining Kristeva's notion of the abject in more detail, as it is particularly relevant to Atwood's work. Abject, filth and defilement, associated by Kristeva with the residue of maternity, epitomise the separation from the mother. If a child is to develop into a healthy independent subject, the mother needs to be expelled by being rendered abject, rather than remaining an object of desire. However, as Kristeva points out, the abject constantly resurfaces with 'a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness,' echoing Freud's notion of the death drive. With the return of the abject, a 'familiar' but 'opaque and forgotten life,' the ego confronts the state of 'Not me, Not that. But not nothing, either' (Kristeva, 1982: 2). As Freud locates the death drive in the forbidden mother's proscribed body, so Kristeva finds the origin of the abject in the ego's lost object, the maternal body. She views the abject as the ego's mourning for this lost object. But for Kristeva, abjection also carries life-giving potential, bringing the ego back to the place where s/he experienced unification with the (m)other. As Kristeva writes,

The abject is the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgements. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away - it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance. (Kristeva, 1982: 15)

According to Kristeva, the archaic mother, as the site of primary identification, reveals the nature of identity as a process or performance. Occupying the borders of existence through abjection, the self claims that "'I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death' (Kristeva, 1982: 3).

I would argue that Kristeva's notion of death or the maternal abject, which is displaced or condensed into subjectivity or language, is directly relevant to subject

formations in Atwood's work. In *The Circle Game*, for example, Atwood metaphorically equates the subject with that which is in process, which is moving, and is yet associated with death. If death is generally associated with finality, death occupies no such position in Atwood's work. Instead, it is a process of mobility and transition linked with the speaking subject. Arguing for the way Atwood's artistic creation operates across boundaries between art and life, I see death as a part of her larger vision of literature as an ongoing process of signification. In 'After the Flood, We,' for example, the emerging figures echo the beast in Yeats' 'The Second Coming,' signalling the coming of a new world. Death functions as the symbolic image of an ongoing process, and represents the openness and transfiguring potential of the text.

The openness or (as Kristeva puts it) the permutability of the text is also realised in the numerous intertextual references which appear in Atwood's *The Circle Game*. I would argue that Atwood's intertextuality is connected with her desire to maintain both aesthetic freedom and a sense of connection with the material/social realm. Just as Kristeva's notion of the irruption of the semiotic into the realm of the symbolic questions conventional conceptions of unified subjectivities and social identities, so her notion of intertextuality draws attention to the permeability of putative boundaries between texts.<sup>9</sup>

At this point it is worth exploring the significance of Atwood's intertextual references, which – in Kristevan terms – serve to transform existing discursive paradigms. In her poems 'The Circle Game,' 'A Sibyl,' 'Migration: C.P.R.' and 'A

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<sup>9</sup> Adopting Bakhtin's statement that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another,' Kristeva is concerned with the existence of multiple or hidden meanings in the text, which she equates with the subversive force of poetic language (*Desire in Language*, 66). I will discuss Atwood's and Kristeva's intertextuality in more detail in Chapter 3.

Place: Fragments,' for example, Atwood recalls earlier male writers such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Andrew Marvell. The fate of the sibyl in Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is inverted in 'A Sibyl,' where the speaker wishes death not upon herself, but rather upon conventional models of womanhood: it is 'not I want to die/ but You must die' (CG, 49). While Atwood reacts against patriarchal ideologies and male writers' conventional representations of woman, her interest is not simply to dismiss literary traditions and existing conventions.

In her feminist psychoanalytic reading of Atwood's work, Eleonora Rao argues that Atwood's writing foregrounds the 'ideological construction of subjectivity' and seeks to challenge systems of masculine logic embodied in the work of her male literary predecessors (Rao, 1993: 174). While adopting this feminist perspective, however, Rao acknowledges that Atwood's treatment of tradition and literary inheritance is multifaceted and not just located within the politics of gender. I agree with this argument, and would suggest that Atwood's attitude towards 'literary tradition' is similar to the way in which she treats the relation between centre and margin as discussed earlier. Her ambivalent approach to the literary canon is embodied in her assertion that writers don't have to 'discard the tradition,' nor do they need to 'succumb to it' (*Survival*, 238).

As I have demonstrated, striking a balance between opposites is an important element in Atwood's work, perhaps reflecting her search for what she refers to as 'some new ways of writing' (*Survival*, 238). As Coral Ann Howells argues, Atwood's revision of traditional narratives and genres 'is balanced against a strong continuity of interests, which are both aesthetic and social' (Howells, 2005: 6). Atwood's revisionist approach to the conventions of gothic romance, for example,

which Howell interprets as a major intertextual strand in her work, draws attention to the provisionality of generic categories. According to Howells, the widespread use of open endings and indeterminacy in Atwood's novels are central to her 'distinctive brand of postmodernism with its ironic mixture of realism and fantasy, fictive artifice and moral engagement' (Howells, 2005: 10). I would argue that a mixture of realism and fantasy is also central to Atwood's representation of Canada. Her attempt to provide a 'map of the territory' in *Survival*, for example, offers a kind of key to Canadian history, but the map – a survival manual – also points towards a metaphysical terrain or colonial mentality which is 'mapped out' in Canadian literature. While representing Atwood's historical materialist approach to Canadian literature, *Survival* emerges through an interweaving of documentary 'fact' with an interpretative or imaginary voice of the Canadian experience, thus blurring the boundaries between artistic imagination and historical fact.

The images and figures Atwood selects to suggest her strong interest in both life and art can be considered in terms of Kristeva's notion of the speaking subject and forms of linguistic expression that operate across boundaries. The speaking subject's relationship to language represents identity itself as a signifying process. Inasmuch as language cannot be limited or contained in one form of representation, the possibility of multiple forms of reality is therefore anticipated. I would argue that this is the way in which Atwood challenges social and cultural forms in which marginalised individuals cannot represent themselves.

Where Atwood's 'This is a Photograph of Me' (discussed earlier) explores the amorphous nature of female identity, her poem 'Camera' is centrally focused upon man's putative compulsion to control aspects of his environment, such as

landscape, nature and weather. In keeping with the dialogical structures of Atwood's work, 'Camera' functions as a companion piece to 'Photograph,' representing a kind of negative or inverse image of the other text. For example, unlike the female speaker in 'Photograph,' who attempts to explore relations between others through the image of the blurred photograph, the male figure, the 'Camera man,' seeks order and control, motivated by a desire to achieve the 'organized instant' (CG, 45). Contrary to the aquatic female world, which allows the unfixed subject to open up relationships with others in an open-ended process of dialogue, 'this instant' and 'rain drying' male world insists that everything is brought under control and requires a systematic ordering of the natural world (CG, 45). In this fixed world, the other finds herself reduced to a 'small black speck' (CG, 45). As my analysis of 'Photograph' has demonstrated, Atwood links her speaker's subjectivity to the process of linguistic expression. This relationship is also evident in 'Camera,' which mainly comprises active verb forms (such as walk, blow, and move) and present participles in order to describe the male figure and his world. Nature is dynamic here; wind is blowing and sunlight is knitting leaves. Words, grammatical structures and sentence patterns thus serve to differentiate the two worlds; each subject has its own stylistic system.

Atwood's metalinguistic poem 'Migration: C.P.R.' engages specifically with the power of language to convey human history and culture. The poem addresses the experience of migrants, and assimilates it within the cultural traditions of Western migration in North America: it appropriates notions of the Canadian pioneers who, in looking forward to a new life in the West, discard their former identities. Here the speaker's escape from the east, where 'language is the law,' to the west, 'a place of

absolute/ unformed beginning,' illustrates how language controls or shapes reality (CG, 52). Significantly, the main source of the speaker's experience of freedom is the absence of language: 'what a free emerging/ on the raw/ streets and hills/ without meaning/ always creeping up behind us' (CG, 54). In Marvell's famous poem 'To His Coy Mistress' (1681), time chases the personae. Here, conversely, language replaces time and regulates the lives of the individuals described in the poem. It is through the imagery of language that the speaker traces people's residence in the forest: 'we can tell (from the sawn/ firstumps) that many/ have passed the same way/ some time before this (hieroglyphics/ carved in the bark)' (CG, 55).

Atwood's poem 'The City Planners,' on the other hand, offers a compelling exploration of Atwood's opposition to fixed and unified forms and conventions, which are associated explicitly with male-dominated urban society. The first stanza begins with a cynical description of 'residential Sunday streets,' and the speaker expresses a sense of discomfort with 'the sanities: the houses in pedantic rows, the planted/ sanitary trees, [which] assert / levelness of surface' (CG, 27). Everything in this suburban world is well ordered: even the lawn mower's sound is 'rational,' and there is no real evidence of an organic natural world in this artificial urban environment. But, as subsequent stanzas reveal, the speaker senses that potential chaos lurks beneath this ordered cityscape, pointing towards the possibility of subversion hidden within uniformity. Behind the city's 'clean,' ordered facade lie dirt and impurities which the city planners cannot obliterate completely. This defilement, hidden within the city, carries the potential to undermine the whole city by a process as gradual as the movement of 'glaciers,' and is encapsulated in the speaker's vision of collapsed houses. The city planners cannot foresee this potential

breakdown, but the speaker's obsession with disorder becomes an expression of subversive dissent: 'even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows// give momentary access to/ the landscape behind or under/ the future cracks in the plaster' (CG, 27).

Atwood's carefully constructed images of the city in the poem allegorise the construction of the human subject, whose social identity has been formed through an expulsion of the abject (as defined by Kristeva). The abject, the 'unclean' and 'improper' elements of corporeal existence, erodes the boundaries between the self and the other which are invoked in order to demarcate social identities. Within this context, a stable subject position is therefore dependent upon the expulsion of the abject. As Kristeva argues, in order to develop a unitary subjectivity, the self regards him/herself as an abject and performs the act of banishment: 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself' (Kristeva, 1982: 3). By expelling his/her own self through self-abjection, the subject gives birth to a new identity – the 'I.' In other words, abjection not only threatens the self, but also, paradoxically, underpins the boundaries of the self. It is through this contradictory quality of abjection that the self undergoes the non-ego state in which s/he proceeds to a kind of rebirth. What is significant is that the abject returns repeatedly at moments of crisis, just as the underlying dirt threatens the ordered urban boundaries of the cityscape described in Atwood's poem. The vocabulary Atwood uses to describe the concealed aspects of the city in the second stanza resonates with Kristeva's theories on the semiotic and the abject: this other world is characterised by 'hysteria, spilled oil, a faint sickness, a bruise, a vicious coil' (CG, 27). On the other hand, the surface suburban world, which can be associated with the symbolic realm, is defined with reference to fixed and solid

images: 'rigid as wooden borders, the panic of suburb order' (CG, 27). When the repressed elements of the cityscape begin to resurface, the 'City Planners' who have ordered and suppressed life 'with insane faces' begin to lose their power (CG, 27). By using capital letters to indicate the city planners, Atwood invests them with the image and authority of phallic fathers. For the speaker the city planners are 'political conspirators' (CG, 27).

'The Circle Game,' the title poem in this collection, depicts woman's frustration and alienation in the male-centred world of history and culture. Here life is likened to a game, a motif clearly illustrated in the poem 'Playing Cards.' References to a queen who is holding 'a golden flower' and a king with 'a sceptre or a sword' (CG, 24) draw attention to the way in which 'Playing Cards' represents gender divisions. The poem establishes a parodic association between 'real life' and the world of games, underscoring the existence of binary structures in the material world. Similarly, in 'The Circle Game' Atwood posits her speaker watching children 'joined hand to hand/ go round and round' (CG, 35). Although the children are playing, 'there is no joy in it': the children are singing, but their songs do not convey any meaning beyond themselves: 'The whole point/ for them/ of going round and round/ is going round and round' (CG, 35-6). In the second section of the poem, Atwood moves from the apparently empty ritual of children's games to the isolation and alienation within the 'game' of love. Here, again, there is a lack of genuine communication between the lovers, and yet 'You' and 'I,' the male and female lovers, do not wish to be separated.

Judith McCombs states that *The Circle Game* stands for Atwood's 'Stage I, the closed and mirroring world' (McCombs, 1988: 142), and she calls the Atwood of

this period 'the Prufrock-poet' (150). McCombs argues that the condition of being female and Canadian, and the state of being circumscribed within various power struggles, is the focus of what she terms Atwood's exploration of a victimised, Prufrock-esque position in these works. I would push McCombs's analysis even further by arguing that Atwood's adoption of a Prufrock-esque persona is part of her strategy of critiquing and subverting social conventions. It is notable however that in effecting processes of subversion, she is also concerned to counterbalance these subversions in order to explore the potential for meaningful dialogue between various subject positions. Demonstrating 'how one or more systems of signs are transposed into others,' Atwood uses the open-endedness of the text in order to work towards a transformation in the material realm (Moi, 1988: 156). In subsequent sections of 'The Circle Game,' for example, the speaker endeavours to establish relationships which also, paradoxically, lead to processes of self reflection:

Being with you  
here, in this room  
  
is like groping through a mirror  
...  
You look past me, listening  
to them, perhaps, or  
watching  
your own reflection somewhere  
behind my head, over my shoulder. (CG, 36-37)

The female speaker in 'The Circle Game' realises that the difficulty of forming relationships stems from her partner's refusal to recognise her autonomy. All his acts and words engender situations of isolation, as though he is located in a wasteland, thereby negating her presence: 'I notice how/ all your word-/plays, calculated ploys/ of the body, the witticisms/ of touch, are now/ attempts to keep me/ at a certain distance/ and (at length) avoid/ admitting I am here' (CG, 39). According to this

analysis, male discourse marginalises woman to the extent that for her lover she is an irritant like 'a wart' on his body. He is depicted as a cartographer who contrives to 'hold these places in their proper places,' tracing her 'like a country's boundary' (CG, 39). In 'his mind's continent,' the female speaker is 'fixed' (CG, 40). The gender domination is consolidated by the control of words and representation. Men make the rules of life and reinforce them with their spoken representations. Here, the female speaker's primary objective is 'to resist the destructive orderings of a masculine identity' (Nicholson, 1994: 16). 'There is no joy' in 'the closed rules' of a man-made game (CG, 43), and the female speaker finally declares: 'I want to break/ these bones, your prisoning rhythms ... erase all maps ... I want the circle/ broken' (CG, 44). Atwood is implying that the breaking of the sexual circle game is possible through a heightened awareness of female subjectivity and the openness it facilitates.

As Deborah Tannen points out in her study on communication, it is 'metamessages' that establish and maintain relationships among people. Significantly, these 'metamessages are a form of indirectness' rather than aggression (Tannen, 1998: 436). According to Tannen, in order to bring about agreement, women tend to be indirect and rely on negotiation, relying upon 'a display of solidarity, which women prefer to the display of power' (436). Like their communication patterns, women's space is constructed by reciprocal relationships. This theory is relevant to Atwood's poem, where the female speaker anticipates an alternative world after the collapse of the conflictual sexual circle game.

'Against Still Life' illustrates the female speaker's refusal to commit herself to the imposed social structures and forms that the sexual circle game personifies. The poem's point of departure is a female speaker observing an orange on a table,

and she initially responds to it as though it were a still life painting. For the speaker, this captures something in her relationship with her lover; she views him as a still life, not as a real, dynamic, and active person. Initially the poem stresses binary conflict. The female speaker wants to break through the still life, metaphorising it in the orange: 'I want to pick it up/ in my hand/ I want to peel the skin off' (CG, 65). Now she refuses a passive attitude toward life: 'it isn't enough/to walk around it/ at a distance' (CG, 65). What she wants is to communicate and actively participate: 'to be told/everything it has to say' (CG, 65). Contrary to the female speaker's attempt to participate in life, her male partner does not show any sign of interest or change in his attitudes. The speaker can no longer stand this passive, sterile situation. Insisting that even his lies are acceptable if they involve him in a process of communication, she highlights the significance of relationships. But his constant silence frustrates her and triggers a violent response: 'now I'd crack your skull/ like a walnut, split it like a pumpkin/ to make you talk' (CG, 66). However, the speaker knows that violence and conflict cannot be the answer. Here, she takes a step back and explores how her conventional female behaviour - passivity and silence - ironically enables her to cope with experience. If man determines and controls reality by appropriating symbolic systems of rules using language to marginalise women, then women use silence to resist this process: 'if I take the orange/ with care enough and hold it/ gently// I may find/ an egg/ a sun/ an orange moon' (CG, 66). In order to express woman's anger the use of silence seems to be more effective than the language which misrepresents women's experiences and subjectivities. In the poem, the marginalisation of women actually raises the possibility of social change. The speaker's remarks - 'if I watch/ quietly enough/ and long enough/ at last, you will say' (CG, 66) – recall the

unidentified female speaker's appeal in 'Photograph.' Atwood's strategy in 'Photograph' is to represent marginalised people (mostly women) through the use of parentheses. Whereas the dominant male party's exclusive and hegemonic perception cannot embody and represent what is marginal, the minority (female) party's lived experience of presence-in-absence embodies the possibility of many forms of reality.

In 'A Place: Fragments,' Atwood explores the potential for the collapse of fixed conceptual boundaries in the image of an empty or formless space. Where Atwood's poem 'Evening Trainstation Before Departure' presents the instability of identity or subject-in-process ('I am always/ moving // I move/ and live on the edges/ (what edges)/ I live/ on all the edges there are' (CG, 15-6)), this poem posits the dissolution of identity as a process which might enable new subjectivities. The aquatic landscape depicted in the poem symbolises the undefined potential energy that threatens geographical and conceptual boundaries: 'The land flows like a/ sluggish current.//The mountains eddy slowly towards the sea' (CG, 74). The space absorbs all of existence. As there is no order, no regulation, everything remains in a fluid form. Even human bodies lose their material frames and finally become air. 'There is no centre' here (CG, 75). Humans have lost their forms and 'the centers travel' with the human figures 'unseen' (CG, 75). The use of the plural 'we' in the poem also points towards openness and plurality. This corresponds to the apocalyptic imagery invoked in 'After the Flood, We.' Again, 'an other sense' that the speakers perceive is none other than the loss of identity (CG, 76). By placing the 'I' on the border of inside and outside: 'I/ stood in the door-/way, at the fulcrum' (CG, 74), Atwood interrogates the boundaries between subjects to emphasise the possibility of new relationships. This process takes place not to cause chaos or anarchy but rather

in order to embrace difference. For Atwood, identity itself is only possible where the self admits or relates to others. Kristeva's notion of abjection is relevant here, raising the possibility of two independent beings sharing feelings and intentions and moving towards unity without effacing difference. In her poem 'The Explorers,' Atwood warns her readers not to realise this simple fact too late, thereby following in the footsteps of the eponymous adventurers in search of an island that they wish to colonise. Rather than living harmoniously with difference, Atwood's eponymous explorers seek to dominate others and this can only result in their own death. The speaker imagines them discovering skeletons which would be their own, or those of their predecessors: 'they will be surprised/ at the two skeletons' (CG, 77-8). As Lorraine York argues, the linguistic patterns in Atwood's poetry and fiction illustrate the way in which 'the myth of the uniform' is exploded to embrace multiplicity and diversity (16). Atwood is well aware that final or complete resolution of difference between subjects is not possible; instead she explores the ongoing relationships and negotiations between binary opposites.

## **2. Occupying borders: revision and the speaking subject in *The Animals in That Country***

The difference between male and female perceptions of objects and other beings, a preoccupation central to *The Circle Game*, is also comprehensively explored in *The Animals in That Country*. As Atwood was to state in *Second Words*, poetry emerges from or out of tension, and this general critical observation about the nature of poetry might have a particular autobiographical relevance to her own

experience of writing (*SW*, 127). Not surprisingly, Atwood's perceptions change over time, especially in relation to her awareness of 'the changing fashions within feminism' (Howells, 2005: 17), yet Atwood does not attempt to dismantle or transcend dichotomies. Rather, her poetry foregrounds binary oppositions and highlights the tensions between opposed or contrasting forces. Alongside these thematic processes, the dialogic relationships established in *The Circle Game* extend the signifiatory dynamics of the speaking subject, enabling the collection to remain open-ended. To ground subjectivity in relation to others, the poems are constructed in intertextual and dialogic form. They are therefore involved in a dynamic process in both thematic and formal terms. One way of maintaining textual openness is by involving the reader in the text's construction. Without fixed meaning, there is no closed or unified structure and vice versa. Since Atwood refuses ready-made or fixed meanings, she contrives an escape from a reality that enforces a fixed or given form.

If *The Circle Game* (1966) questions a unified identity at the level of the individual human subject, *The Animals in That Country* (1968) expands its horizons into nations and species. The female figures located on the borders and peripheries in the earlier text are transformed into Canada's geographical borderlands and into animal victims symbolising historical, cultural and economic conditions. The focus of tension shifts into the activities of history, culture and evolution that have consolidated binary oppositions. The amorphous female identity that Atwood explored in *The Circle Game* is now equated with the borderline status of Canada itself, which raises possibilities for new dialogic relationships. As Sherrill Grace points out in her study of Canadian and American borderlands, the definition of borderlands itself resists fixed notions of geographical and conceptual space. An

actual borderland is characterised by its incessant state of fluctuation, and the word 'borderlands' is itself also slippery (Grace, 1991: 243). Grace argues that 'Borderlands articulate districts, spaces, or conditions (physical and spiritual) that are uncertain, intermediate and noncentered, even anticentrist' (243). What is particular in Grace's interpretation of borderlands is that any notion or discourse of borderlands involves dialogue between different locations. Founded on ambiguity and duality, and calling into question the notion of centrality, borderlands signify not only an amorphous dividing line, but also the mobility of edges where irreconcilable entities might find space to interact. Grace's notion of the interactive nature of borderline space is useful to a consideration of Atwood's work, in which heterogeneous elements are able to cohabit.

Kristeva's notion of the abject is also concerned with undecidable boundaries, bringing the subject to the edge of the symbolic. While abjection or the loss of the mother constructs the speaking subject or the social identity, the abject is elusive within the signifying system.<sup>10</sup> In the beginning of *Powers of Horror* Kristeva concentrates on the indefinable characteristic of the abject. The abject in her account:

is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire... The abject has only one quality of the object- that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded, and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.' (Kristeva, 1982: 1-2)

Kristeva is attentive to the operation of 'the *appending of territories* - corporeal, natural, and social - invested by drives' (Kristeva, 1984: 102). This process, she

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<sup>10</sup> See Andre Green (1986), p.172. According to Green, the deferred action remains in abeyance in the psyche as a registered meaning, while awaiting its revelation.

argues, dominates the space of the subject-in-process and is connected with the borderline state of schizophrenia. Kristeva's theories are relevant to a reading of the wilderness in Atwood's work; in texts such as *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Surfacing*, for example, the wilderness is represented as a threatening otherness, encapsulating the 'borderline' status of the Canadian 'psyche.' Having both positive and negative associations, wilderness is presented as a violent duality which represents Canada's immigration history and culture. In line with Kristeva's arguments, however, Atwood's texts dissolve dualities and break down boundaries between the subject and society through dynamic processes of representation or signification (Kristeva, 1984: 103).

In discussing the ways in which Atwood's writing operates across boundaries, my analysis focuses upon the relationship between the speaking subject and language, whose imagery often encapsulates a blurred division in space, or a border that resembles an osmotic membrane. As discussed earlier, *The Animals in That Country* furthers strategies explored in *The Circle Game*, exploring Canadian cultural nationalism while at the same time articulating and enacting Atwood's aesthetic freedom. One outcome of Atwood's exploration of Canada's political and social milieu is a textual dialogue which interrogates boundaries between the two poetry collections themselves. While there is no obvious link between the two collections in terms of their exploration of Canadian cultural identity, they both deploy the metaphor of the journey, along with images of wild landscape and pioneer figures, all of which allude to Canada and are clearly bound up with Canadian identity. Through these allusions, which are pointedly shared by both collections, Atwood's work engages in a dialogue or intertextual process that typifies Kristeva's discussion of

'the workings of a text's unconscious' (Millard, 1989: 158). By frequently returning to narratives or images featured in *The Circle Game*, *The Animals in That Country* demonstrates a process of writing which goes beyond the boundary of 'a discourse.' Like the abject that comes back in moments of crisis and disrupts a stable subjectivity, in Atwood's writing narratives of Canadian identities operate across boundaries between life and art. What I argue here is that Atwood's writing is not simply a matter of articulating oppositions between one side and the other, but of balancing opposites and contradictions, however precariously. This is connected to her intention of challenging fixed positions in social 'reality.' Likewise, the images of animal 'others' affirm Atwood's quest for inter-relationship. Animals, as one of the primary referents in the collection, are identified with Canadians and their cultural otherness.

In her book *Margaret Atwood's Power*, Shannon Hengen notes a subversive energy in Atwood's poetic style, identifying the potential for transformation in her 'rhetorical figure of the mirror,' which forms a direct link with Kristeva (Hengen, 1993: 32). However, Hengen draws attention to 'Atwood's plain poetic style,' a quality which clearly differentiates her work from the formal experimentation which Kristeva has identified with 'poetic language,' the subversive writing of avant-gardism. Nonetheless there is a subversive quality to Atwood's formal and thematic challenge to fixed conventions. And, as in Kristeva's writings, it is the mother's body which underlies the subversiveness of Atwood's poetics. Drawing attention to the way in which formal experimentation is valued in North American culture, Hengen suggests that Atwood's use of ordinary speech in the poems mirrors her 'defence of the subversiveness, in North American culture, of a plain poetic style' (Hengen,

1993: 74). That is, Atwood's use of demotic language in her poems, and her break with conventional poetic diction and sound patterning, can be considered as a form of poetic language which has the potential to disrupt or subvert social institutions. Although Atwood's formal experimentation does not correspond exactly with Kristeva's notion of poetic language, then, I would nevertheless argue that the two subversive processes are comparable. I would suggest that Atwood's use of a plain poetic style parallels the expansion of her poetic horizons to refer to actual Canadian and North American social conditions, manifesting her interest in the power of art to transfigure reality. Atwood's plain style effectively conveys the subversive force of art, challenging the status quo. If every example of poetic language contains subversiveness within itself, it can lead to the rearrangement of power structures in the social realm.

Since the subject is constituted by language, for Kristeva textual operations can reconstitute the real. The *jouissance* of art, Kristeva explains, bypasses the symbolic and threatens the unity of the subject and the social realm. The operation of semiotic drives in texts causes the subject to relinquish 'his/her identity in rhythm, dissolving the buffer of reality in a mobile discontinuity, leaving the shelter of the family, the state, or religion' (Kristeva, 1984: 104). Kristeva argues that these destructive or transformational forces can be enacted in artistic practice which itself denies rigid binary structures. She argues that avant-gardist texts which engage in different forms of linguistic experimentation constitute examples of this process at work. In her belief that artistic practice shatters what is constant and stable in the real, Kristeva states: 'the commotion the practice creates spares nothing; it destroys all constancy to produce another and then destroys that one as well' (104). In relating

these theories to Atwood's writing, I would argue that one of the ways Atwood redefines the concept of power is by emphasising the amorphous and shifting status of subjects and texts. In foregrounding woman at the margin and Canada as a borderland, she raises the possibility of mobility, using marginal space to open up a possible harmony between seemingly irreconcilable entities. Yet once again, Atwood's concern is not merely to highlight the position or status of the periphery, with a view to disturbing the primacy of the centre. While the dualities that she constantly uses in her works expose the limitations of uniformity, the way she transgresses and challenges the dominant culture is not simply to transcend the differences, but rather to balance them. This, I would argue, corresponds to Kristeva's exploration of poetic language.

As if to demonstrate the degree to which she is engaged in reshaping poetic subject-positions, Atwood opens *The Animals in That Country* with the poem 'Provisions,' which refigures the motif of the pioneer's journey into the Canadian wilderness as explored in 'Migration: C.P.R.' and 'Journey to the Interior.' But whereas these two earlier poems were concerned with the historical realities of migration in Canada, 'Provisions' has a contemporary setting, focusing on the experience of poorly provisioned city dwellers as they seek to re-enact the pioneer experience by journeying into the wilderness. 'Provisions' is therefore an extended exploration of the pioneer journey in which the pioneer is replaced by the city dweller after urban settlement. The speaker's disorientation in 'Provisions' ('so here we are, in thin/ raincoats and rubber boots// on the disastrous ice, the wind rising' (AC, 1)) parallels the pioneer's existential despair in a hostile wilderness in

'Migration: C.P.R.,' where 'Things here grow from the ground/ too insistently/ green to seem spontaneous ... There is also a sea/ that refuses to stay in the harbour' (*CG*, 55). Similar experiences are explored in 'Journey to the Interior,' which treats the topography of the Canadian wilderness, and the propensity of travellers to lose themselves in it, as a metaphor for madness: as the speaker notes, 'there are no destinations/ apart from this,' but this territory is defined by 'the lack of reliable charts' (*CG*, 57).

In her discussion of nature poetry, Atwood suggests that the poet can present his/her interior landscapes by disguising them as an objective portrayal of nature. For Atwood, the landscapes of nature poetry constitute 'maps of a state of mind' (*Survival*, 49). She argues that 'the exploration story' regenerates a 'journey into the unknown regions of the self, the unconscious, and the confrontation with whatever dangers and splendours lurk there' (*Survival*, 113). In this context, as John Wilson Foster notes, the imagery of the journey is 'the emotional landscape of everyday life' that transcends the boundaries of certain people and periods (10). Journeys are therefore ongoing process rather than events: it is not the destination or experience of arrival that is important: rather the importance of journeys lies in the experience they offer of existing in a liminal or in-between state.

In *The Animals in That Country*, Atwood also uses the natural world as a focus for exploring interrelationships between different forms. In the title poem of the collection, for example, Atwood establishes a binary framework which highlights the difference between two countries, presumably Canada and the United States, in order to illustrate how violent and technological human culture precipitates the loss of contact with other living things. Equating the fate of animals that are extinct or

threatened by human activity with that of North American Indigenous peoples and their displaced culture, Atwood anticipates the possibility of the same fate in Canadian society. Atwood has already explored similar issues in *The Circle Game*, where she noted this same movement towards cultural and environmental extinction by examining the changes in the significance and function of totems in 'Some Objects of Wood and Stone' (CG, 59). The poem notes how totems have become commercialised 'sold replicas and souvenirs' (CG, 59), losing their meaning as art forms which express everyday community life dedicated to the harmony of living creatures. Reduced to a commodity or 'an alien aesthetic system' in a preserved park or a museum, totems are identified with displaced North American native cultures and peoples (Anzaldúa, c1999: 90). Significantly, in later poems from *The Animals in That Country* such as 'The Totems' and 'Elegy for the Giant Tortoise,' Atwood reinvokes native American conceptualisations of totems as a response to ecological disasters (AC, 22-23).

In 'The Totems,' for example, the speaker dreams of 'hollow totems' which take the form of live animals, while in 'Elegy for the Giant Tortoise,' Atwood equates the fate of humans with that of the giant tortoise which ended as an object in the museum: the totems are 'the relics of what we have destroyed,/ our holy and obsolete symbols' (AC, 22-23). Technologically 'superior' Western European culture displaces native American culture, and this motif of cultural invasion recurs in the relationship between North American and Canadian settler cultures. In spite of the shared ethnicity of Canadian and North American Settler cultures, Atwood suggests that Canadian culture is circumscribed by the dominant American culture, and this establishes a structural parallel with Atwood's exploration of woman's peripheral

position in male dominated societies.

At this point it is worth exploring the significance of the United States in Atwood's writing. I suggest that it is because Atwood considers Canada to be 'a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head' that in her writing the U.S. comes to assume the status of a symbolic image rather than an actual country (*Survival*, 18). Implicit in Atwood's thought and writing is the assumption that the U.S., as an oppressive power, exists not simply in one material form, but in various symbolic forms as well.

Atwood's representation of Canadian cultural identity as occupying the position of victimised other is explored in more detail in *Survival*, in which she talks about the colonial mentality evident in Canadian literature. Noting that Canada's economy relies on animals for its survival, Atwood suggests that the extinction or victimisation of animals constitutes a threat to Canadian identity. Whereas the ways in which Canadian writers identify themselves with animals projects a 'deep-seated cultural fear' (*Survival*, 79), the Canadian attitude toward animals is dual and contradictory insofar as the nation was founded on the fur trade (*Survival*, 80). The animal victims in Canadian literature are, therefore, more symbolic than real. Here Atwood points out that Canada's ambivalent attitude towards animals originates from the habit of viewing itself as a victim. Animals in Atwood's poetry represent human behaviour and emotions such as fear and pain, and simultaneously function as representations or symbols of mental states and social realities. However, although she equates humans with animals in her poetry, animals nevertheless retain their independent status.<sup>11</sup> Atwood's recognition of Canada's cultural and economic status

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<sup>11</sup> In her later poems, Atwood again speaks from the point of views of animals, highlighting harmony within difference. Some of these poems are discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

is embodied in her depiction of actual animal victims, and yet Atwood's anthropomorphism at the same time reveals the text's unconscious, ironically highlighting the difference between reality and imagination. In deciphering this process, the reader may detect the eruption of an otherness, a meaning that resists the author's or the text's 'intention.' In this context, Atwood's insistence on animal alterity is similar to the way in which Kristeva explains the existence of otherness or the abject.

I would argue that Atwood ultimately offers a call for reconciliation in her depiction of the surviving Canadian wilderness and her representation of animals as 'other.' As if to translate Kristeva's notion of the abject, Atwood presents uncultivated natural environments and animal life as examples of otherness. I have already pointed out that Atwood's explanations of Canadian cultural identity enact the abject, given that they operate across boundaries between reality and imagination. I would also argue that Canada's landscape functions as the abject in Atwood's writing in its persistent returns to and disruptions of boundaries. The open, uncultivated space of Canada's wilderness is presented as otherness, and for Atwood it is the wilderness that constructs Canadian identity. In this way she constructs what I would call the borderline, the concept of the abject. Although Atwood longs for a world in which binary polarities disappear, she does not attempt to erase or overcome difference.

'The Landlady,' for example, explores Canada's perceived marginal status by examining human conflict as a world in which the dominant power oppresses the weak psychically as well as physically. Although the poem ostensibly focuses upon the exploration of a tenant by her landlady, the relationship also points towards

Canada's 'colonial' economic and cultural status. As if in a jungle where the strong overpower the weak, the dominant side controls all things, leaving the weak with nothing: as the speaker observes, 'From her I rent my time ... Nothing is mine' (*AC*, 14). This angst under despotism foreshadows the totalitarian regime of *The Handmaid's Tale* (discussed in Chapter 2). In a situation of complete dependency, the weak lose human dignity, and for the speaker, escaping from this prisoner status is almost impossible. As the dominant figure, the landlady, occupies even the speaker's inner world, 'images of daring escapes' in the speaker's dreams reflect the landlady's perception rather than the speaker's own (*AC*, 15). Confounded by the intervention of the landlady's dominant perspective, the speaker's dreams are distorted and cannot inform her unconscious. Before this omnipresent power, the speaker finds that her senses don't work properly: 'Though I have tried/ to find some way around/ her, my senses/ are cluttered by perception/ and can't see through her' (*AC*, 15). The imagery of imprisonment featured in this poem resonates with Atwood's reference to the 'Rapunzel Syndrome' in Canadian literature in *Survival*. Like Rapunzel, Canada avoids confronting or admitting its own fears, and expresses self-hatred in a form of self-imprisonment (*Survival*, 209).

Where 'The Landlady' explores Canada's cultural marginalisation metaphorically, 'At the Tourist Centre in Boston' foregrounds the marketing of Canada within the tourist industry to depict the way in which Canada is 'othered' in order to appeal to American interests and perceptions: 'There is my country under glass,/ a white relief ... an assertive purity' (*AC*, 18). The poem is as characteristically cynical as it is comic, bringing into focus the subordination of the Canadian economy to that of the U.S. With Canada reduced to the status of 'other' in

the dominant American culture, the poem illustrates the unequal power relations between the two nations. Framed and mapped outside 'the actualities of Canadian context' to attract American tourists (Nicholson, 1994: 30-31), Canada becomes someone else's dream: 'a manufactured/ hallucination, a cynical fiction, a lure/ for export only (*AC*, 18). Reacting to mapping as actuality distorted for a dominant other's perception, the speaker attempts to translate the 'actual' Canada into her self-consciousness: 'Perhaps/ that was my private mirage// which will just evaporate' (*AC*, 19). Canada's identity is at once constructed and denied, and in exploring this process, Atwood highlights how constructions or perceptions of 'reality' are specifically invested with the logic of power. As Richard Helgerson argues in his discussion of choreography in the formation of nationhood, the physical world or the reality of geography is reinvented by 'the design of collective desire' (Helgerson, 1994: 153). In the context of Atwood's poem, the construction of Canada for the tourist market can therefore serve to objectify Canada as 'other.' In this context, the speaker's suspicion of constructed 'reality' parodies a signifying system which cannot represent reality: 'Do you see nothing/ watching you from under the water?' (*AC*, 19). Where Canada's mirror image is formed in an other's perception in this poem, Atwood's poem 'A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum' explores a similar process in a scenario in which the speaker is trapped in a multicultural exhibit. Shifting the location of entrapping perception from the foreign to the domestic, Atwood warns of the pervasiveness of power that engenders the other. The speaker's ambivalence toward her entrapment reflects Atwood's attitude towards the signifying process more generally. Insofar as signification represents human history, it is the signification process that entraps the speaker: 'Under that ornate/ golden cranium I

wander/ among fragments of gods, tarnished, coins ... in spite of the diagrams/ at every corner, labeled/ in red: YOU ARE HERE/ the labyrinth holds me' (*AC*, 20).

In her poem 'The Surveyors' Atwood returns to the scenario explored in 'The City Planners,' which allegorically depicted the way in which the conscious subordinates the unconscious to constitute the human subject. The rational mind with which the 'phallic' fathers have built the organised city operates through the surveyors who are 'clearing/ their trail of single reason/ through a land where geometries are multiple' (*AC*, 4). The danger Atwood identifies in oppressive masculinity, that of imposing uniformity and the polarity of binaries on life, is realised in 'red vestiges of an erased/ people, a broken/ line' (*AC*, 4). It is advanced technology and its imposed order that lie behind the destruction of native culture. The surveyors' obsession with order and mapping is opposed to nature. For the surveyors, nature simply looks chaotic, and the 'numbers and brash/ letters' that embody their rationality are 'incongruous' even with the nature which is already touched by human force, as is implied in the references to 'sheared wood or glacial rock' (*AC*, 4). With the 'signals, painted assertions' that are altered by the object which surround them, Atwood stresses the limit of the symbolic order which she metaphorically identifies with the surveyors' act of giving order to their world. Illustrating the limits of language whose function is to control the human world as a symbolic mechanism, Atwood points to the inherent fractures within a man-made ordered reality.

Atwood's abhorrence of suppressive regimes and structures is clearly evident in 'Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer.' In the poem Atwood warns of man's distorted perception of nature, a state of mind which isolates him from material

realities and ultimately leads to madness. The male pioneer's act of imposing order is to deny the primordial unity between humans and creatures. His insistence on one form of order traps him in endless conflicts with his surroundings. In his assertion that 'this is not order/ but the absence/ of order' (*AC*, 37), the male pioneer refuses to accept the world of difference. But nature does have an order. It is one that we often don't understand and that we disturb through ignorance. As Atwood expresses, 'He was wrong, the unanswering/ forest implied:// It was/ an ordered absence' (*AC*, 37). Conceiving nature as chaos that is opposed to his ordered world, the pioneer engenders anxiety within himself. At the core of his insanity is his incapacity to acknowledge the plurality of beings. As Atwood herself says of the poem in *Survival*, the pioneer's attempt to impose order is the source of his madness (*Survival*, 124). Man's compulsion to create order turns the curve of nature into the straight line which is equated with fixed form in her poetry. While both desiring and fearing escape from forms, spaces and roles, as Forster points out, Atwood's poetry is 'prepositional.' Notably, in her first poetry collection there are no other prepositions except 'with,' as prepositions 'pre-position substance' (Foster, 1977: 19). Poems such as 'Evening Trainstation, Before Departure' and 'A Place: Fragments' (as discussed earlier) foreground unstructured spaces or ongoing positions through images of the self on the edge: 'Here I am in/ a pause in space/ hunched on the edge/ of a tense suitcase' (*CG*, 15). They are metaphors for female identity, negotiating fixed boundaries at the risk of the loss of self.

'Part of a Day' explores gender dynamics in these terms, revisiting the binary opposition between men and women and capturing 'the despair of the separate/ object' depicted in 'The Circle Game' (*AC*, 6). Like the lover who maps

and names his lover's world in 'The Circle Game,' the male speaker's imposition of his ideas of the female in 'Part of a Day' is central to his increasing sense of despair: as the speaker observes, 'If he could cram his mind/ into my body/ and make it stay there,/ he would be happy' (*AC*, 6). Similarly, 'Roominghouse, Winter' pictures human beings whose exile is driven by others or their own will. Atwood chooses a desolate boardinghouse as a locus within which to explore the alienation that individuals feel when they lose the ties that connect one to another. The speaker here cannot find any objects with which she can find a sense of connection. Everything exists separately in its own realm. Expressing fear of self-effacing isolation, the speaker attempts to relate herself to 'you,' an unnamed male lover. Ironically enough, the speaker's act of calling the other sometimes to make sure s/he is still there highlights the desolate situation. Like the fate of temporary tenants whose existence is easily forgotten with the appearance of newcomers, the speaker's sense of self has no meaning in the absence of communication: 'Tomorrow, when you come to dinner/ They will tell you I never lived here' (*AC*, 28). Yet the speaker's desperate effort to survive by establishing communication is confounded by the partner's coldness and disinterestedness: 'In the weak light you looked/ over your shoulder./ You said/ Nobody ever survives' (*AC*, 29).

In a similar vein, 'A Fortification' reveals an individual who becomes his/her own prisoner. The speaker identifies him/herself with machines to protect him/herself from outside dangers; technological development becomes a defense against creatures that threaten human life: '... my control panel/ whispers softly as a diamond/ cutting glass... I have armed myself, yes I am safe: safe:' (*AC*, 16). Ironically, however, it is through the self's identification with machines that the

sense of alienation is intensified. Though sceptical of the possibility of emotionally meaningful interactions between humans and machines, here Atwood does not give up the possibility of solidarity even in materialistic and mechanised culture. In his/her craving for human contact, the speaker traces what is now forgotten and yet still present in him/her:

Still for an instant I

catch sight of the other creature,  
the one that has real skin, real hair, vanishing down the line of cells  
back to the lost forest of being vulnerable. (*AC*, 16)

Pursuing this same theme, the evolutionary chain described in 'Pre-Amphibian' gives voice to the inextricable bonds that connect all living creatures. The female speaker dreams of a world before the appearance of land animals. While the forms of terrestrial life are clearly demarcated, the aquatic world of the primordial blurs these taxonomical boundaries. Unlike 'in a drying world' where 'we flounder' (*CG*, 64), what the boundless fluid world observes is the possibility of a state of unity. As the speaker says: 'here I blur/ into you our breathing sinking/ to green milleniums/ and sluggish in our blood/ all ancestors/ are warm fish moving' (*CG*, 63). Similarly, in 'Notes From Various Pasts,' the unknown world of the sea, I would argue, is associated with the poetic language of the semiotic *chora* which evades fixed meanings by embodying what is forbidden and prohibited in the conscious realm. The language of 'the deep core of the sea' (*AC*, 10), which seems to be as psychical as it is physical, is inscrutable to the speaker who has lost the memories of his/her self's unknown region or the union with the pre-Oedipal mother. As 'potent signals' (*AC*, 10), the submerged language of the poem surfaces within the conscious mind and opens up communication between signifying systems. This process, I would

argue, could be equated with the *jouissance* in language that artistic activity brings into the symbolic realm. Atwood's words remain on the border of the symbolic. Her acceptance of the symbolic order is one way of showing how she seeks balance at the centre of subversion. With the image of language that is enervated by the loss of contact with the unconscious, Atwood points towards her own subversive vision:

The words lie washed ashore  
on the margin, mangled  
by the journey upwards to bluegrey  
surface, the transition:

these once-living  
and phosphorescent meanings  
fading in my hands

I try to but can't decipher.

(AC, 11)

The poem 'More and More' develops this point still further, explicitly exploring a space in which there is no polarity or binary oppositions. The poem witnesses a dissolution of the dividing lines by which individuals or entities are defined: 'the edges /of me dissolve and I become/ a wish to assimilate the world, including/ you' (AC, 53). Since division causes her suffering, the speaker's concern lies in the transcendence of boundaries. Yet, her interest is not to consume the other(s) wholly but to maintain the process of becoming: 'I would not consume/ you, or ever/ finish' (AC, 53). The poem represents differences that avoid conflict by admitting the existence of irreconcilable entities. In imagining communication with the other, the speaker states that 'you would still be there/ surrounding me, complete/ as the air' (AC, 53), positing the process of osmosis in plants as an ideal relationship with the other because it sustains and does no damage to either entity. Despite her wish,

however, the speaker is resigned to the fact that this communication cannot be achieved: 'Unfortunately I don't have leaves./ Instead I have eyes/ and teeth and other none-green/ things which rule out osmosis' (AC, 53). Yet her powerful aspiration towards communion with the other is described as being as resilient as 'a starved dog's logic about bones' (AC, 53).

In this chapter I have discussed Atwood's artistic practice and the way it challenges boundaries between art and social life. The meaning of Atwood's work is essentially elusive, foregrounding the amorphous nature of the speaking subject and the process of signification. The speaking subject, Canada's borderline status, and openness of the text in *The Circle Game* and *The Animals in That Country* are all situated within the context of permutable boundaries. If human subjectivity is to be split open by language, dialogue must always be in process, as language itself is dialogical. Atwood's speaking subjects' utterances and positions are structured by the reciprocating presence of the other. The subject needs to be identified, yet it would seem that difference can enable dialogue. The next chapter explores in more detail how Atwood challenges notions of boundaries through her use of intertextuality, which illustrates how text operates as a translinguistic dialogue.

## Chapter 2. Dialogue and Intertextuality in Atwood's novels

This chapter focuses on intertextuality in Atwood's writing, exploring the ways in which this process confounds conventional interpretations of individual texts as discrete, self-contained entities. As I will demonstrate, Atwood's intertextuality often reverses structures of signification from her 'source' texts, creating a sense of pluralism and indeterminacy. The previous chapter explored the way in which the speaking subject or the workings of a text's unconscious operates across boundaries. My primary aim in this chapter is to examine intertextuality, not as a static literary theory but as a dynamic process which creates dialogue and mobility. As I have argued, Atwood repeatedly challenges essentialist definitions and paradigms, as revealed, for example, in her attitude toward feminism, as well as in her challenging of literary conventions. In a Kristevan sense, language or utterance is necessarily dialogical, creating a mobility in the position and communicating acts of the speaking subject. Atwood's intertextuality exposes the slippery foundation of enunciation, drawing attention to the way in which the text enacts translinguistic dialogue.

*Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are patterned around this notion of the circumnavigatory utterance, and create a dialogue between fantasy and reality. As discussed in the previous chapter, various poems in *The Circle Game* and *The Animals in That Country* establish an intertextual dialogue through the use of allusion. In this chapter, my discussion is predicated on the assumption that a word's or a text's unconscious is the locus of intertextuality or intertextual dialogue. By shifting the focus of critical attention from the writing subject to the text itself, Kristeva explains intertextuality as textual productivity or as

the text's unconscious. Kristeva's arguments of course draw upon Bakhtin's theories on dialogism, which similarly focus on the mobility of the text. It is my contention that these theories on dialogism provide a useful theoretical context in which to consider the translinguistic dialogue evident in Atwood's use of intertextuality.

To emphasise the dialogic orientation which he views as a natural discursive phenomenon, Mikhail Bakhtin ironically draws attention to the biblical Adam as a subject or an originary solipsistic state. As he remarks in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 'only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object' (Bakhtin, 1981: 279). What is implicit in this metaphorical statement is the concept of relation, which is central to Bakhtin's theories on dialogism. As Kristeva has observed, Bakhtin's recourse to the method of Socratic dialogue that opposes 'any official monologism' is particularly important here (Kristeva, 1980: 81). Just as Socratic dialogues interrogate 'a truth' in the context of dialogic relationships, so dialogism challenges notions of a unitary voice suggested or accepted in literary and cultural traditions, by positing dialogic interaction in and between discourses. Kristeva argues that in his references to polyphony and carnival, Bakhtin explores how revolutionary effects are created in discourse.

Kristeva uses Bakhtin's arguments on dialogism and 'the transposition from a carnival scene to the written text' as a central tenet of her own theories on intertextuality (Kristeva, 1984: 59). With the transposition of one sign system into another, that is, the intersection of different 'signifying materials,' intertextuality is a dynamic process, drawing not only on dynamic elements within discourse, but also

on elements outside discourse (Kristeva, 1984: 59). By demonstrating 'the mutual displacement of the literary and the historical or social' through intertextuality, Kristeva highlights the transposition of signifying systems that words make possible (Rajan, 1991: 63). According to Kristeva's account, for Bakhtin, a word is a minimal unit of structure to explain dialogic relationships in various signifying systems.

Since Kristeva's coinage of the term in the 1960s, intertextuality has become one of the most controversial and versatile literary concepts. As David Duff rightly puts it, 'intertextuality seems permanently suspended between opposed meanings and uses' (Duff, 2002: 54). In other words, intertextuality has a range of definitions and applications, used in some contexts as an umbrella term, and in others in a much more specific and nuanced way. Kristeva's reading of Bakhtin, and her reformulation of his work, has proved to be highly influential on debates on intertextuality. According to Kristeva's interpretation of Bakhtin, intertextuality can use the original meaning and function of a particular text as a springboard 'to deeper and wider cultural understanding and dialogue' (Orr, 2003: 181). Kristeva develops this notion into her own unique conceptualisation of intertextuality. According to Kristeva, Bakhtin's ideas become the epitome of a translinguistic dialogue that informs her 'humanist' interpretation of intertextuality.

As a primal agent of transposition in signifying systems, intersubjectivity, a term explored in both Bakhtin's and Kristeva's work, extends the range of the dialogic process. In discussing the relationship between Kristeva's and Bakhtin's theories, Toril Moi argues that Kristeva's 'active dialogue with Bakhtin's texts' enacts this dialogic process (Moi, 1986: 34). In other words, Kristeva defines intertextuality as a discursive space where texts carry out dialogic processes. For

Kristeva, dialogism is not teleological, although it draws in part upon Hegelian dialectics for its formation (Kristeva, 1980: 88). The dialogic process brings multiple discursive relations into play by articulating and actualising other voices. In this sense, dialogism is different from dialectics in that it maintains an open-endedness in the text rather than transcending oppositions.<sup>12</sup> This, then, is the way Kristeva adapts Bakhtin's theories on dialogism and the revolutionary potential of discourse to her discussion of intertextuality.<sup>13</sup> What fascinates Kristeva about dialogism is that it is rooted in a logic that exceeds 'codified discourse' (Kristeva, 1980: 65).

In her discussion of intertextuality, Kristeva also engages with Bakhtin's theories on the carnivalesque, drawing attention to the 'dream logic'<sup>14</sup> of carnival, which transgresses not only linguistic rules, but also social mores and established hierarchies. She relates Bakhtin's theories on the subversive nature of the carnivalesque to textual language in particular, arguing that the text involves an act of communication that effects a redistribution of the order of language. In recognition of the text's redistributive function, Kristeva defines text as a 'trans-linguistic apparatus' (Kristeva, 1980: 36). Following Bakhtin's account of dialogic utterances, she foregrounds human utterance as a process which creates open-endedness in the text. Utterance or the word, for Bakhtin, 'live[s] [...] on the boundary between its own context and another, alien context' (Bakhtin, 1981: 284). Similarly, Kristeva describes text as 'a permutation of texts, an intertextuality' in which 'several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one

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<sup>12</sup> See Don Bialostosky (1989), who, in his discussion of Bakhtin, posits dialogics as an alternative discourse that can escape the repression of 'other' voices which can occur in dialectical models.

<sup>13</sup> See also Orr's investigation of Kristeva's intertextuality and *Semiotike*, which similarly interprets Kristevan intertextuality as 'interactive, permutational production of text' enacted through translinguistic dialogue (Orr, 2003: 27).

<sup>14</sup> Terms such as 'dream logic', 'poetic logic' and the logic of distance and relationship that I use here relate to the subversive, multivocalic aspects of carnival as analysed by Bakhtin.

another' (Kristeva, 1980: 36). Here it is important to see how Kristeva identifies the importance of social and historical contexts in intertextual processes. While Kristeva's approach to texts is not exactly the same as Bakhtin's, her adaptation of Bakhtin's notion of the importance of ideology in intertextuality reflects the political dimension of textuality.<sup>15</sup> This is a fundamental aspect of Kristeva's adaptation of Bakhtin's dialogism for her own theory of intertextuality, and it provides a useful model for assessing the extent to which Atwood explores the potential for harmony between opposed entities through intertextual processes. I suggest that Atwood's intertextuality, and the dynamics between art and life, reality and imagination, illustrate '*dialogue* and *ambivalence*,' identified by Kristeva as the two axes that underpin Bakhtin's theories of textual relationships (Kristeva, 1980: 66).<sup>16</sup>

### **1. Extending the frame of human relations: carnival and intertextuality in *Lady Oracle***

But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play. (Bakhtin, *Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 197-98)

Arguing that carnival expresses a universal spirit involving all sectors of society,

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<sup>15</sup> See David Duff's essay 'Intertextuality versus Genre Theory: Bakhtin, Kristeva and the Question of Genre.' Pointing out 'the notions of author, creativity and intention' that are maintained in Bakhtin's concept of text, Duff argues that Bakhtin is steadfast in his interpretations of genre (Duff, 2002: 61). While Kristeva reformulates Bakhtin's concept of genre, as Duff states, his notion of ideological poetics underlies her theory of intertextuality.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in her analysis of Atwood's texts Barbara Godard (1986) studies intertextuality and dialogue between texts or between the text and the reader. As I will argue below, Godard focuses on Atwood's display of the embedded stories of oral narrative in the texts. My examinations of narratives, dynamic space in Atwood's novels resembles Godard's analysis of the intersection of embedded and frame narratives, but my analysis is more focused on the way in which the intertextuality of carnivalesque logic projects inconclusiveness and ambiguity in art and reality. The subversiveness of intertextuality, in this context, can create new kinds of human relationships.

Bakhtin claims that carnival festivities and comic spectacles create new human relations. As carnival does not draw a distinction between actors and spectators, it is not restricted to a particular aesthetic form or performance; instead it embodies the spirit of the people, thus occupying the borderline between life and art. Bakhtin maintains that carnival points to the doubleness of human experience; it is 'the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter' (Bakhtin, *Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 198). Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, I would argue, presents an expansive social vision, which resembles the dynamics of carnival time, 'the feast of becoming, change, and renewal' (Bakhtin, *Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 199). With its use of humorous vignettes and an often flippant tone, the novel evokes the scope and the importance of the culture of folk carnival.

*Lady Oracle* takes the form of a confession offered by the protagonist Joan Foster, an author, but it emerges through several interlocking narratives. Embedded within Joan's life story are a series of Gothic romance narratives she has written, which point towards a kind of carnivalesque plurality in the text. The first part of the novel briefly outlines Joan's personality and presents life in the Italian town of Terremoto, while subsequent sections of the novel explore the motivations behind Joan's fake suicide (she plans this to avoid the threat of blackmail) and her decision to leave her husband Arthur; as she reveals, 'All my life I'd been hooked on plots' (*LO*, 310).<sup>17</sup> The final section of the novel reveals that Joan's account of her life has emerged as a result of a reporter's disclosure of her fake suicide. Mistaking the reporter for a stalker, Joan (paranoia) hits him over the head with a Cinzano bottle, and she narrates her story while he recovers in hospital.

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<sup>17</sup> All page references will be to the Virago (1982) edition.

There is an apparent moment of carnivalesque transformation towards the end of *Lady Oracle*, when Joan unconsciously walks into the fictional world she is creating. In the rather confusing denouement of Joan's costume gothic novel *Stalked by Love*, the reader finds out that the embedded narratives in the novel are the protagonist's own story which she relates in multiple voices. The heroine in the story is transformed into Joan, telling the reader about her fake death by drowning:

*"You don't want me," she said brokenly. She began to cry, her large body shaken by uncontrollable sobs. What could he do? "You didn't want me to come back at all," she wept. "You're happier without me...and it was such an effort, Arthur, to get out of that water and come all this way, just to be with you again..." Redmond drew back, puzzled. "Who is Arthur?" he asked. The woman began to fade, like mist, like invisible ink, like melting snow ... (LO, 323)*

If carnival is the locus of the interrogation of boundaries, *Lady Oracle* is carnivalesque in the sense that Joan's act of writing is a performance in which barriers between author and narrator, life and art are undermined. Yet this blurring of the generic and ontological boundaries can also be interpreted with specific reference to the conventions of gothic romance; as Coral Ann Howells points out, 'fear,' the foundation of the Gothic sensibility, is a borderline state, whether it emerges on the level of the supernatural or the psychological, and she categorises *Lady Oracle* as neo-Gothic, in that its gothic horror is tempered with an ironic humour (Howells, 2005, 54). At a structural level, *Lady Oracle* is dialogical in its interweaving of embedded and framing narratives, rendering indeterminate the boundaries between art and life, fantasy and reality.

Another example of intertextuality in Atwood's text is Joan's 'Lady Oracle' poem, which echoes many of the images and motifs in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott.' Yet the poem is also heavily inflected by Joan's own experiences, and the

lady in the poem is a representation of Joan herself, sharing physical characteristics and character traits. The poem is produced through a process of automatic writing, created while Joan is looking into a dark mirror, and the very opening of the poem renders indeterminate the boundaries between 'art' and Joan's 'real life' experience:

*She sits on the iron throne  
She is one and three  
The dark lady    the redgold lady  
The blank lady    oracle  
of blood, she who must be  
obeyed                    forever  
Her glass wings are gone  
she floats down the river  
singing her last song (LO, 226)*

These lines not only blend aspects of Tennyson's 'lady' with Joan herself, but also reference the 'dark lady' of Shakespeare's sonnets, conceptualising the lady of the poem as a kind of multiple being redolent of deities in biblical discourse or classical mythology. In addition to engaging in intertextual dialogue with the work of poets such as Tennyson and Shakespeare, Atwood's novel also explores comic and parodic situations in a manner redolent of carnival folk humour in medieval culture.

Bakhtin's theories on dialogism and polyphony are grounded in his exploration of the medieval carnival. Bakhtin interprets carnivalesque discourse as the coexistence of multiple voices within - and subversive of - hierarchical society. It is through the carnivalesque that repressed voices can express themselves, both to their own class of people and to the authorities, raising the potential to disrupt the existing social and cultural structures. Of special importance here is the interplay of multiple voices, some of which project abusive or uncensored language into official discourse, and vice-versa. Thus the parodic discourse emerging during carnival plays an important role in establishing a means by which to change social structures. As a

form of authorised transgression, the special context of carnival (in which official and marginal discourses intersect) disrupts fixed social boundaries and hierarchies. Carnavalesque logic is enacted through utterances which can produce social change. Bakhtinian utterance facilitates communication, and also promotes openness to difference.

The potential to challenge reality is illustrated by the notion of transposition. Bakhtin's dialogism rests upon carnival ambivalence. According to Bakhtin, given that carnival is performed through communal participation, 'carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people' (*Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 200). In many cases, then, this carnival laughter is directed at the carnival audience itself, and as a result folk humour is often characterised by ambivalence. While people laugh at the object of mockery, they find in it their own incompleteness, including death and possible renewal. This laughter is evidently different from modern satire in which the satirist excludes himself from that derision. These arguments provide a useful context within which to consider the seriocomic aspects of Atwood's novel. As Sherrill Grace rightly observes, *Lady Oracle* is 'a funny book, a veritable feast of verbal wit and comic situation,' and yet the humour in the novel is also blended with aspects of modern satire, creating 'a combination of parody and satire' evident in the novel's 'seriocomic tone' (Grace, 1980: 112). In reading the various complicated layers of the novel, Grace emphasises the protagonist Joan's self-dramatisation and picaresque-like adventures as the locus of humour. Joan's geographical shifts from Toronto to London and to Terremoto, related through multiple layers of plot and narrative, imbue the novel with elements of the picaresque. Her life is complicated, resembling a Gothic plot, itself a form of escapist fiction. As a quixotic heroine, Joan

is unable to maintain a clear distinction between reality and fantasy: her first lover is described as a Polish Count, while her husband Arthur is described as ‘sort of like Lord Byron, whose biography [she] had just been skimming’ (*LO*, 165).

I would suggest here that the comic aspects of Joan’s character are underscored through her carnivalesque obesity and gluttony. In elaborating his notion of grotesque realism, in which the human body is the locus of a communal perception of the human condition, Bakhtin claims that this perception is achieved through carnival festivities (Bakhtin, *Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 205). These arguments are relevant to Atwood’s novel, where Joan’s childhood and adolescent obesity, and her quixotic character, are in keeping with the exaggerated or fantastic elements of the narrative, and function as a means to instigate change and renewal in human relations. It can also be argued that Atwood’s interrogation of obesity is part of a feminist agenda. As Susie Orbach (1978) argues in her introduction to *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, fat is intimately connected to adult female sexuality and motherhood. Following the feminist argument that compulsive eating expresses complex relationships between mother and daughter, Orbach claims that *Lady Oracle* expresses a feminist rejection of the reification of the slim female body, viewing Joan’s obesity as symbol of a rejection of conventional attitudes toward female beauty. However, I would argue that Atwood’s exploration of obesity in *Lady Oracle* is better considered as analogous to carnival folk humour, in that it produces ‘a complex system of meaning existing alongside and in opposition to the ‘authoritarian word’ of dominant orthodoxy’ (Morris, *Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 194). At a generic level, this process of challenging orthodoxies is also expressed through Atwood’s adaptation of the conventions of fairy tales, which, as Vladimir Propp (c1968) has

suggested, can be reduced to a series of formulaic plots, characters and motifs. Atwood's novel challenges and inverts many of these conventions: Joan's corpulent body, for example, functions as an intertextual device that undermines stereotype of the slim fairy-tale princess.

I would argue that Joan's writing itself becomes a domain in which the carnival spirit enacts unfulfilled or repressed desire. Her various stories become vehicles for uncovering the silenced or transgressive voices that oppose dominant or official discourse. Just as carnivalesque folk culture and humour enable the suspension of hierarchical order, social norms and prohibitions by the introduction of 'a second reality outside the official realm,' so the act of writing constitutes an alternative reality for the narrator whose traumatic past life governs his/her present (Morris, *Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 194). In defence of the Gothic romances upon whose heroines she models herself, Joan recognises the escapist function of her writing: 'the pure quintessential need of my readers for escape, a thing I myself understood only too well' (*LO*, 34). As she observes, Gothic fantasy can offer a vision of hope that transcends the limitations of material reality: 'The truth was that I dealt in hope, I offered a vision of a better world, however preposterous' (*LO*, 35). Through her own life story, as well as in her writing, Joan herself becomes a site of intertextuality, becoming a vehicle for the exchange between art and social reality.

At this point it is worth revisiting Kristeva's notion of intertextuality as a means by which to account for the signifying figure of Joan, and the ways in which her Gothic romances open up a borderline territory that disrupts the boundaries between fantasy and reality, present and past. As the co-existence of framing and embedded narratives shows, *Lady Oracle* foregrounds multiple voices which activate

dynamic expressions or meanings within the text. Joan offers us multiple narratives, and through the writing process, she establishes dialogic relationships between different fictional conventions. Joan's gothic romance *Stalked by Love*, for example, is one of the embedded narratives which exists alongside Joan's own personal story, and yet Joan herself appears to interpolate herself into the plot of her own novel, addressing Charlotte (the heroine of *Stalked by Love*) thus: 'Don't go into the maze, Charlotte, you'll be entering at your own risk, I told her' (*LO*, 332). In demarcating the apparent division between the two narrative modes, Atwood presents the narrated world of the Gothic romances in the form of italics. Yet, in spite of these typographic distinctions, *Lady Oracle* foregrounds the way in which these narratives also incorporate and absorb one another, a process which Kristeva calls the intersection or transposition of texts. A fusion between the two narrative modes takes place, for example, when Charlotte and Joan both face the threat of male violence:

*She took hold of the doorknob and turned it. The door unlocked and swung outward....There, standing on the threshold, waiting for her, was Redmond...Then she knew. Redmond was the killer. (Stalked by Love, LO, 342)*

But if I turned the handle the door would unlock and swing outward, and I would have to face to face the man who stood waiting for me, for my life.  
I opened the door. I knew who it would be. (*LO*, 343)

Thus even though the two paragraphs are separated stylistically (by italics and normal type), the experiences of the two women are brought together.

Sherrill Grace has argued that the narrator's intermingling of life and art can be viewed as an example of Atwood's anti-Gothic stance. As a device that parodies Gothic romances, the absorption of Joan's life in her Costume romances plays an important role in subverting orthodox plot conventions. She begins, for example, to

identify with the villains rather than the victims in her narratives, expressing a preference for the malevolent wife Felicia rather than the heroine Charlotte, 'with her intact virtue and her tidy ways' (*LO*, 319). Grace argues that *Lady Oracle* enacts a 'double parody' (Grace, 1980: 124), lampooning both Gothic romance and the realist novel. I would argue that this double parody is one means by which Atwood challenges autonomous or fixed generic structures. Joan herself appears to struggle for control over the plot structures of her own narratives, wondering: 'Why did every one of my fantasies turn into a trap?' (*LO*, 334). Atwood's metafictional strategies, therefore, foreground the ways in which texts are counter-implicated in, and modified by, dialogic relationships with other texts.

In her reading of Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* and several other texts, Barbara Godard examines how folk tales encode dialogic processes. Analysing the use of folk tales and other intertexts in Atwood's work, Godard argues that through the use of embedded and framing narratives, 'the text enters into dialogue with itself and represents the apparatus of its own interpretation' (Godard, 1986: 61). It is important to note, however, that in discussing Atwood's use of folk tales in her narrative, the dialogic process is enacted through Atwood's *critique* of fairy tale conventions. There is an analogy here with Angela Carter's intertextuality in *Bloody Chamber*, which also draws upon fairy tale conventions in order to explore gender roles and sexuality within the context of social and cultural politics. However, although Carter transposes fairy tale narratives into different cultural contexts, she nevertheless maintains the conventional fairy tale gender dynamics. In contrast, Godard notes that Atwood calls into question the plots of fairy tales which confine women to passive roles and the position of the gendered other. In *Lady Oracle*, for example, one of the

main fairy tale intertexts is the Bluebeard story, which is often analysed in terms of its focus on male violence against women. As Grace points out, however, Atwood's parody of this fairy tale renders the story amusing rather than terrifying, though Joan herself identifies with the terror of Bluebeard's victims: 'In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stupid sisters who open the forbidden door and are shocked by the murdered wives...' (*LO*, 152). To the extent that its intertexts do not follow but rather travesty narrative conventions, the novel contributes to and yet simultaneously renders indeterminate Atwood's criticism of sexual politics. Atwood's intertextual references to Bluebeard, Snow White, Cinderella and The Little Mermaid foreground sexual politics but they are characterised by enigmas, metamorphoses, and indeterminacy. Atwood's intertextuality is highly self-reflexive, constantly interrogating the ideological strategies through which her novel destabilises Gothic and other generic conventions.<sup>18</sup>

I would argue that these intertextual references to folk tales also represent a means by which to interrogate human subjectivity and experience more generally. The experience of death, for example, is a central motif in the text, but the use of theatrical devices such as the narrator's fake death undermines the solemnity of these events. Sonia Mycak explores death in *Lady Oracle* from a psychoanalytic perspective by examining how death is central to the structure of Joan's life and narrative. Mycak suggests that in the novel, death is interpreted as a psychological process that the protagonist must negotiate. In her account of the relationship between death and Joan's act of writing, Mycak draws upon Kristeva's theories on the semiotic, arguing that Joan's problematic relationship with life itself can be

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon (1988b) interprets this strategy in terms of Atwood's experimentation with postmodernist narrative technique.

traced back to the separation from the mother that instils a death drive within the subject (Mycak, 1996: 92).

I would argue that death is a highly contested and shifting thematic concern in Atwood's novel. Joan herself engages directly with death both in her writing and in her own experience, and in a sense, telling stories becomes a means by which she can evade the temptations of the death drive. Death is foregrounded from the outset of the novel, as Joan describes her fake death as a carefully plotted and staged event: 'I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it' (*LO*, 7). As we discover, Joan has staged her death in Lake Ontario to avoid the threat of blackmail. As the celebrated author of 'Lady Oracle,' Joan wishes to conceal elements of her past, including her career as a Gothic romance writer. By the end of the novel, the reader knows that the framing narrative is a device through which Joan traces her past lives in chronological order. Despite the circular, open-ended structure of the narrative, Joan's story nevertheless emerges in chronological order. In contrast to narrative fragmentation created by the narrator's multiple voices and self-division, the order of her story makes sense of the 'maze' of complex selves and situations.

As Pamela Bromberg argues, mirror symbolism is used in *Lady Oracle* to explore the issues of doubling, image and reality, and self-division. Joan experiences self-division, and yet she 'possesses conscious knowledge of past, present, and multiple selves' (Bromberg, 1988: 20). The origin of Joan's self-division can be traced back to her mother's unplanned pregnancy and hastily arranged marriage, with Joan manifesting her mother's failure and anger. I would argue that Joan's multiple personalities are inextricably linked with these gender politics, but Joan's self

division can be differentiated from that expressed in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* in that she is able to offer a chronological account of her experiences. Nevertheless, Joan's sense of being watched, and her fear of the controlling male gaze, resembles the type of female paranoia that Freud associates with problematic sexual relationships. Like the unnamed female patient whom Freud identifies as an example of paranoia in 'A case of paranoia running counter to the psychoanalytic theory of the disease' (1915), Joan claims that she has been persecuted and stalked by her former lovers or unidentified male voyeurs. Joan begins to feel paranoid that her husband Arthur is responsible for the threat of blackmail: 'The whole thing was Arthur ... He'd been watching me all along, not saying anything' (*LO*, 292). Her paranoia is not depicted in terms of the pathology of self-fragmentation, although it is implied that her desire to escape from reality by faking her own death is partly motivated by gender-based anxiety.

As the reader soon discovers, Joan is haunted by her past, a past which she wishes to exorcise. Yet her attitude toward the past is complex and ambivalent. Clara Thomas points out that Joan is caught in 'the contradiction between wanting to change the past and wanting to treasure it in nostalgia' (Thomas, 1981: 164). Being obsessed with thoughts of her husband Arthur, Thomas argues, Joan lacks confidence in herself and her decision to escape. For example, most of her narrative is spent trying to explain why she has attempted to escape reality by burying her identity: 'Why did I never tell [Arthur]? It was fear, mostly' (*LO*, 33). She expresses an ambivalent attitude toward her life with Arthur, identifying him as the main trigger of the ontological double-bind that she portrays through the heroines of the Costume Gothics. Joan manages to escape her situation, but residual feelings of guilt about

Arthur imply the possibility of her return to the restrictions of her former life. Inasmuch as Arthur is the driving force behind her transformation, Joan is unable to free her repressed selves and escape the past. In *Lady Oracle* Joan's ambivalence about her marriage is encapsulated in the intertextual reference to the Bluebeard story, which links marriage with death and male oppression. Further, Joan's mother's unhappy marriage and mysterious death mirror the Bluebeard story, as Joan suspects her father's involvement in the death. Yet while *Lady Oracle* does explore marriage as an oppressive institution, I would also argue that Joan's ambivalent attitude towards Arthur also expresses a desire for communication and rapprochement between human beings. Structurally, this impulse is analogous to Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, in that Atwood's intertextuality subverts original narratives yet opens up the context in which opposites can be reconciled.

As Ann McMillan states, ultimately Joan's guilt about her deception and duplicity enables her to return to reality through the recognition of her responsibilities and interconnections. According to McMillan, Joan is trapped in her 'transforming eye,' which provides her with the wrong frame of perception. The operation of the eye creates fears or ghosts that actually represent her own repressed selves, dominating her and controlling her behaviour. Joan's 'desire to escape the unglamorous facts about herself' is intimately related to this transforming eye (McMillan, 1988: 59), which like the mirror in the tale of Snow White, governs the female subject. It becomes clear that Joan's self-division is at least in part a product of anxiety, which can be traced back to her mother's unhappy marriage. She experiences recurring dreams in which she begins to blame her mother rather than sympathise with her: 'As I grew older, this dream changed. Instead of wanting to

stop the mysterious man, I would sit there wishing for him to enter. I wanted him to find out her secret, the secret that I alone know: my mother was a monster' (*LO*, 67).

Another cause of Joan's anxiety is her past obesity, which she strives to conceal from people, especially from Arthur. Her anxieties about her obesity give rise to a distorted body-image which can be traced back to a particular incident in her childhood: a ballet recital. In the recital, Joan was desperate to be cast in the role of a dancing butterfly, but instead she is cast in the role of a mothball which threatens to poison the butter flies. Although her performance was unexpectedly popular with the audience, the young Joan feels betrayed and the memory remains as trauma. Joan's obesity, and her sense of resembling clown or fool in this episode, become the basis of her perceived victimisation by others. As the slim adult Joan reconstructs the event, she perceives her body as the focus of her humiliation: 'with my jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where breasts would later be and my plump upper arms and floppy waist, I must have looked obscene, senile almost, indecent; It must have been like watching a decaying stripper' (*LO*, 46). Significantly, Joan uses her body as a medium through which to rebel against her mother, who wouldn't let her dance as the butterfly. In an act of revenge, Joan eats gluttonously and wears clothes which accentuate her obesity. Although she wins this battle, ultimately all she gains through her defiance is a grotesque body which she ridicules and abhors:

There, staring me in the face, was my thigh. It was enormous, it was gross, it was like a diseased limb, the kind you see in pictures of jungle natives; it spread on forever, like a prairie photographed from a plane, the flesh not green but bluish-white, with veins meandering across it like rivers. (*LO*, 121)

Joan's ambivalence toward her obesity is also fuelled by another childhood experience: the occasion where she attends the Canadian National Exhibition with

her aunt. At the exhibition, which includes a carnival, Joan is fascinated by a 'Fat Lady' who appears as a circus freak: 'She was wearing pink tights with spangles, a short fluffy pink skirt, satin ballet slippers' (*LO*, 102). Joan incorporates elements of the Fat Lady into her own body-image, wearing brightly coloured dresses which accentuate her corpulent body. While Joan's obesity makes her life miserable, paradoxically it is her exaggerated, comically debased bodily image that allows her to experience a form of Bakhtinian self-renewal. Joan's body, as the amalgam of tears and laughter, represents a kind of universal humanity, and the blundering, comic scenes of gluttony extend the parameters of human experience. I would argue that this interest in renewal and the pushing of the boundaries of human experience is what motivates Atwood's use of grotesque realism in the novel. Joan's obese body becomes a metaphor for social transformation; as she herself observes, the rounded contours of her body render difference less absolute: 'I was quite fat by this time and all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two. Also, fat women are not more noticeable than thin women; they're less noticeable, because people find them distressing and look away' (*LO*, 82). While Joan's image of her body is predominantly negative, I would therefore argue that her obesity points towards the possibility of social transformation.

One of the novel's main challenges to social orthodoxy occurs in the scenes where Joan's performance of her identity recalls carnival masquerade. Under the pseudonyms of Louisa K. Delacourt, Joan Delacourt/ Foster, and Charlotte, Joan's multiple identities dissolve the boundaries between life and art. This interplay between reality and fantasy, truth and illusion is encapsulated in Joan's own name, which she disavows as a badge of her identity. Speculating on the reasons why her

mother gave her this name, Joan speculates: 'Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn't have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille LeSueur, which would have suited me much better' (*LO*, 42). By implying that her name is a kind of façade or pseudonym, I would argue, Joan not only signals a sense of dual or multiple identities, but also points towards the theatricality of identity as a means of self- or social transformation. Here, Joan is comparable to Mozart's Don Juan, whom Kristeva praises as 'an artist with no authenticity other than his ability to change, to live without internality, to put on masks just for fun' (Kristeva, 1987: 199). For Kristeva, subjectivity or identity is always in process, and Don Juan, a man without 'a name,' is emblematic of this ontological fluidity. Similarly, one could argue that Joan's masks (in Atwood's novel) enable a similar ontological flexibility. Behind these masks, Joan narrates a story that ultimately enables her to reconcile herself with reality. By speaking in the voices of others, Joan disrupts the boundaries between 'I' and the 'other.' This bespeaks the carnival spirit through which people for a time enter their second life, 'the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance' (Bakhtin, *Bakhtin Reader* (1994), 199).

As I have demonstrated, the mixture of art and lived experience, self-parody and satire in *Lady Oracle*, as well as Joan's experiments with various generic forms, signal Atwood's interest in the unstable, intertextual structures of narrative. I would argue that Joan's narrative, which switches between real life and the realm of the imagination, suggests Atwood's sustained interest in textual and ontological mobility: the transposition of 'real life' into an imaginative written text, and the transference of one generic system to another, signals the amorphous nature of

signification in Atwood's writing.

## 2. 'A verbal performance in print': utterance, communication and intertextuality in *Bluebeard's Egg*

The author-actor's utterance unfolds, divides, and faces in two directions: first, towards a referential utterance, *narration* - the speech assumed by he who inscribes himself as actor-author; and second, toward textual premises, *citation* - speech attributed to an other and whose authority he who inscribes himself as actor-author acknowledges. (Kristeva, 1980: 45; original italics)

I would argue that like *Lady Oracle*, Atwood's 1983 short story collection *Bluebeard's Egg* is founded upon a structure of embedded and framing narratives, but this text focuses more specifically upon human utterance as a means by which to interrogate textual and social boundaries, and as a vehicle for intertextual exchange. Celebrating the communicative potential of the utterance, Atwood's use of intertextuality in *Bluebeard's Egg* promotes dialogic engagement and undermines notions of textual fixity or autonomy, whether in spoken or written texts. Throughout the novel, the relationship between the author-narrator's and the character's enunciations trigger intertextual dialogue. As I shall argue, Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* enacts an intertextual and metatextual process through which she strives to present a model of responsive textuality. What is implied in this interdependent world of the polyphonic text is that everything, including meaning in textuality, is in a state of becoming. This is in full accord with Atwood's ongoing literary aesthetic which she has figured as a relationship between opposing forces throughout her works. As outlined above, *Lady Oracle* illustrates the way in which the gaps between life and art, reality and fantasy are narrowed by the novelist protagonist. In the sense

that *Bluebeard's Egg* comprises a collection of short stories, it is difficult to consider it in terms of an integrated theme and plot. However, it can be argued that all the stories in the collection are united under the category of metanarrative. Broadly speaking, metanarrative is narrative about narrative, and its form displays narrative within narrative. I would also argue that when considered in terms of Kristeva's theories, metanarrative is intertextuality in process. Viewed in these terms, Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* enacts an intertextual transposition similar to that in *Lady Oracle*. Applying a feminist intertextuality that relies on the communicative and transformative aspects of language, Atwood takes this process further in *Bluebeard's Egg*.<sup>19</sup> Rather than exploring intertextuality as a theoretical phenomenon, intertextuality in *Bluebeard's Egg* engages texts, characters and readers in dynamic processes of dialogue.

*Bluebeard's Egg* is a collection of disparate short stories, presented from a variety of narrative perspectives, some first person and some third-person. Many of them involve family relationships, expressing a variety of dialogical relationships and storytelling techniques. Most of the stories in the collection engage in a dual process of enunciation, suspended between embedded and framing narratives. By claiming that in 'Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother,' 'an alternation of the narrator's words and the character's' produces the text, Godard has noted how Atwood blurs the distinction between the two narrative modes (Godard, 1986: 74).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Atwood's *The Robber Bride* also lends itself to the model of intertextuality I discuss here. The novel is significantly similar in narrative structure to the other two texts, and could be interpreted as an extension of them. *The Robber Bride*, like *Lady Oracle* and *Bluebeard's Egg*, engages with and subverts the convention of gothic romance, in this case introducing a female Bluebeard into the narrative.

<sup>20</sup> In her essay discussing Atwood's shaping of dialogue in her text, Godard also emphasises Atwood's use of oral narrative. While Godard herself does not draw upon theories of dialogism and intertextuality in her discussion of Atwood, I would argue that aspects of her analysis connect with mine.

The text therefore witnesses an interchange between the two voices, which is the most important feature in the text's enactment of Bakhtinian dialogic relations. Whether these relations are analysed at a linguistic, textual or interpersonal level, the focus is on the word. Relying on the word and the reciprocity of dialogue (as the word itself is uttered in anticipation of a response), *Bluebeard's Egg* presents a reciprocal view of human communication. In 'Significant Moments,' the author-narrator's (the daughter's) words retrace the character's (her mother's), so that the stories are formed from the act of telling/listening within a performative context, and are therefore profoundly dynamic. Through the author-narrator's recognition of the difference between symbolism and anecdote, Atwood illustrates the dynamic process: 'Listening to my mother, I sometimes remember this' (*BE*, 27).<sup>21</sup> Although the stories are ultimately reconstructions (inasmuch as they are rewritten by the author-narrator), I would argue that the stories reflect explicitly the dialogic principle, negotiating meaning through a contract between speaker and interlocutor.

The stories in *Bluebeard's Egg* are precisely the product of the mutual relationship between teller and listener. The process of telling or writing stories begins by positing the presence of the speaker's interlocutor(s). Although the teller presents the story, the shape of the narrative is constantly modified by the point of view of others in the community to which s/he belongs. The story in 'Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother' is a good example of this process at work. Here, the author-narrator's attempts to relate aspects of her mother's life are constantly subject to the interventions of the mother as a 'character' in the story. This story is a life story of a mother that is rewritten by her daughter. The daughter-narrator reports

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<sup>21</sup> All page references will be to the Vintage (1996) edition.

to us on her reception and delivery of her mother's anecdotes, which are full of energy and optimism; she orders them in her written narrative (Godard, 1986: 75). The narrator's written narrative emerges out of her mother's story-telling or talking, therefore there is sense of bond or interplay between speaking and writing. The daughter-narrator observes this in terms of construction that requires interpretations and revisions: 'We both know whose idea this was. For my mother, *the proper construction to be put on this event* is that my brother was a hell-raiser and I was his shadow' (BE, 24, italics added). This bespeaks the dialogic contract. As Pavel Medvedev explains, 'every utterance, including the artistic work, is a communication, a message, and is completely inseparable from intercourse' (qtd. in Pearce, 38).<sup>22</sup>

I would argue that in Atwood's writing, dialogism, or the interdependence of utterance characterised by the reciprocating presence of an addressee, is connected with intertextuality, which involves a similar process of mobile interchange. This connection has been elaborated by Bakhtin and other narratologists such as Tzvetan Todorov. Both processes are instigated through the utterance or 'the word,' described by Bakhtin as follows:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. (Bakhtin, 1981: 280)

As Bakhtin makes clear, the word becomes social and contextual through the dialogic relationship: 'Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life: all words and forms are populated by intentions.'

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<sup>22</sup> Along with Voloshinov, Medvedev is a proponent of the dialogic philosophy of the Bakhtin group.

Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word' (Bakhtin, 1981: 293). Bakhtin's fundamental belief that utterance cannot escape from socio-ideology is paraphrased by Tzvetan Todorov as follows: 'Intentionally or not, all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates' (Todorov, 1984: 10). Todorov argues that dialogism, or 'intertextual dimension,' is one of the primary features of the utterance (10). In a similar vein, Kristeva has argued, within the context of Bakhtinian dialogism, that writing is identified 'as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality' (Kristeva, 1980: 68).

Where *Lady Oracle's* intertextual dialogism explored the relationship between real life experience and fantasy, *Bluebeard's Egg's* dialogism focuses more specifically upon lived experience shared by teller and character. The text follows a formula in which the description of someone else's words or life experience create a metanarrative, thereby establishing a dialogic relationship between the two versions of the story. The two voices in 'Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother,' discussed earlier, enact this kind of dialogic relationship. As Todorov puts it, 'the utterance that describes another utterance enters into a dialogical relation with it' (Todorov, 1984: 23).

Through this process, Atwood introduces a mosaic-like narrative perspective in which the narrated and quoted stories can operate across boundaries, undermining textual fixity. Significantly, in each story, the author-narrator does not exert absolute control over the narrative, but instead merely interprets or restates the original story. Atwood's technique even allows for potential errors in interpretation on the part of

the author-narrator, whose perspective may be challenged by characters in the text. The story 'Unearthing Suite,' where the narrator offers an anecdote about her parents, shows this process at work:

One of their neighbours recently took me to task about her.  
'Your poor mother,' she said. 'Married to your father'.  
'What?' I said.  
'I see her dragging her groceries back from the supermarket,' she said. (True enough, my mother does this. She has a little cart with which she whizzes along the sidewalk, hair wisping out from her head, scarf streaming, exhausting anyone foolhardy enough to make the trip with her, by that I mean myself.) 'Your father won't even drive her.'  
When I told her this story, my mother laughed.  
My father said the unfortunate woman obviously didn't know that there was more to him than met the eye. (*BE*, 266)

In this quotation, the narrator initially appears to agree with the opinion expressed by the neighbour, but her parents' reactions cast doubt on the reliability of this interpretation. Dieter Meindl has argued that this technique is characteristic of Atwood's writing, in which the process of narration 'presupposes the rejection of the narrative perspective conveyed (Meindl, 1994: 219)

Narrative perspective in the text is one of the most important factors to consider when interpreting Atwood's view on an androcentric world. Meindl, for example, has argued that the use of narrative perspective in Atwood's writing often advances her views on gender relations. According to Meindl, in quantitative terms, narrative perspective is limited, since it is narrated in the figural frame of reference involving a first person or a third narrator who is often denied direct access to the thoughts of particular characters. But, in the sense that these figures' attitudes and views are conditionally valid, they have the advantage of expressing a variety of human perspectives. Therefore, qualitatively, the narrative perspective is unlimited. In elaborating his quantitative model of the limitations of narrative perspective,

Meindl raises the question of the unreliability of female narrators. If, following conventional models of language and gender, the female voice is circumscribed by the dominant male point of view, it could be argued that female narrators are unable to express a truly 'female' discourse. According to this logic, female narratives are heavily mediated by male discourse, and the points of view of female characters are similarly inflected by a male consciousness which in turn entraps the characters in their inner worlds. An example of this process can be found in Atwood's story 'Uglypuss,' where a female character named Becka kills her ex-boy friend Joel's cat, but her perspective is overtaken by his view of events: as a third narrator describes, 'Now she feels as if she's committed a sacrilege. Why should she feel that way? Because for at least two years she thought he was God ... *My heart does not bleed*, she tells herself. But it does' (BE, 110). In reflecting upon Atwood's female narrators, Meindl argues that while some of the stories in *Bluebeard's Egg* involve genuine communication between the sexes, most involve a breakdown of communication between men and women. It is certainly true that in some of the stories in *Bluebeard's Egg*, Atwood does engage with the potential uncertainties and contradictions of female perception. 'Scarlet Ibis,' for example, focuses on a woman tortured by doubts about her relationship with her husband: 'Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he would say he was coming on with a headache. Maybe she would find herself walking on nothing, because maybe there was nothing there' (BE, 184). It could be argued that in this example, Atwood is foregrounding the subordinated status of women and their language. Always interested in the relation of the female self to language, Atwood has often explored the otherness and linguistic oppression involved in gender politics in her work. A similar process takes places in

the story 'Loulou; or the Domestic Life of the Language,' where the female character Loulou's identity and life are refracted through the dominant perspectives of male poets: 'What, underneath it all, is Loulou really like? How can she tell? Maybe she is what the poets say she is, after all; maybe she has only their word, their words, for herself' (*BE*, 80). In the story these poets are described as Loulou's companions, residing in her house. They are Loulou's ex-husbands and ex-lovers. Loulou herself is an artist – she is a potter - and yet her commercial and material art is subordinated to the poets' more abstract form of creativity.

I would argue that Atwood's focus upon narrative perspective as a medium through which to explore women's repression is related to her interest in aesthetic freedom as a means by which to challenge ideological certainties. In this sense, the inability to locate reliable points of view can be interpreted more positively as a form of aesthetic liberation. Narrative perspective remains active or flexible to some extent as the reader participates in the process of signification. I would argue that these narrative perspective strategies allow Atwood to avoid endorsing any single ideological position in her texts. Indeed, Atwood refuses to reduce her fiction to a mere debate on gender. As I have demonstrated, in *Lady Oracle* her engagement with the conventions of gothic romance serves to question and transcend conventional dialectics. Similarly, in *Bluebeard's Egg* her intermingling of narrative perspectives disrupts the binarisms which often structure feminist theory and literature. In this way, I would argue, Atwood's narratology illustrates Kristevan subversiveness. *Bluebeard's Egg* yields narrative perspectives that break down oppositions. Eschewing fixed ideological positions, these flexible narrative perspectives allow Atwood to transcend specific theoretical and political certainties.

As Atwood's emphasis in *Bluebeard's Egg* falls on narrative perspective, what is implied in the mode of story-telling in 'Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother,' for example, is an extension of the self. It is affirmed by the fact that the stories shared by mother and daughter are about the family. Through the relationship to the parents, the 'I' is located in the family circle in which she enters into dialogue with the other, her mother. Just as the narrative is built on the mode of dialogue, so the 'I' is not in struggle with the other. Here the relation between an 'I' and the other is established not in order to explore difference *per se*, but rather to illustrate the possibility of negotiation in difference. Given that the mother is also involved in the story-telling process, the first-person 'I' perspective embodied by the narrator also shifts to a more inclusive 'we,' enabling difference to coexist with sameness in this family narrative. Other stories in the collection, such as, 'Hurricane Hazel,' 'In Search of the Rattlesnake Plantain' and 'Unearthing Suite,' follow similar lines by foregrounding collective experience. For example, 'Hurricane Hazel,' the second story in the collection, explores the concept of collective memory, as the author-narrator tells of a cataclysmic hurricane which entered into local folklore within her community, thus serving in a sense to define family and community identity. Similarly, the story 'In Search of the Rattlesnake Plantain,' which recounts a family excursion, reinforces the narrative 'we' that is considered as the extension of individual identity. The family trip involves a search for an endangered plant, the rattlesnake, and at the centre of this shared experience is the recognition of death, which prefigures the death of the narrator's own father. The family trip actually takes place following the father's recovery from a stroke, but it foreshadows his eventual demise: 'this isn't the whole story' (*BE*, 232). In this sense, the family trip becomes a

collective experience which facilitates both an awareness of, and an acceptance of, death as an inevitable part of human experience. Similarly, in 'Unearthing Suite,' the two separate worlds of men and women (symbolised by gendered division of space in the author-narrator's and her parents' houses) converge in an image of gardening, an unearthing which evokes renewal through death. The story begins with the narrator's parents' plan for their death, as they purchase funeral urns in which their ashes will be temporarily stored. Their wish to have their ashes sprinkled on the soil contextualises death within an ongoing process of renewal and vitalism, as the parents showed a love of gardening and seek to re-enter the process of organic life after they have died. As the narrator says, 'Gardening is not a rational act. What matters is the immersion of the hands in the earth ... In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt' (*BE*, 276). This desire to subsume one's individual self or identity within a larger life cycle is another example of the process by which the narrative 'I' gives way to a collective 'we' in *Bluebeard's Egg* (see also Suarez, 1994: 243).

At this point it is worth returning again to a consideration of Atwood's story 'Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother,' whose narrative techniques, which involve a blending of the point of view of the author-narrator and the character(s), encapsulates the flexible use of point of view that is common to all the stories in *Bluebeard's Egg*. As explained earlier, the narrator of the story offers us a collection of anecdotes about her mother's life, demonstrating how her reception and delivery of her mother's stories is an integral part of the narrative process. Although daughter and mother tell the story simultaneously, it is reconstructed through the prism of the

author-narrator's own life.<sup>23</sup> Here it is impossible to fix a single narrator in the constant interchanges of point of view. The moment in the story where the narrator tells an anecdote about a hay-wagon clearly demonstrates this process:

This is the story of the hay wagon. "Your father was driving," says my mother, "at the speed he usually goes." We read between the lines: *too fast*. "You kids were in the back." I can remember this day, so I can remember how old I was, how old my brother was... When we became too irritating my father would say, "Pipe down." We weren't old enough to know that his irritation could be real... We were going down a steep hill," my mother continues... (BE, 23).

Here, the story-telling portrays a dialogic pattern that is based on intimacy and inter-relationships, as the mother and daughter communicate with each other in the process of (re)telling. In her discussion of the mother-daughter relationship represented in 'Significant Moments,' Suarez, drawing upon the feminist concept of sisterhood, points out that the two women's lives and stories unfold in parallel. However, although the stories of both women share a focus on female subjectivity, Suarez herself recognises that there is nevertheless a significant gap between the two women's stories. The author-narrator indirectly informs the reader of the gap by emphasising her mother's singularity; she is described as a good mimic, [who] imitates the sounds of the drill and the tobacco juice: "Rrrrr! Rrrrr! Rrrrr! Phht! Rrrrr! Rrrrr! Phht!" (BE, 14). The author-narrator reveals that her mother, in the process of telling stories, 'takes all the parts, adds the sound effects' (BE, 17), thus foregrounding the different personalities of the two women and according the mother a certain primacy in the process of narration.

While I would argue that this and other stories in *Bluebeard's Egg* have feminist or female-centred agendas, I am most interested in the ways in which these

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<sup>23</sup> Conversely, emphasising the author-narrator's act of reconstructing the story, Suarez claims that the story is not about the narrator's mother. See Suarez, p.236.

narratives draw attention to the processes of enunciation and interpersonal communication. As outlined earlier, the act of enunciation or narration is structured in relation to an implied interlocutor or addressee, and the text therefore becomes a space in which the interaction or transformation of utterances is carried out. While the author-narrator's retelling preserves the essence of the character's initial utterance, a shift in meaning occurs when utterance shifts to another level. This process can be evaluated in terms of Kristeva's analysis of the way in which transposition in language substantiates intertextuality:

These inferential agents imply the juxtaposition of a *discourse* invested in a subject with another *utterance* different from the author's. They make possible the deviation of the novelistic utterance from its subject and its self-presence, that is, its displacement from a discursive (informational, communicative) level to a textual level (of productivity). (Kristeva, 1980: 46)

In his analysis of intertextuality, Jonathan Culler identifies a link between the reader and the semiotic process, thus departing from more conventional understandings of intertexts as sources or 'influences.' Culler asserts that intertextuality refers to 'the paradox of linguistic and discursive systems' in which 'utterances or texts are never moments of origin because they depend on the prior existence of codes and conventions' (Culler, 1998: 22). For him, 'the nature of codes,' as interpreted by poststructuralist semioticians, is 'to be always already in existence, to have lost origins' (22). What Culler presents as a substitute for origins is 'a discursive space' which projects the way in which a text relates to other texts in the domain of linguistic codes (22). Although it is clear that Culler focuses primarily upon intertextuality as a semiotic process, he also identifies an intersubjective figure (the reader) that is posited in the discursive act. Culler is not particularly concerned with

the degree to which the involvement of the intersubjective figure contributes to a new interpretation, but his notion of a pre-existing subject that influences textual or discursive domains is useful to an interpretation of Atwood's writing, which involves a degree of intersubjectivity, whether between reader and text, or author-narrator and character.

Significantly, Atwood makes it clear that a text cannot be fully translated from one discursive context into another. The narrator of 'Significant Moments,' for example, remarks that meaning changes or loses its original shape when transmitted:

Having fun has always been high on my mother's agenda. She has as much as fun as possible, but what she means by this phrase cannot be understood without making an adjustment, an allowance for the great gulf across which this phrase must travel before it reaches us. It comes from another world ... It is possible to reconstruct the facts of this world - the furniture, the clothing,... but not the emotions, not with the same exactness. So much that is now known and felt must be excluded. (*BE*, 18)

This passage suggests that it is possible to establish a dialogic relationship in discourse, but the author-narrator's awareness of the difficulty in conveying the other's message is nevertheless also evident in the narrative. I would argue that Bakhtin's study of discourse in the novel offers a useful context within which to consider this phenomenon. Bakhtin writes,

The language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each character's speech possesses its own belief system, since each is the speech of another in another's language; thus it may also refract authorial intentions and consequently may to a certain degree constitute a second language for the author. (Bakhtin, 1981: 315)

This argument is relevant to Atwood's 'Significant Moments' in that the author-narrator's self-consciousness about the story is evident in her acknowledgement that

her paraphrase cannot fully replace the literary and linguistic uniqueness of the character's (her mother's) words. Atwood's model demonstrates that 'not all transmitted words belonging to someone else lend themselves, when fixed in writing, to enclosure in quotation marks' (Bakhtin, 1981: 339). Transmitted speech or the mere shifting of the context of utterance generates another meaning as the narrator/character's enunciation moves in two directions.

It is in the title story of the collection, 'Bluebeard's Egg,' that Atwood's interrogation of fixed meaning is most explicitly represented. The title of the story itself suggests a link to the original Bluebeard story. However, Atwood's reformulation of the story focuses on the words' function of translation or transposition, which transforms the meaning of the original story. Atwood clarifies this argument through the description of a night-course, 'Forms of Narrative Fiction,' that the protagonist Sally has been attending:

The first thing Bertha assigned was The Epic. They read *The Odyssey* (selected passages, in translation, with a plot summary of the rest) (152) ... Then Bertha read them another story, and this time they were supposed to remember the features that stood out for them and write a five-page transposition, set in the present and cast in the realistic mode. (BE, 154)

This quotation draws attention to the broader process of narrative transposition signaled in the story's title. In the framing narrative Sally has to rewrite the Bluebeard story on her night course. Her assignment is to write it in a present-day realistic version, choosing the point of view of any individual character in the story. I would argue that the night course itself represents the act of reading and writing, the narrative processes or the elements of narrative that introduce the possibility of a never-ending story. The two versions of the Bluebeard story in the text encapsulate this:

The story she was about to read, she said, was a variant of the Bluebeard motif, much earlier than Perrault's sentimental rewriting of it. In Perrault, said Bertha [the course instructor], the girl has to be rescued by her brothers, but in the earlier version things were quite otherwise.' (*BE*, 154)

The Bluebeard motif is at the heart of the story, refracted through references to Sally's husband Ed's X-ray room (analogous to the forbidden room in Bluebeard's castle), and the mystery surrounding Ed's two previous wives. Ed is a heart-surgeon, often busy in the evenings, and Sally takes the night course in order to keep herself occupied during these lonely periods. Sally's narrated world reevaluates her relationship with Ed, figuring her life as a kind of fiction. If the motifs of a disguised wizard-husband and a secret room are the basis for the sexual politics underlying the Bluebeard stories, then 'Bluebeard's Egg' offers a new commentary on these sexual politics. Sally describes Ed's X-ray room as 'sexual in a way she didn't quite understand; it was clearly a dangerous place' (*BE*, 145). This reference appears to figure the X-ray room as a modern-day patriarchal realm, redolent of Bluebeard's secret chamber, but (in her reading of the Bluebeard story) Sally foregrounds the image of the egg, often interpreted as an emblem of female subjectivity: 'the egg can be a fertility symbol ... or a symbol of virginity' (*BE*, 157). Sally is wondering about the egg, and how to present 'a story from the egg's point of view' (*BE*, 157). In the original Bluebeard story the bloodied egg is a symbol of death related to loss of virginity or sexual defilement. In the framing narrative, Ed is described as a puzzling figure to Sally: 'In her inner world is Ed, like a doll within a Russian wooden doll, and in Ed is Ed's inner world, which she can't get at' (*BE*, 150). In the story Sally is constructing, 'Ed isn't the Bluebeard: Ed is the egg' (*BE*, 157). The egg is ultimately featured as 'something that the story left out,' yet it is also a symbol of rebirth or

another story. As Sally observes at the end of the story, 'one day it will hatch' (*BE*, 164).

Although the story is told in the third person, its self-reflexivity transforms the text into a metanarrative: 'There was more, about how the wizard [Bluebeard] met his come-uppance and was burned to death, but Sally already knew which features stood out for her' (*BE*, 156). It goes without saying that metanarratives comprise at least two voices, whether they communicate with each other or not. Inasmuch as utterance itself involves two voices, there are four voices involved in the process of metanarrative, and dialogic relationships are therefore central to metanarrative. In Atwood's text, the presence of an artist heroine, a writer, and a reader, creates the dialogic space in which narration takes place.

According to Culler, it is through the acts of reading and writing that a text takes up a position in discursive space (Culler, 1998: 22). The writer's experience of being a reader constitutes a form of intertextuality. Bounded in references, quotation marks and influences, the text becomes intertextual, the product of semiotic interplay. Paradoxically, text becomes text by appealing to an intertext which it transforms, reformulates and reworks. In Atwood's story, Sally's emphasis on rewriting and readership in her night course foregrounds this kind of intertextuality. Her own real-life experience and readership form the subtext, the location of 'intertextual authority' that draws attention to its own constructed origins.

If text therefore exists only through inter-textual relationships, it is by definition dialogical and is capable of challenging notions of fixity in language and the signifying process. In a similar vein, celebrating the nature of dialogue and its presence in any type of communication, Valentin Voloshinov has claimed that 'a

book, i.e., a verbal performance in print, is also an element of verbal communication' (qtd. in Pearce, 41). 'Calculated for actual perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organised printed reaction,' books are considered to be one of the primary sites in which dialogism can be found (41). The next section of this chapter will explore these arguments through a reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which exemplifies an actual, real-life dialogue in print.

### **3. Orality, the unconscious and reconstruction: intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale***

But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 49-50)

This quotation, from Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, offers a good example of Atwood's interest in dialogic relations through its focus on the interlocutor. Highlighting the narrator's craving for communication, *The Handmaid's Tale* repeats the frame of dialogue used in *Lady Oracle* and *Bluebeard's Egg* to undermine fixity in artistic and social relations, marking a position of social 'becoming' as elaborated by Bakhtin. However, in this case, verbal communication and language are actually identified as a site of repression rather than intercommunication.

However, when considered in terms of Kristeva's theories on intertextuality (which developed out of Bakhtin's theories on dialogism), acts of communication in *The Handmaid's Tale* can also be interpreted more positively as a means by which to undermine notions of textual fixity and autonomy. For Kristeva, the main interest of dialogism is not the resolution of different or opposing positions, but 'the logic of

*distance and relationship*' that accounts for the interplay between different positions (*Desire*, 71; original italics). The ability of double-voiced language or polyphony to question the monological is a starting point from which Kristeva proceeds to the study of literary semiotics. Both Bakhtinian and Kristevan theories of discourse ultimately present the possibility of changes in reality through dialogism in language, drawing attention to the potential of utterance to create open-endedness in the text. It could be argued that Atwood attempts to portray this potential in *The Handmaid's Tale* by foregrounding the concept of dialogue through the process of narrative reconstruction (given that the protagonist Offred's story is reconstructed by the narrator from a tape recording made by Offred herself). The novel also enacts dialogism through the process of intertextuality, as the novel introduces various intertexts, ranging from fairy-tales and the Bible to literary texts. The Grimms' fairy tale 'Little Red Riding Hood,' and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are two of the most prominent intertexts in the novel. Through these intertexts, Atwood explores the ways in which narrative constructs or reconstructs reality, as the novel presents its own new (re)visions of these narratives. A further form of dialogism in the narrative is enacted in Atwood's exploration of the relationship between oral and written discourse. As the following reading of the novel will show, my purpose in this section is to illustrate how Atwood elaborates her intertextuality by foregrounding oral language as both conservative and revolutionary.

To date, critics have focused primarily on the dystopic futuristic society depicted in Gilead, interpreting it as a totalitarian regime in which the mores of fundamentalist sects are enforced in everyday life. Permeated with images of violence, incarceration and oppression, the life story of female protagonist Offred

illustrates the siege mentality that permeates authoritarian societies. Military and secret police and their appropriation of media shape the Gilead regime's absolutist state. In an effort to consolidate its status, the ruling class re-educates people by attempting to control language and modes of thought. At the centre of this totalitarian control lies the suppression of written language, and in particular a ban on women's reading and writing as a means of confining women to orality which, in turn, reinforces their gendered oppression. However, the novel's emphasis on the subversive power of spoken discourse complicates its political dynamics, because the interpersonal relationships posited in the process of story-telling suggest potential harmony. In this context it is significant that men are also oppressed in Gilead. As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, Atwood's concern for human rights takes precedence over her feminist politics. I would argue that Atwood's use of duality in discourse is a central means through which she explores the possibility of resolving various forms of oppositional conflict, including, but not restriction to, gendered conflict.

In analysing the dichotomy between orality and literacy in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Mario Klarer argues, in opposition to conventional feminist interpretations of written language as a patriarchal domain, that Atwood foregrounds 'written discourse' as an empowering form of female expression (Klarer, 1995: 130). As Klarer argues, in their attempts to link literary discourse with masculine, many feminists have posited orality as an alternative mode through which to express female experience. *The Handmaid's Tale* might initially appear to invite this kind of feminist reading, as the narrative appears, superficially, to posit a homology between women and orality as secondary, marginalised entities. The sentence structures

featured in Offred's narrative are grammatically simple, with a repeated pattern of main clause + main clause, rather than relying upon a combination of main and subordinate clauses. This repetitious mode can be compared with the tendency toward tautology and redundancy in oral traditions. Under Gilead's authoritarian rules, there is no other means of communication beyond short private conversation. Offred's recurring phrases; 'Praise be,' and 'Under His Eye,' which only allow a very basic form of communication between the handmaids, foreground their marginality, pain and dislocation.

However, in contrast to conventional feminist readings in which literacy is viewed as a male mode of expression, *The Handmaid's Tale* challenges the gendered view of the oral-written binary. We are often told of Offred's longing for books and letters, and it is revealed that Offred was a librarian, 'transferring books to computer discs' (*HT*, 182). This job is identified as the act of destroying books as material artefacts, as Offred is expected to send the books to the shredder after they have been transferred to a virtual format. Offred, however, defies these instructions, smuggling various books back to her house. Despite Offred's remarks that she took the books home simply because she liked the feel and the look of them, what is suggested here is that women also have access to the power associated with writing. This power manifests itself in different ways: Offred's mother, for example, asserts herself by destroying pornographic texts on the grounds that they objectify women.

There are other examples in the text which link language with gender dialectics. Atwood's playful critique of Latin in the games of Scrabble between Offred and the Commander, for example, can be interpreted as a form of feminist critique. A message illegally written on the floor by her predecessor of the same

name, '*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*' (*HT*, 196) ['Don't let the bastards grind you down' (*HT*, 197)] for example, appeals to notions of female solidarity. The illicit game of Scrabble with the Commander gives Offred the opportunity to play with words, but it is through this activity that Offred realises that she is trapped like her hanged predecessor. The message is playfully written in bastardised Latin, but I would suggest that it is still invested with subversive potential, given that historically, Latin was the language of male scholarship. Further, while telling her story, Offred frequently reveals an intimacy or intimation of something like a sense of sisterhood existing among women. Just before her escape from the Commander's house, Offred contextualises her situation within a broader narrative of female experience: 'Behind me I feel her presence, my ancestress, my double ... There were always two of us. Get it over, she says' (*HT*, 305). Significantly, given the conventional association between written discourses and patriarchy, it is a written message on the floor of her room that enables Offred to feel a member of a kind of sisterhood: 'It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman' (*HT*, 62). When she cites her instructor Aunt Lydia, who claimed that, 'pen is envy' (*HT*, 196), it could be argued that Offred is alluding to 'penis envy,' Freud's harsh simplification of female sexuality. But for Offred, writing is not an exclusively male preserve: 'The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains' (*HT*, 196). While the act of writing could be seen as a usurpation of male authority, Offred does not interpret it in these terms. Through her ambivalent responses to the written text, Atwood distances herself from binary analyses of language and gender.

Returning to the domain of orality, Offred's restricted life in Gilead is

reconstructed in her tape-recorded story, which we discover only at the end of the story. In retrospectively tracing her memories of Gilead's exploitation of women, Offred reports her personal experience as a handmaid, a victim, whose identity is defined by her procreative function. As she says, 'we [handmaids] are two-legged wombs, that's all' (*HT*, 146). In her essay, 'Nature and Nurture in Dystopia,' Roberta Rubenstein explores how *The Handmaid's Tale* extends Atwood's earlier literary explorations of victimisation and survival. Rubenstein contends that the female body is treated as a tool for reproduction and links this with Atwood's more general interest in modes of survival. In Gilead, Rubenstein argues, human bodies are reified and described according to their separate constituent parts, rather than as wholes. Reduced to an object, the body is linked with violence, torture and mutilation (Rubenstein, 1988: 103-104). Rubenstein's arguments offer a useful context within which to explore the handmaids' conversations, in which imagery of mutilated language points to the abuse of the body. Characterising the handmaids' words as 'clipped whispers' and 'amputated speech,' Offred draws attention to the fragmentary nature of language that stems from oppression (*HT*, 211). Significantly, this recalls the language Newspeak in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The destruction of words in totalitarian Gilead parallels the way Oceania suppresses and reduces language in Orwell's novel. Further, Offred's act of telling her story to an unknown listener echoes the protagonist Winston Smith's forbidden diary made at the instigation of O'Brien.<sup>24</sup> These parallels with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* foreground Atwood's intertextual frame of reference.

As an immediate product of linguistic restriction, Offred's language is

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<sup>24</sup> In his essay 'Dystopia's Point of No Return: A Team-Taught Utopia Class,' Rudd Teeuwen (1996) also compares the society in *The Handmaid's Tale* with the dystopian world of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

fragmentary and marks her victim status. As she observes, her story is fragmentary and yet this story-telling functions as a form of survival: 'I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled part by force ... But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story' (*HT*, 279). Offred's narrative is comparable to Joan's act of writing in *Lady Oracle*. Like Joan, whose romance writing creates an alternative reality, Offred finds hope in her story-telling, which raises the possibility of reconstruction and the creation of alternative worlds. Her words enable her to envision hope through the human connections enacted in the process of storytelling: 'By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are' (*HT*, 279). This, of course, is a clear intertextual reference to Descartes's 'I think, therefore I am.' Offred identifies a correlation between the construction of narrative and the restoration or incarnation of the body, and the very act of telling militates against Gilead's de-humanising censorship.

At this point it is worth returning to Bakhtin's theories on language and the body, focusing in particular on his theories on the subversive potential of the carnivalesque. It is also worth noting that the link between bodily symptoms and words is a central concern in psychoanalytic interpretations of hysteria. As far as Freud's analysis of hysteria is concerned, the cause of the illness is attributed to psychic repression. As I will argue with reference to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* in Chapter three, both language and the body are located as sites of oppression. By linking the body with the act of story-telling, a connection between *The Handmaid's Tale* and her other texts is made.

Just as hysteria serves to erode binary oppositions between conscious and unconscious realms, allowing the return of the repressed, so the handmaids' fragmentary story raises the possibility of reconstructing repressed narratives, serving to question notions of narrative fixity. The story's epilogue ('Historical Notes') reveals Atwood's suspicion of notions of 'the true story,' a formulation that tends to ignore the existence of other voices and stories. In her earlier poem, 'True Stories,' Atwood warned: 'The true story lies/ among the other stories// The true story is vicious/ and multiple and untrue/ after all' (*SP*, 245). This interest in alternative stories helps to account for the insertion of the epilogue in which it is revealed that the handmaid's tale is itself reconstructed by another writer. At a conference on the history of Gilead in the year 2195, Professor Pieixoto, one of the two Cambridge dons who discovered and transcribed the handmaid's tale, observes the fragmentariness of the original text. The reader now discovers that the story that s/he has read is the result of scholarly reconstruction. It is Professor Wade who entitled the narrative *The Handmaid's Tale*. The professors suggest that there is no originality in the written narrative, and it is the handmaid's oral accounts that they foreground as the basis of the reconstruction process. Out of the tapes that have neither particular order nor numbers, the academics 'arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go' (*HT*, 314). As Professor Pieixoto reveals, 'all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research' (*HT*, 314). Significantly, in the novel itself Offred herself insists several times that her tale is a reconstruction that cannot necessarily capture 'the reality' of her experience:

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should

or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here-...When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. (*HT*, 144)

Adding to this statement, the scholarly transcription revealed in the epilogue draws attention to the constructedness of the text and arguably neutralises the putatively subversive elements within Offred's personal voice that transgress codified or systematising discourse. It could be argued that Gilead's repressive ideology and its authoritarian speech are reproduced in the scholarly narrative text. The two discursive forms, oral and written text, are once again associated with conventional gender dialectics centred upon male power. Yet it is worth remembering that the oral tale itself stems from the process of reconstruction, and many openings still remain in the narrative. Proving that no interpretation can be definitive, the disjunction between signifier and signified is inscribed in Offred's reconstruction, and it in turn raises suspicion about notions of originality and fixed meaning: 'It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out' (*HT*, 144).

In relation to the gaps that the narrative discloses, whether in spoken or written discourse, Atwood draws attention to gender dialectics, which are (as stated above) one of her principal preoccupations. Nevertheless, her emphasis on language points to the possibility of a more complicated reading of the novel. Both Offred and the scholars recognise gaps in the narrative, but their approach to them is completely different. Unlike Offred, who asserts the inevitability of 'the gaps between the words and reality,' the male scholars attempt to fill the gaps, as Hilda Staels has pointed out

(Staels, 1995: 465).<sup>25</sup> The academics ignore the existence of the unspeakable or unrecorded experience which is implied in Offred's emphasis on reconstruction. That is the main reason why the academics cannot fully interpret or access the core of the handmaid's tale. Identifying the tale as a work of art or fiction (The title of the professor's paper, 'Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale,' points to this), the scholars ignore the fears and horrors that Offred experiences in the process of resistance. Offred's desperate situation, in which her tale becomes a tool for survival, is travestied in the use of puns such as 'tail' and 'The Underground Frailroad (Femaleroad)' as described in the epilogue. Professor Pieixoto flippantly notes how apt 'the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*' is to illustrate 'that phase of Gileadean society,' which debases the bodies of women by exploiting their sexuality (*HT*, 313). However, in spite of the professor's levity, the fact that the handmaids were treated as 'two-legged wombs' challenges the merriment of the pun. Significantly, Professor Pieixoto's presentation elicits laughter from his auditors on several occasions. Here Atwood's enclosing of 'Laughter' in parentheses cannot be viewed merely as a rhetorical device, given that Atwood frequently uses parentheses in her writing to indicate ideas or feelings that are contrary to those on the surface of the narrative. As Sandra Tomc notes, Offred's silences and tricks in the taped narrative are unreadable within the frame of Pieixoto's official discourse. They are laughed at and dismissed by the academics, but Atwood's sexual politics are conveyed in the contrast between the handmaids' suffering and the audience's laughing. The academics are far from being the ideal listeners whose existence might empower Offred to withstand the struggle. It is no

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<sup>25</sup> In her study of the discursive forms in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Staels draws on Kristeva's theories of the semiotic to identify the subversive gaps in discourse.

surprise that they fail to read the messages of resistance and hope in the handmaid's tale. The handmaid's tale is like an encoded message that counters the determined rationalism of both the Republic of Gilead and the academic world.

In her discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Hilde Staels argues that Offred's mode of narrating provides a model of resistance through the individual voice. Drawing upon Kristeva's notion of poetic language as a means by which to transgress and transcend the boundaries of dominant discourse, Staels suggests that Offred's personal discourse becomes a means by which to oppose the discursive and potential laws of Gilead. While Offred's narrative emerges from her mental and physical withdrawal from society, her silenced speech can metaphorically defy reality by enacting subversive, semiotic effects, becoming a language of physical traces. The fact that the suppression of complex discursive forms paradoxically opens up the possibility of subversion is made clear in Offred's tale, which is grounded in 'her inner feelings and bodily sensations from her situation on the periphery of society' (Staels, 1995: 459). According to these arguments through their private forms of discursive resistance, the handmaids are able to resist their imposed identities.

The recurring images of flowers and gardens in the novel could be interpreted as a form of poetic language which underlies the handmaid's protest against the gospel of the theocracy. Offred's description of executed people hanging on the wall demonstrates how poetic discourse can express the unconscious: 'The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting. But on the bag there's blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one' (*HP*, 42).

If simile can be interpreted as one of the figurative modes that represents the unconscious, the process of free association in Offred's narrative demonstrates the way in which the unconscious or poetic language manifests itself. By free association, for example, the blood stain in the white bag covering the corpse is linked with the tulips in the Commander's wife's garden: 'I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden' (*HT*, 43). Offred's self-reflexive similes stem from her commitment to consolidate reality, and yet these observations expose the gaps and crevices in language: 'The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other' (*HT*, 43). Resisting Gilead's constraints on language in which reality and individuals are reduced to coded concepts and reified objects, as Staels argues, Offred's poetic language of the psychic realm overwhelms 'Gilead's transparent, quantifiable products of meaning' (Staels, 1995: 460-61). By opposing Gilead's codified and restrictive language, a poetic language of subversion draws attention to the gaps between object and meaning. In addition to the cryptic references to the tulips discussed above, Offred's use of the image of an egg later in the narrative is another example of poetic language that resists. In part, the egg is connected to female fertility, reified by the Gileadean regime, yet Offred's figuration of the egg seems to exceed the narrow definitions of Gileadean logocentrism: 'The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside. The egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own' (*HT*, 120). Offred's words suggest a concealed, interior energy which escapes definition and official control.

I would argue that these examples of poetic language in *The Handmaid's Tale* challenge fixed textual boundaries. Jessie Givner, for example, has drawn

attention to Atwood's intertextual references to Sylvia Plath's 'Tulips.' Both texts use a similar tropic structure, associating the red of the tulips with blood and human suffering. As Givner observes, in *The Handmaid's Tale* there is no 'actual quotation or immediately recognisable allusion to Plath' (Givner, 1992: 61), but Givner's point is that this similar mode of figuration between two texts can be interpreted as a form of intertextuality, raising an intertextual echo. Further, John Wilson Foster has argued that hysteria is a common thread running through the work of Atwood, Virginia Woolf and Plath, constituting a form of feminist discourse. Atwood has herself discussed Plath's writing in her book *Second Words* (316-19), and while the references to tulips in *The Handmaid's Tale* may not be a conscious echo of Plath's 'Tulips,' it is worth remembering that intertextuality can take place even when an author does not intend it.

It is worth considering Atwood's intertextuality in terms of the importance of the notion of 'influence' to many critical analyses of intertextuality. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein have argued, for example, that intertextuality is dependent upon 'influence' for its existence, asserting that 'old-fashioned' notions of influence are intimately connected with contemporary theories on intertextuality (Clayton and Rothstein, 1991: 4). Clayton and Rothstein connect the notion of influence with conceptions of 'authorial genius' as well as literary tradition, arguing that in its broader definition, influence encompasses 'the notions of context, of allusion, and of tradition' (Clayton and Rothstein, 1991: 6).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's intertextuality sometimes takes the form of direct allusion, such as when Offred characterises herself as 'some fairytale figure in a red cloak' (19). Apart from this direct statement, however, any other parallels

with fairy tales are merely implied. As Kathleen E. B. Manley suggests in her essay 'Atwood's Reconstruction of Folktales,' Atwood dismantles the fairy tale and reconstructs it from the fragments. Rather than representing the original tale, Atwood looks at its sensual subtext. While *The Handmaid's Tale* does make reference to 'Little Red Riding Hood,' Atwood dismantles and then reconstructs the text in a different form which reflects the protagonist's views on reality. The wood in 'Little Red Riding Hood' is transformed into the garden that is ostensibly set aside for private contemplation and the glory of the God, controlled by the grandmother figure, the Commander's fundamentalist Christian wife Serena Joy. Yet, Serena's 'urge to wreath herself in flowers' is tinged with sensuality (*HT*, 91), and Offred herself makes reference to the sexual properties of flowers, referring to the 'genital organs of plants' at one point (*HT*, 91). In noting these connections, Manley explores 'the relationship of character traits and flowers to the subtext of sensuality' (Manley, 1996: 137). Manley's analysis of the gardens in the novel is particularly useful for an understanding of Atwood's intertextuality. Manley points out that as a place of forbidden sensuality, the garden is one of the crucial elements underlying Atwood's exploration of subtexts. The temptation which causes Red Riding Hood to stray off in the woods is seen in Offred herself, whose walking in the garden confronts the dangers of repressed desire. Offred herself seems to associate the garden with a transgressive sensuality:

There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon*. (*HT*, 161)

Here, although the garden is associated with the world of fairy tale, it is not seen

through a child's naïve perspective. Indeed, the intertextual reference to Tennyson's 'Come into the Garden, Maud' reinforces the focus on sexuality. In Tennyson's poem, the innocent, sixteen-year-old Maud is located in a garden imbued with Christian associations, but the girl appears poised to experience some sort of carnal knowledge. Similarly, in the garden in *The Handmaid's Tale* 'the air suffuses with desire,' evoking an atmosphere of incipient female sexuality (*HT*, 162). As Offred metaphorically puts it, 'this liquid ripeness' of the feminine garden is stiflingly seductive (*HT*, 162). I would argue that the description of the garden echoes not only Tennyson's garden poem, but also Sylvia Plath's poem 'The Beekeeper's Daughter,' another text which links a garden environment with female sexuality. As is the case in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Plath's poem connects plant life with eroticism, focusing on a young woman's developing sexuality:

A garden of mouthings. Purple, scarlet-speckled, black  
The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks.  
Their musk encroaches, circle after circle,  
A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in. (Plath, 1981: 118)

As Toni Saldivar argues, in Plath's poem the garden is 'seductively, even oppressively, feminine,' resembling a hot house (Saldivar, 1992: 103).<sup>26</sup> Significantly, this 'hot house' image recurs in Atwood's text, evident following quotation:

Light pours down upon it from the sun, true, but also heat rises, from the flowers themselves, you can feel it: like holding your hand an inch above an arm, a shoulder. It breathes, in the warmth, breathing itself in. To walk through it in these days, of peonies, of pinks and carnations, makes my head swim (*HT*, 161).

Both Plath's and Atwood's texts thus associate gardens with a heady, intoxicating

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<sup>26</sup> Toni Saldivar reads the poem with reference to Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic theories. See Toni Saldivar, *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self*, pp. 103-105.

sensuality. This sense of a rising, overpowering sexuality, I would argue, can be associated with the unconscious, which 'surfaces' in the text, epitomising the process of intertextuality itself. This process is evident in other works by Atwood: as I will demonstrate in Chapter three, for example, Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* contains a reference to peonies, which symbolise the protagonist's unconscious state and are associated with sensuality. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and Plath's poem in particular, sensuality co-exists, paradoxically, with innocence. Just as the speaker in Plath's poem is a young woman who is exposed to the temptation of prohibited sexual desire, so Atwood's Offred is clad in a coat that gestures to the innocence of Little Red Riding Hood. Similarly, Offred's servile relation to the Commander in their 'sort of' love affair, which illustrates the power and hierarchy of the theocracy, is comparable to the speaker's attitude toward the male power that her father represents in Plath's poem:

Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,  
You move among the many-breasted hives,

My heart under your foot, sister of a stone. (Plath, 1981: 118)

In both cases, then, desire is subject to various checks and prohibitions. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, Atwood implies that because sexual desire cannot be brought entirely under conscious control, Gilead is ironically caught up in sexual energies which the regime prohibits other than for reproduction. Jezebel's, the brothel which serves the Gilead regime, stands for uncompromising and overwhelming sexual desire, and the biblical allusion here again connects sexuality with religious prohibition, drawing attention to the semantic complexities created by Atwood's intertextual strategies.

Atwood's fascination with fragments and reconstruction recurs in her novels in general, and is clearly evident in the double layered processes of narrative reconstruction in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As Offred says, 'All I can hope for is a reconstruction; the way love feels is always only approximate' (*HT*, 275). Intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*, I would argue, operates in a manner similar to the workings of the unconscious. As a fragment or subtext, intertexts undermine the stabilised and unified 'main' text. Just as Offred's utterance opens up a gap in official discourse, so these fragmentary intertexts point towards the 'main' text's involvement in the process of reconstruction. In this case, the novel leaves the reader with a narrative that remains semantically and generically indeterminate.

As I have argued, Atwood's enactment of intertextuality through utterance undermines textual fixity. Utterances create gaps and processes of translation, relativising the processes of signification. In *Lady Oracle*, *Bluebeard's Egg* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the boundaries between women, and between humans more generally, begin to collapse through the effects of utterance. Atwood selects modes of narrative whose subsequent interpretations involve intertextual uncertainty, and builds them into processes of intersubjectivity, whether between narrators and characters, or between reader and text. As I have demonstrated, Bakhtinian dialogism is a crucial foundation for Kristeva's theories of intertextuality, which I have in turn applied to a reading of Atwood's intertextuality. Dialogism effects dynamic interpersonal and textual relations, challenging fixed social and generic boundaries, and denying semantic or interpretative fixity in the act of creating and reading the literary text.

## **II. Interrogation of Boundaries: indeterminate subjects in Atwood's work**

In part one of this thesis I discussed the way in which Atwood's work operates across boundaries between art and social reality through the speaking subject and flexible processes of signification. The dynamic power of language and mobile subject positions illuminate Atwood's aesthetic freedom in which life and art intersect. As I stated in the introduction, Atwood has constantly engaged with provisionality or borderline dynamics in her work. In part two of the thesis, I will extend my analysis of Atwood's borderline aesthetics by exploring the notion of the indeterminate subject in her work. I will argue that Atwood's explorations of hysteria, love and melancholia effect a textual fusion of self and other while marking Atwood's ethical concerns such as reconciling oppositions and exploring multiple perspectives.

### **Chapter 3. The subject of hysteria, or the borderline**

This chapter will discuss how an exploration of explicitly hysterical or borderline states can illuminate Atwood's exploration of the dynamics of boundaries. Atwood's female characters in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), *Surfacing* (1972) and *Alias Grace* (1996) embrace otherness inside and outside of themselves in what could be described as an hysterical state. In other words, these characters bear witness to a transgression of the boundary between self and other, revealing resistance to fixed ontological categories. Appropriating Freud's analysis of hysteria which interprets cultural forms in terms of repressed sexuality, Atwood envisions the

possibility of a challenge to rigid conventional notions of the meaning of reality.<sup>27</sup> In this chapter my argument is predicated on the assumption that hysteria or borderline states point towards a difficulty in enforcing boundaries. In addition to outlining how Freud's and Kristeva's analyses of hysteria or borderline states offer a way to foreground stories of the repressed other and help with interpretations of the form of Atwood's narratives, my analysis also explores the way in which Atwood expresses hope for harmony through the exploration of difference.

Freud's case history of Dora (whom Freud uses as an exemplar of his theory on hysteria) reveals that hysteria represents the discourse of the minority psyche. As the site in which the symptoms are manifested, for Freud the hysterical body is identified as a repressed discourse. Hysterical attacks such as headaches, nervous coughs, and muscular rigidity are understood as the encoded language which the psyche uses to manifest itself. The effects produced in the repressed body express the split subject and the fragmentary nature of narrative. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the sick body as an hysterical narrative can be compared with the marginalised subject (figured as 'woman' and Canadian) in Atwood's writing.

With his theory of the unconscious as outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud began to undermine Western concepts of subjectivity or the Cartesian *cogito*. Freud's case histories of hysteria offer a platform for his theories of the unconscious, a potentially disruptive force underlying our subjectivity. Just as the unconscious is revealed by the interpretation of dreams, hysterical symptoms are elucidated through analysis of the patient's dreams. Freud's use of dream-

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<sup>27</sup> Atwood's knowledge of Freudian psychoanalysis is implied in her mention of the unconscious which she links with gaps and fragments in the narratives. In *In Search of Alias Grace* Atwood suggests how the repressed memories which are 'unknowable except for the suspicious smell' control the psyche (12). See page 11-12 in particular.

interpretation in studying hysteria encloses the case histories within a narrative frame which conflates the patient's symptoms with the analyst's interpretation. It was this relationship that gave rise to controversy about his case histories: Freud's case histories, narrated in a hybrid textual form, began to disrupt the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Freud's method of psychoanalysis is double-edged, simultaneously foregrounding the patient's voice while ultimately privileging the therapist's translation of it. Freud locates hysteria within the core structure of personal narratives: the hysteric's body itself speaks for the mind, so the text is composed of the double layered story. The hysteric's narrative is an evasive and fragmentary form of the unconscious and challenges fixed meanings or interpretations.

In her interpretation of Freud's notion of the death drive, which engages with the boundaries of subjectivity, language and the law, Kristeva illustrates how psychoanalysis allows the self to experience 'a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable' (Kristeva, 1991: 182). Her appropriation of the practice of psychoanalysis, which itself is a process of dialogue, is used to explore an ethics that is neither a law nor a doctrine, but a process. What is particularly interesting in Kristeva's interpretation of psychoanalysis is the recognition of otherness or alterity, which traditional ethical frameworks ignore or suppress in the logic of sameness. For Kristeva, 'the foreigner,' who occupies the borderline, allegorises a new form of ethics and represents a means to accommodate otherness or difference. But her insistence on the self's experience of being an other does not serve to eradicate or underestimate the concept of the 'I,' but rather to emphasise the existence of the others as independent

entities. Kristeva points out that it is necessary for the self to think from the other's point of view to go beyond a simple reversal of existing hierarchies. It is only by putting him/herself in the place of the other that the self can truly come to terms with otherness within and around him/herself: 'It is not simply – humanistically - a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his/her place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself' (Kristeva, 1991: 13; original italics). Occupying the borderline thus causes the subject to come to terms with otherness.

### 1. 'I am a word in a foreign language': *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

Margaret Atwood writes in the 'afterword' of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*: 'These poems were generated by a dream. I dreamt I was watching an opera I had written about Susanna Moodie' (*JSM*, 62). It is through this highly suggestive remark, connecting the dream and the process of revision, that reveals Atwood's continuing preoccupation with open-ended textual structures. In a sense, this book charts what she has quested for in the previous two collections of poems, *The Circle Game* and *The Animals in That Country*, and in her subsequent book of criticism *Survival*. The Moodie collection is 'Atwood's most cohesive group of poems' and develops a single character Mrs. Moodie throughout, following her life, including her immigration to Canada from Britain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and her death and spiritual resurrection in a twentieth century Canadian landscape (Rosenberg, 1984: 39). While elaborating on the theme of the experience of English settlers in Canada, the book challenges conventional understandings of genre and historiography. Marking an extension of Atwood's cultural nationalism in relation to the wilderness,

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie* offers a starting point for readings of Atwood's generic experiments with historiography, as the text draws upon the memories of an actual 19<sup>th</sup> century Englishwoman named Susanna Moodie. In the collection Atwood chronicles Moodie's response to the Canadian landscape in particular. Moodie had published her own books, *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1856) in which she accounts for her experience of Canada.<sup>28</sup> Atwood identifies Susanna Moodie's 'paranoid schizophrenia' as an allegory for cultural psychopathology (*JSM*, 62). In 'the personality of Mrs Moodie,' Atwood writes, there are 'obsessions' which are still held by contemporary Canadians (*JSM*, 62). Wilderness is the place where Susanna Moodie undergoes both self-division, and an experience of harmonious natural order. In other words, the wilderness is presented as an ambivalent space, having both positive and negative associations. Susanna Moodie's construction of identity in relation to the wilderness, the threatening otherness, is a figure for Atwood's interpretation of Canadian identity within the context of its immigration history and culture. In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, each entry offers an imaginative reconstruction of this historical figure. I would argue that Atwood's symbolising or representing of Moodie and historical events expresses 'historicality' that is itself 'both a reality and a mystery' (White, 1987: 53). As Hayden White demonstrates in *The Content of the Form*, historical events are expressed through narrative in order to give the content 'coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary' (White, 1987: 24). Emphasising Moodie's psychic dislocation, 'the other voice running like a counterpoint through her work,' Atwood highlights the problematic relationship

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<sup>28</sup> See Faye Hammill (1999), and Patrick Lane (1989). They point out Atwood's use of historical fact and real figures such as Susanna Moodie and Grace Marks.

between 'fact' and its representation (*JSM*, 63). Moodie's psyche operates across boundaries between reality and imagination. As Marlene Kadar demonstrates, Atwood's interest in the gaps in Moodie's writing is manifested in the text's combination of poetry (interpreted as the imaginary) and journals (interpreted as the real). Reading the collection as life writing, Kadar examines the text's inherent contradictions that Atwood creates by linking the real and the reconstructed Susanna Moodie through the two generic forms.

Freud has shown similar contradictions in his case histories by producing his own interpretation of fragmentary hysterical discourses. For Freud, what the unconscious and hysteria have in common is the gaps that make their narratives incomprehensible. In this model of gaps, the purpose of psychoanalysis is none other than to fill the gaps which exist in the psyche. But Freud's efforts to fill the gaps in the hysteric's narrative were unsuccessful as he admitted in the 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria.' I would argue that Freud's conscious act of filling gaps, which he paradoxically performs by acknowledging the fragmentary nature of the text, is comparable to Atwood's dualistic narrative structure which seeks to represent the 'real' Moodie's life, and yet adds its own additional 'contextual' details about her life. I would argue that the contradictions in the two genres of autobiographical journals and poetry used in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* demonstrate Atwood's strategy of transcending binary oppositions. By reconstructing as poetry an historical figure's realist writing, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* operates across boundaries between reality and the imagination. Atwood's use of a split persona creates a dualistic narrative structure which challenges generic distinctions. In 'a modern register,' Atwood transposes the historical figure into 'a

new aesthetic' (Hammill, 1999: 70).

I would suggest here that Moodie's split personality brings fantasy into dialogue with reality. Although *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* does not express psychoanalytic concepts directly, Atwood's description of Moodie's self-division suggests that her writing of the poems was informed by psychoanalysis: Moodie undermines the boundaries between the past and the present, the real and the imaginary by 'the inescapable doubleness of her own vision' (*JSM*, 63). In this respect it is possible to say that *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* epitomises Atwood's artistic strategy of blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, art and life, form and content. As Sherrill Grace has rightly stated in her essay on dualities in Atwood's poetry, 'Moodie is the mythic embodiment of Atwood's vision, at once an emblem of Canada's cultural past, a model for national potential, and a symbol of human physiological, psychological, and linguistic doubleness' (Grace, 1981: 57). As I wish to argue, Moodie's duality, in which she views herself at once as 'an ardent Canadian patriot' and as 'a detached observer, a stranger,' is a metaphor for Atwood's literary poetics which resists fixing meanings or structures in its 'violent duality' (*JSM*, 62). Atwood uses the paranoid, hysterical voice of Moodie, who suffers traumatic experiences, to foreground the process of reinterpreting or reconfiguring historical 'reality.'

As feminist scholars have often noted, the content of the book is overtly feminist, concerning the state of a woman who undergoes self-division by confronting hostile environments.<sup>29</sup> As Kadar argues, Atwood's choice of the journal form is feminist in itself, because journals, with their intimate personal or

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<sup>29</sup> See Blakely (1983) and McCombs (1981).

psychological revelations, are often associated with female protagonists in particular. According to Kadar, 'the journal keepers sense that they are forgetting or hiding something, or that [...] they are not supposed to feel whatever it is they do feel' (Kadar, 1996: 150). Atwood's use of the journal form, which resonates with notions of silenced or suppressed female experience, emphasises the existence of gaps in the text which imply hidden meanings. As I will argue, Atwood includes gender issues in the text, and yet she sets out to extend upon this at the same time by focusing on the duality or dynamics which the text's unfixed form foregrounds. In this sense, 'the other voice' in Moodie's work foregrounds its feminist politics (*JSM*, 63).

Hysteria is an issue taken up in feminist scholarship, due to its association with split personality defects arising from repression. Yet the discourse of hysteria is grounded in duality and enables its own narrative to slip into a new register. Atwood's narrative demonstrates this process, drawing attention to dynamic openings and narrative indeterminacy. While this collection delineates the relationship between the female subject and the case of paranoid schizophrenia, it also point towards a harmony that Atwood is striving for throughout her writing. Specifically, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie's* exploration of female self-division or split subjectivity can be considered in the context of Atwood's 'artistic duality.' By foregrounding Moodie's confrontation with the Canadian wilderness, Atwood illustrates 'the operations of perception, action and expression' that are 'vulnerable to control' (Blakely, 1983: 38). While such vulnerable operations are associated with the repression of the unconscious (as Blakely argues in the context of Atwood's sexual intersubjectivity) or the wilderness, they are part of the larger context in which Atwood locates her critique of fixed boundaries. For Atwood, Moodie's self-

division blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality, creating an open space in which others may surface. My primary aim here is not simply to explore the feminist aspects of Atwood's text, but rather to examine the way in which Atwood envisages the ethical position of reconciliation by choosing a hysterical female persona who experiences otherness within her self. For Atwood, as Grace mentions, 'it is our duplicity that forcibly relates us to our environment' (Grace, 1981: 56). As the title of each journal entry suggests, Atwood invites readers into a personal document that records a life story. Following Moodie's life journey (comparable in certain aspects to Atwood's), readers can experience what life provides for humankind: 'hope, anguish, fear, joy, resignation, and anger' (Wagner-Martin, 1981: 87).

'Journal I' (dated 1832-1849) begins with 'Disembarking at Quebec,' depicting the arrival of an immigrant woman, Moodie, and her subsequent questioning of her own identity. To depict Moodie's psychic alienation, Atwood highlights the disharmony between the outer world and Moodie. While gazing into unfamiliar landscapes, Moodie experiences a loss of identity: 'The moving water will not show me/ my reflection' (*JSM*, 11). Moodie expresses her alienation by describing herself as 'a word/ in a foreign language' (*JSM*, 11). As Colin Nicholson has argued, it is with a 'sense of strangeness in linguistic alienation' that the female alterity of Moodie's double vision is concerned (Nicholson, 1994: 38). Unlike her immigrant companions who seem entranced by the new world, the self-conscious Moodie is driven to sense 'a large darkness' in 'Further Arrivals' (*JSM*, 12). Her negative memories in the cities create 'an irremediable dissociation between herself and everything else' (Kristeva, 1989: 72). Enslaved to self-consciousness, Moodie

continues to engender fearful images in her mind: 'My brain gropes nervous/ tentacles in the night, sends out/ fears hairy as bears' (*JSM*, 13). Foregrounding the contrasting reactions of immigrants - 'The others leap, shout/ Freedom!' - (*JSM*, 11), Atwood suggests a female consciousness that belongs to neither world, and the way she visualises her anxiety is similar to that of a paranoid person: hearing 'malice in the trees' whispers' (*JSM*, 13). Moodie's fear draws attention to the perils of pioneer life, such as the frequent deaths of people caused by wild animals, and other problems posed by a hostile environment. While asserting that 'whether the wilderness is/ real or not/ depends on who lives there' (*JSM*, 13), Atwood suggests that the terror of the wilderness is not confined to Moodie. That is, Atwood's focus on Moodie's uneasiness with her surroundings stems from her strategy of exploring the oppressed feminine consciousness which exists in women across time and space. This implies the inherent fears that have constricted women's perceptions and lives throughout human history. In this sense Moodie's psychic dislocation and sense of identity is presented as something that goes beyond a certain time and place.

'First Neighbours' presents the way in which the subject, a new immigrant Moodie, encounters the stranger within and without herself. As a foreigner in her own words, Moodie experiences a state of orphanhood. By losing her origin or homeland, it is impossible for her to take root: 'I ... knew that England/ was now unreachable, had sunk down into the sea' (*JSM*, 14). Kristeva's discussion of the foreigner provides a useful framework within which to read this poem. For Kristeva, the foreigner's ontological condition demonstrates otherness or alterity within ourselves which points to the possible transference and reconciling of difference. The foreigner's experience of lost origins is allegorically linked with that of the subject

whose entry into language signifies the loss of the mother's body. The foreigner in his/her mobile position or space is left with his/her memories: 'Not belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance' (Kristeva, 1991: 7). In a context in which she cannot represent herself in her mother tongue, Moodie in 'First Neighbours' becomes 'a minor invalid' (*JSM*, 14). Even she expects herself to make 'inept remarks,/ futile and spastic gestures' (*JSM*, 14), projecting clearly Freud's linkage of hysteria and linguistic disturbance. One way to escape this psychic numbness is to recover her self through language: 'I negotiated the drizzle/ of strange meaning' (*JSM*, 14). Moodie's linguistic incapacity brings her life to the edge. In this way Atwood once again elaborates the relation between the subject and language: 'where my damaged/ knowing of the language means/ prediction is forever impossible' (*JSM*, 15). Moodie's failure to communicate through language is reflected in the threatening image of surrounding nature. Unable to articulate the repressed affect, her anxiety engenders an uncanny or ghost-like image: 'while I was drawing/ birds, a malignant face/ flickered over my shoulder' (*JSM*, 15). Moodie's reflections on this alien landscape could be interpreted in terms of the self's experience of the abject that for Kristeva indicates the emergence of alterity in crisis. The self experiences his/her own death at the borderline; paradoxically, 'the death that "I" am' evokes horror but at the same time brings about a sensation of unification' (Kristeva, 1982: 25). As Moodie declares, 'Resolve: to be both tentative and hard' (*JSM*, 15), and this seems to point towards the potential of the abject, which, through its ambiguity, serves to efface borders, disturbing categories of identity, system and order (Kristeva, 1982: 14).

In the psychic unrest caused by the loss of linguistic control, Moodie perceives that only illusion can sustain the settlers' life in the wilderness. But she knows that this illusion can be shattered at any time if they 'open their eyes even for a moment/ to these trees, to this particular sun' (*JSM*, 17). Moodie sees 'the Planters' moving 'between the jagged edge/ of the forest and the jagged river' (*JSM*, 16) and senses potential dangers hidden beneath the surface. In contrast, the male planters do not notice any dangers or vulnerabilities in this wilderness. Relying on their illusions, male settlers appear to control space and time: 'They deny the ground they stand on, // pretend this dirt is the future' (*JSM*, 16). The planters here are the extension of male figures in Atwood's earlier poems, whose insistence on a man-made order illustrates an incapacity to acknowledge difference or plurality. While men try to impose their power on the wilderness, Moodie feels threatened by the forest-scape. Beset by imagined or real threats, Moodie is driven toward schizophrenia. But her double vision, or ability to see beyond the surface of things, has the potential to reveal a 'true' order of life. Moodie's perception involves abjection that causes at once the death and the resurrection of the self.

Kristeva's concept of the abject refers to the presence of the Other in the formation of the 'I.' According to her, the Other is a necessary prerequisite for the appearance of the 'I': it is through the Other that the 'I' experiences a state of abjection and becomes the other through the death of his/her ego. Because the 'I' is constituted by the Other who precedes and possesses him/her, it is the Other who governs and conditions the position of the 'I,' and is inherent within the 'I' (Kristeva, 1982: 10). This is why the 'I' is unstable, always in process and it is this which allows for the possibility of difference. Atwood uses this type of psychic

phenomenon as the basis of her ethical project in which the self can be reconciled with others.

'The Wereman' takes this process into another dimension, describing an experience of female paranoia or self-division in which Moodie transforms her husband and herself into animals. In the first stanza, Moodie sees her husband entering the forest through the field, 'a concept/ defined against a blank' (*JSM*, 19). Moodie's fantasy draws attention to a darkness which represents the chaotic world of the unconscious. Atwood draws attention to Moodie's paranoia or neurosis through syntactic ambiguity, using unclear objects or establishing loose connections between subject and verb: 'what does he change into/ what other shape/ blends with the under-/ growth, wavers across the pools/ is camouflaged from the listening/ swamp animals' (*JSM*, 19). As we can see, Moodie cannot perceive the actual object that her husband changes into. Her language, displaying a disturbing mixture of seeing and listening, illuminates such vulnerable perception. Consumed by her own paranoid logic, Moodie wants to know the truth hiding beyond surface appearances. However, the phrase that conveys Moodie's will to find truth beyond the masks increases in ambiguity with the absence of any clear object in the sentence: 'I will find returning/ with him hiding behind it' (*JSM*, 19). What Atwood highlights here is Moodie's self-division, a kind of hysterical state or split conscious mind which Breuer and Freud have described as 'the consummation of hysteria' (Breuer and Freud, 249). It is Moodie's split ego that generates the poem's strangeness. The forest into which the divided self walks along with her husband can be interpreted, in Kristevan terms, as the 'hiatus, blank, or spacing that constitutes death for the unconscious' (Kristeva, 1989: 26). And the disturbed syntax, particularly distinctive in stanzas 2 and 3, as I

quoted above, characterises 'depressed speech,' which is preceded by a fractured consciousness.

In subsequent stanzas, Atwood concentrates on the hysteric's fantasy through imagery of transforming eyes, which is central to the poem's ambiguity and is another example of Atwood's interest in artistic duality. The opening of the poem draws attention to Moodie's uncertain vision and perception. Moodie's distorted perception and vision suggest a feminist reading of seeing, tinged with fantasy. Critics often associate the act of seeing with the assertion of phallic power. In Atwood's poem the eyes evoke 'I,' selfhood, and yet as Blakely argues, Moodie's transformation into animal forms through her husband's gaze indicates 'a feminist paradigm of oppression and transformation' (Blakely, 1983: 38). As Moodie contends, 'He may change me also/ with the fox eye, the owl/ eye, the eightfold/ eye of the spider' (*JSM*, 19). 'Constituted by being watched,' this female identity is brought into conflicting relations with nature, as Timothy Melley argues (Melley, 1996: 77).<sup>30</sup>

In her research on cinema, Laura Mulvey has similarly explored how ways of seeing consolidate sexual difference. Asserting that the cinema reflects the way in which the dominant order of patriarchy structures the unconscious, Mulvey engages with the relation between female subjectivity and the patriarchal culture (Mulvey, 1997: 439). Just as the scopophilic's controlling gaze transforms other people into 'objectified others,' it is the fantasy of the male gaze that determines the form of the

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<sup>30</sup> Timothy Melley offers an illuminating account of the relation between gender and paranoia in Atwood's novels. As he argues, Atwood's female protagonists' paranoia is intricately linked to a culture that imposes heterosexuality as the norm. Unlike Freud's interpretation of paranoia in which he dismisses woman's claims of threats as the products of fantasy, Melley argues that Atwood's novels locate anxieties in institutions such as marriage.

female figure in the cinema (Mulvey, 1997: 440).<sup>31</sup> In Atwood's text, this imagery of the gazing, objectifying eye is further developed in 'Paths and Thingscape,' when Moodie faces primeval forests: 'I am watched like an invader/ who knows hostility but/ not where' (*JSM*, 21). As discussed earlier, Atwood has suggested that 'landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind' (*Survival*, 49). I would argue that in Atwood's text, a hostile nature projects Moodie's anxious inner world just as the neurotic patient develops symptoms that trace back to the unresolved conflicts of the unconscious.

In a similar context, 'Looking in a Mirror' highlights Moodie's loss of identity caused by the unresolved conflicts of wilderness. What Moodie finally sees in the mirror, after seven years of living in the wilderness, are fragments of her self. With the disintegration of her self Moodie loses the function of speaking. In some distress, her mouth cannot articulate what she wants to say, but can only produce cracking sounds 'like a rock in fire' (*JSM*, 25). Atwood's oral imagery here illustrates the suffering which the self undergoes both physically and linguistically. This is analogous to the symptoms of hysteria that Breuer and Freud noted in their own research, where traumatic events or deeds are equated with particular words.<sup>32</sup> The psyche is projected into the pain of the body and is manifested in accompanying linguistic disorders. Freud's elaboration of hysteria interprets 'the symptom as a form of symbolisation, the expression on the body of repressed psychological experiences'

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<sup>31</sup> Mulvey's assumption of a heterosexual male gazer is grounded in psychoanalytic theory, and has created controversy in relation to theories of representation. Critics like Suzanne Moore and Jackie Stacey insist that the presence of a female erotic gaze or lesbian desire can undermine such descriptions of an active masculinity or a passive femininity. For discussions of the problem of psychoanalytic criticism that privileges gender distinction and its representation in popular culture, see *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (1988), ed. Gamman, Lorraine and Margaret Marshment.

<sup>32</sup> In exploring hysteria based on recollection or repressed affect, they link bodily symptoms with particular words. In their belief that language stands for action, they confirm psychoanalysis as the 'talking cure.' Breuer firstly initiated this technique during the treatment of his patient 'Anna O.'

(Parkin-Gounelas, 2001: 135). Implying the play between the repressed psyche, body, and language, Atwood ends her poem with an expression of incomprehension: 'What is this' (*JSM*, 25); and the subsequent parenthetical utterance signals the repression of the traumatic memories: '(you find only/ the shape you already are/ but what/ if you have forgotten that/ or discover you/ have never known)' (*JSM*, 25). Nonetheless, it is a collapse of selfhood that allows Moodie to transform herself into other forms of life. Her female vulnerability enables such a bodily transformation. As 'Departure from the Bush' reveals, in Moodie's transformed perception, wilderness, or the other, is no longer seen as a threat: 'I, who had been erased/ by fire, was crept in/ upon by green/ (how lucid a season)' (*JSM*, 26).

'Journal II' (dated 1840-1871), which covers Susanna Moodie's city life, begins with 'Death of a Young Son by Drowning.' Using the water imagery that recurs in her writing, Atwood addresses a duality that is evident in the hysteric's uncertainty about her ego boundary. From the first stanza, the river which devours Moodie's son is portrayed as a symbol of the womb, 'the dangerous river of his own birth' (*JSM*, 30). Thus death implies a return to the place where life is conceived, raising the possibility of rebirth: it is a place 'we have all been to and some remember' (*JSM*, 30). In this context, death is another form of life and the pain of the event is alleviated. This vision transcends binary oppositions. However, Moodie's denial of her son's death results in melancholia. Through Moodie's seeming composure in depicting the recovery of her son's dead body, Atwood presents a depressed person's ambivalence toward the figure of loss. In spite of her apparent intellectual acceptance of this loss, Moodie cannot escape from the void inside herself. Moodie embraces her son's death as her own and identifies with him.

Similarly, in 'The Deaths of the Other Children,' which suggests the demise of several more of Moodie's children, Moodie who buried her child's body in the land 'like a flag' (*JSM*, 31), watches her own body's disintegration: 'The body dies/ little by little/ the body buries itself' (*JSM*, 41). Obsessed by her children's deaths, Moodie exhibits symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, believing that their bodies are alive in blackberries, thistles, wind and soil. In a deep depression, Moodie questions the value of her property and of her self that she has struggled to maintain: 'Did I spend all those years/ building up this edifice/ my composite/ self, this crumbling hovel?' (*JSM*, 41). According to her perception, her own fragmented arms, eyes and words, like her 'disintegrated children,' hover wherever she goes. Her perplexed syntax in which she cannot identify the real substances that catch at her heels 'with their fingers'- it is not clear whether it is '[her] disintegrated children' or 'the spreading briars'- reflects her liminal state of mind.

I would suggest that the poems in 'Journal II' describe Moodie as an hysteric tyrannised by her own reminiscences. The memories of her hard settlement days underlie the symptoms. The past life highlights her immigrant state in which she experiences a crisis of identity. Moodie's recall of the past, it could be argued, corresponds to 'the hallucinatory reproduction of a memory' that causes actual hysteria (Breuer and Freud, 13). According to Freud, repressed or forgotten memories of the past life can appear in a patient's hallucinations and incoherent utterances.<sup>33</sup> I would argue that Moodie's narrative emerges as an example of

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<sup>33</sup> Freud addresses how the illness disappears through the restoration of the missing words. In other words, by releasing repressed drives into the Symbolic or language, the patient can be cured. As Breuer and Freud put it, the therapeutic procedure is to enable the patient to release the repressed affect: *It brings to an end the operative force of the idea which was not abreacted in the first instance, by allowing its strangulated affect to find a way out through speech; and it subjects it to associative correction by introducing it into normal consciousness* (Breuer and Freud, 17; original italics).

hysteria, the repressed affect that has not been discharged and yet remains in the psyche. These poems are similar to those in Atwood's previous collections, in which psychic landscapes and pioneer imagery represent borderline female or Canadian identities. In the *Journals*, Atwood therefore demonstrates how Moodie's immigrant identity and her conflicting sense of time causes her hysteria or borderline status. The disturbed memories cut off Moodie from her present life, as the past haunts the present, and leads to neurotic illness. In a hypnotic state, Moodie sees immigrants invading her relatively stabilised city life: 'I see them coming/ up from the hold smelling of vomit,/ infested, emaciated, their skins grey with travel' (*JSM*, 32). Finding herself among the crowd of immigrants, she begins to lose her identity again. This loss of identity can be interpreted in terms of 'the foreigner' whom Kristeva describes as the abject. As stated earlier in this chapter, Kristeva argues that the moment when one encounters the foreigner, whose presence threatens his/her identity, allegorises the state of the abject in which the self experiences the breakdown of the ego-boundary. Just as the abject places the self 'on the edge of non-existence and hallucination, and of a reality,' the foreigner unsettles the boundaries between selves, causing a crisis in identity (Kristeva, 1982: 2). Kristeva argues that the return of the repressed (the foreigner) renders boundaries indeterminate:

Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel "lost," "indistinct," "hazy." (Kristeva, 1991: 187)

These arguments are useful to an interpretation of Atwood's text. Separated from their own countries, their own mother tongues, 'the immigrants' are foreigners

wherever they settle. Feeling rootless, 'day and night riding across an ocean of unknown/ land to an unknown land' (*JSM*, 33), they become strangers to themselves. Through these figures, Atwood illustrates Canada's borderline identity in relation to its immigrant history. In the afterword to the collection, Atwood explicitly connects Moodie's schizophrenic state with Canadian cultural identity: 'we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here' (*JSM*, 62). It is because the process of forgetting the immigrants means forgetting herself that Moodie cannot escape her immigrant status. Reflecting the way in which an inevitable gap is created in the subject, Atwood's immigrants challenge notions of fixed subjectivity or identity. As Kristeva asserts, 'Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*' (Kristeva, 1991: 13; original italics). Kristeva's notion of the foreigner helps to explain the crisis of identity that Atwood's Moodie faces. When subjects confront the foreigner within themselves, they undermine the boundaries between them. Foreigners are heterogeneous elements which constitute the possibility of what Kristeva calls the permutable boundary, itself comparable to the realm of the wilderness as perceived by Moodie in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. In 'The Immigrants,' which metaphorically represents Moodie's identity as a map which shows the movement of immigrants, Atwood undermines narcissistic notions of identity which are formed through the exclusion of others. For Moodie, identity is an ongoing process: 'my mind is a wide pink map/ across which move year after year/ arrows and dotted lines, further and further' (*JSM*, 33).

Outwardly stable, Moodie's city life shows its vulnerability by surrendering to nightmarish images of wilderness which govern her psychic world. The Canadian landscape is still a threatening presence in her dreams. In 'Dream 1: the Bush

Garden' she perceives soil as human blood: 'anything planted here/ would come up blood' (*JSM*, 34). Repugnant or abject forms of plants display her sense of fear: 'the potatoes curled/ like pale grubs ... the beets/ pulsing like slow amphibian hearts' (*JSM*, 34). These images are redolent of Freud's theories on the way in which the liberated libido manifests itself in hysterics.<sup>34</sup> Haunted by images of wetness and redness, which invoke mortality, Moodie reveals a fear of death in the wilderness. Her second dream, 'Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter,' focuses on a scar-throated hunter named Brian who attempted suicide by cutting his throat. Brian's feeling of metamorphosing into the animals he aims to kill illustrates the moment when the self encounters his or her own death: 'I feel/ my skin grow fur/ my head heavy with antlers ... I die more often than many' (*JSM*, 36). But here Brian's suicide attempt, and his account of how he felt at the moment of shooting, are revealed as the product of Moodie's unconscious: Brian 'never said anything' (*JSM*, 36). By reconstructing Brian's demise in her dream text, Moodie projects a vision of her own terrifying death. Moodie's strategy of interposing herself within the experiences of the dead man is arguably analogous to Freud's interpretation of the hysteria of patients, where psychoanalyst fills the gaps in the patient's narrative.

In 'Dream 3: Night Bear Which Frightened Cattle,' Moodie cannot separate reality from a nightmare which stupefies her senses. Recalling a terrifying episode in which an approaching bear outside threatens her cabin 'with lanterns,' Moodie develops a liminal psychic state and cannot separate the real from fantasy. Moodie

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<sup>34</sup> As Williams notes, Freud classifies hysteria into two forms according to how the liberated libido manifests itself in patients. While concentrating his attention on 'conversion hysteria,' which exemplifies hysteria as 'a form of symbolic system,' Freud refers to 'anxiety hysteria' (Williams, 5). Unlike conversion hysteria in which the libido is converted into a physical symptom, anxiety hysteria takes the form of a phobia in which the libido, freed from repression, remains as anxiety without conversion (Williams, 4, 5fn).

knows that she is dreaming and that what she sees is not tangible, not real: 'I lean with my feet grown intangible/ because I am not there' (*JSM*, 38). Even she claims that the bear, and the fear of death, is just a nightmare. But as fear increases, her consciousness continues to inhabit the space between the real and the unreal. The fear of death continuously closes in on her world until finally: 'it absorbs all terror' (*JSM*, 39). For Moodie, nightmarish dreams and visions represent hysterical self-division through the reactivation of repressed memories: 'where forgotten birds/ tremble through memory' (*JSM*, 38).

In 'The Double Voice' Moodie's paranoid schizophrenia culminates when two voices claim her, depicting two contradictory worlds. With the aid of her bleary eyes, Moodie's emotional side follows the changing spectacle of a Canadian landscape shaped by the cycle of the seasons. On the other hand, the voice of knowledge portrays a harsh reality in which men have to labour in order to survive. In the articulation of the phrase; 'Pigs are pigs/ but must be eaten' and the image of 'a dead dog/ jubilant with maggots' (*JSM*, 42), this voice awakens in the self the recognition that killing is necessary for the maintenance of life. Activating two voices in a single self, Atwood enacts a double vision, Moodie's double perspective on Canadian nature, which points to a duality in the Canadian psyche. Atwood seems to imply that neither of the two voices can convey a holistic view of life. Her exploration of doubleness here resists such strict dichotomies as self/other, culture/nature and feminine/masculine that Western metaphysics has mapped onto the mind. As Grace suggests, through the image of the 'jubilant' dead dog, decaying in a sweet-pea garden surrounded by maggots, Atwood implies a 'creative harmony with the world' (Grace, 1981: 56).

'Journal III' (dated 1871-1969) records Susanna Moodie's old age, death, and spiritual resurrection in a twentieth century Canadian landscape. Here Moodie is figured as 'both author and character, egoist and victim' (McCombs, 'Atwood's Haunted,' 43). The journal opens with Moodie's reminiscences about her career as an artist: 'I wrote/ verses ... which I exchanged for potatoes; ... I painted butterflies ... for English parlours// and my children (miraculous)/ wore shoes' (*JSM*, 47). However, Moodie concludes that now 'there is no use for art' (*JSM*, 47). Atwood encapsulates Moodie's failure to define herself as a woman artist through the image of a moon in 'Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age.' Likened to the moon, which needs the sun's light to become visible, Moodie embodies a female sense of artistic passivity or marginalisation: 'reflecting the sun/ in shadows from the pocked ravines' (*JSM*, 48). Drawing attention to her aged appearance, as Wineapple notes, Moodie discloses a 'self-deprecating irony and cool detachment' that reflect her suppressed anger about her situation (220). Despite her recognition that she changes and has changed, Moodie cannot avoid a sense of loss: 'I am being/ eaten away by light' (*JSM*, 48). In 'Wish: Metamorphosis to Heraldic Emblem,' Moodie wishes for a transformation of her body into an artefact. The image of the aged Moodie expresses her anxiety about aging and death through imagery of the wilderness: 'On my skin the wrinkles branch/ out, overlapping like hair or feathers' (*JSM*, 49). Blakely argues that Moodie allows 'her vulnerability to become a means of transformation' (45). She attempts to transcend her fears of death through her art, but finds it difficult to come to terms with death. Her aspirations are embodied in the form of an emerging phoenix-like creature: 'new formed plumage/ uncorroded/ gold and/ fiery green ... my/ opal/ no/ eyes glowing' (*JSM*, 49).

Moodie's old, decrepit self comes back to the modern city of Toronto in 'Visit to Toronto, With Companions.' The doubled and divided self explored here corresponds with the symptoms of self-division discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to the wilderness. Particularly significant in this story is the presence of 'the lunatic asylum' (*JSM*, 50). Approaching death, Moodie visits the asylum and the cryptic remark; 'the air/ was about to tell me/ all kinds of answers' suggest an insanity that undermines binary systems (*JSM*, 51). It is instructive to see that Moodie doesn't want to leave this place, although she feels alienated and out of touch with the landscape: 'They [companions] wanted me to go out/ to where there were streets and/ the Toronto harbour/ I shook my head' (*JSM*, 51). In 'Thoughts from Underground,' the now dead Moodie watches the transformation of the wilderness into a modernised city, and her attitude towards this change is also ambivalent. Moodie reflects on the harsh environment which caused the duality in her mind and reveals how her lived experience constituted the doubleness as a necessary strategy for survival: 'I said I love it/ and my mind saw double ... I fought. I constructed/ desperate paragraphs of praise, everyone/ ought to love it' (*JSM*, 55). 'A Bus Along St Clair: December,' the last poem of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, describes the resurrection of this nineteenth-century Moodie in the urbanised landscape. Moodie 'refuses to be ploughed under completely' (*JSM*, 64): 'It would take more than that to banish/ me: this is my kingdom still' (*JSM*, 60). As Atwood comments, 'Susanna Moodie has finally turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated' (*JSM*, 64). She herself, finally, becomes the persistent force of the wilderness: 'Turn, look down:/ there is no city;/ this is the center of a forest// your place is empty' (*JSM*, 61).

In her contention that Moodie has lived in 'border country,' Atwood inscribes Moodie with a dual voice and borderline characteristics. Reconstructing a woman whose split ego manifests love and hate for her surroundings, Atwood suggests a possibility for harmonising difference. Moodie's dual voice raises the possibility of a world beyond binary systems. As I have demonstrated, this process is analogous to the way in which the dynamic discourse of hysteria opens up through psychoanalysis. The discourse of hysteria ironically articulates the repressed story, and it is through this hopeful contradiction that Atwood crystallises the double vision that embraces opposing positions.

## **2. 'True vision; after the failure of logic': hysteria and the ghost in *Surfacing***

*Surfacing* is a novel about a traumatised female narrator's journey back to northern Quebec, her childhood home, in order to investigate her father's disappearance. The narrator travels with her companion, Joe, and two other friends (David and Anna) who are a married couple. The narrator's mother has already died some time before, and the narrator returns to the Quebec bush of her childhood to search for her father. The narrator has detached and estranged herself from her father emotionally as well as geographically. Her father has lived for many years in his cabin on an island within the bush. The narrator's detached, latent hostility toward her parents ultimately lies in her inability to accept their mortality, a state of mind which is reinforced by her own traumatic experience of having an abortion. The title

‘Surfacing’ therefore points towards the emergence of repressed traumatic memories.

As Atwood herself remarked in an interview, one of the most important figures in *Surfacing* is the ghost. She argues that ‘the interesting thing in that book is the ghost in it, and that’s what I like. And the other stuff is there, it’s quite true, but it is a condition’ (Atwood cited in Gibson, 1973: 29). Despite Atwood’s claim that the novel is a ghost story, *Surfacing* has received as many diverse interpretations and reviews as any of her other books. Whether the divergent readings stem from the ‘other stuff’ in the novel or not, it is usually acknowledged that *Surfacing* involves Atwood’s resistance to fixed meaning and form. One element that supports this view is the novel’s fragmentary form and disconnected narrative. Further, as Roberta Rubenstein has astutely observed, *Surfacing* synthesises the motifs that have dominated Atwood’s writing since her early poetry. These motifs include ‘the elusiveness and variety of language in its several senses; [and] the continuum between human and animal’ (Rubenstein, 1976: 387), and once again I would argue that these are central to Atwood’s textual open-endedness, embodied in the hysterical female narrator in *Surfacing*.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood maintains semiotic indeterminacy in the image of the ghost, which cannot be interpreted in terms of a single meaning or form. Although I am not reading the novel as a ghost story *per se*, I would argue that the ghost is a metaphorical figure which effectively illustrates Atwood’s interest in boundaries or thresholds. In *Surfacing* the ghost does not belong exclusively to either the world of life or death, but at the same time it resides in both worlds by hovering in the narrator’s psychic world of death-in-life: ‘[The ghost] can’t be anywhere that’s

marked out, enclosed ..., they are against borders' (*Surfacing*, 174).<sup>35</sup> Just as the indefinable ghost evokes an atmosphere of ambiguity in the novel, the narrator's repressed memories of a traumatic event undermine the certainties of her narrative itself. According to Freud, when a subject suffers from hysteria, his/her memory and its affect fade or disappear as a result of various factors. In the sense that the patient's memory itself varies with his/her reaction to the trauma, the hysteric's narrative is already subject to repression, and gaps are therefore inevitable. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's memories are unreliable and Atwood thus registers a certain openness or indeterminacy in the narrative.

In his analysis of Atwood's use of ambiguity, Philip Stratford has discussed the relationship between the narrator's capability of restoring memories, and her mastery of her situation. Here he argues that the detail of the narrative is fragmented and 'half-imagined, half-recalled' due to the narrator's intermingling of memories and her present state of mind (Stratford, 1983: 121). Without an accurate recall of the past, mastering the present situation is not possible and her narrative itself raises the important question of the role of 'truth' in repressed forms of representation. What is involved here is the potential for new versions of the story which may address different interpretations of life experience. For Eli Mandel, the ghosts represent such negative effects as 'repressed contents of the imagination,' or 'social rigidity' (Mandel, 1983: 60). Mandel argues that the ghost story, starting from 'what Foster calls the minority psyche,' projects individual or social dilemmas: 'the cultivation of barely controlled hysteria' or 'the psychic individual at sea in a materialist society' (60). Of course, the ghost can hardly be interpreted as a hopeful sign of harmony. I

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<sup>35</sup> Page references will be to the Virago (1979) edition.

agree that Atwood's ghost story is marked by repression or oppression, as in other ghost stories. Yet I suggest that Mandel has overlooked the final point that Atwood makes in order to challenge conventional understandings of the ghost story.

Here I will argue that Atwood draws on the notion of hysteria in presenting the female narrator's ability to see beyond fixed boundaries between different entities.<sup>36</sup> While the hysterical narrative can be considered a version of a ghost story underpinned by repression, it is through the narrator's hysterical state that her transcending vision ('true vision; after the failure of logic') emerges (*Surfacing*, 139). Through this process, Atwood seeks to reconcile oppositions that logic cannot explain.<sup>37</sup> In Freud's analysis of hysteria, hysterics are tyrannised by traumatic memories. In projecting the repressed memories of traumatic experiences onto the body, hysterics are trapped in the realm of fantasy.<sup>38</sup> While it is true that actual bodily illness arises from the patients' conflation of fantasy and reality, a material model for reconciling oppositions can be seen in the way in which the hysterics blur fixed boundaries between truth and fiction. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's difficulty in distinguishing the real and the fictional, and her (un)conscious manipulation of memories, render her position comparable to that of the hysteric. Living with a reconstructed past, the narrator is dislocated by both the present and the past. My emphasis on Atwood's use of the suppressed psyche in the novel is to show the way in which she explores repressed 'other' stories that are under the surface of the

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<sup>36</sup> Reading the sign of hope that is evident in the narrator's spiritual rebirth, critics such as Josie Campbell, Roberta Rubenstein and James Williams have argued that Atwood presents a vision of integration which goes beyond conflicting oppositions.

<sup>37</sup> In her analysis of H.D.'s 'Helen in Egypt,' Susan Edmunds has investigated the transformative potential of hysteria, discussing the poet's inverse handling of Freud's analysis of hysteria. Looking at the symptoms of hysteria which H.D. insightfully links to the manifestations of the unconscious in the poem, Edmunds suggests the potential of hysteria to effect reconciliation of opposing forces.

<sup>38</sup> Arguing that fantasy is related to the unconscious and hysteria, Freud writes: 'there are no indications of reality in the unconscious, so that [the hysteric] cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect' (qtd. in Williams, 1995: 12).

narrative. Her model of the narrative of hysteria, I would argue, interrogates fixed social realities and binary oppositions.

In the opening line of *Surfacing*, Atwood's unnamed female narrator says of her journey to her childhood homeland: 'I can't believe I'm on this road again' (*Surfacing*, 1). The narrator's returning journey, which is motivated by her father's disappearance, begins with her implicit anxiety and it sets up the central plot of the novel. *Surfacing* can be seen as the story of a Canadian woman's quest to find her identity and to come to terms with her present and past life, as well as her relationship to her parents. As with the journey motif in her poetry which I examined in the previous chapter, in *Surfacing* Atwood articulates a narrative journey by staging the narrator's quest for her missing father. As Coral Ann Howells points out, the narrator's journey into the Quebec bush can be interpreted as an 'individual quest for spiritual survival' which refigures the journeys of explorers and pioneers within a contemporary Canadian context (Howells, 2005: 41). As we shall see, the narrator finds a way to heal her psychic dislocation in the wilderness. Ultimately the journey is linked to her search for her own selfhood. However, the narrator's unwillingness to return to the bush is made clear at the outset of the novel. Insofar as the object of the journey is to find her father, the narrator's ambiguous attitude toward the journey suggests that she is not in any normal state of mind. This is soon manifested in her extreme emotional calmness when she confronts the landscape of her former home town. Her state can be compared to the psychic numbness that is found in the melancholic. Atwood figures the narrator's psychic disorder in language which suggests self-division and contradiction: "That's where the rockets are," I say. *Were.*

I don't correct it' (*Surfacing*, 3). This utterance can be interpreted in terms of the 'depressed speech' that Kristeva posits as a consequence of split subjectivity (Kristeva, 1989: 52). As the narrator is trapped in the past by her traumatic experiences of abortion and her mother's death, she cannot adapt herself to changes in reality. Once again, it is in figures of conflicting time and place that Atwood locates the narrator's mental illness. Atwood's emphasis is on 'the present in abeyance,' as Kristeva expresses it, as she maps out the link between the narrator's memories and her psychological symptoms. Significantly, the narrator targets her father as the object of blame: 'Nothing is the same, I don't know the way any more ... why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it' (*Surfacing*, 6). It is through blame that the melancholic reveals his/her hatred against the lost loved object, as Freud and Klein have noted in their analysis of mourning and melancholia.<sup>39</sup> By denying her parents' ageing and death, the narrator draws attention to the symptom of her distress: 'They [parents] have no right to get old. I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember, they stay unchanged' (*Surfacing*, 3). Through the narrator's musings, Atwood points towards the spiritual numbness of the melancholic, suggesting a difficulty in distinguishing between life and death.

In her later novel, *Cat's Eye*, Atwood focuses in detail on the condition of melancholia in which the narrator cannot free herself from trauma and loss. Similarly, the narrator of *Surfacing* frequently reveals how the melancholic state develops into the symptoms of hysteria. Just as the melancholic is characterised by the absence of affection, the strangeness that the narrator of *Surfacing* feels towards the territory she

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<sup>39</sup> I will explore mourning and melancholia in Atwood's works in more detail in Chapter 5.

is 'returning to' highlights her empirical detachment from the past and the community. Not surprisingly, nothing is familiar to the narrator, who is mentally fragmented and alienated. After arriving at her home town, she says: 'Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory. My throat constricts, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing' (*Surfacing*, 5). This sense of estrangement the narrator discloses can be interpreted in part in terms of Atwood's exploration of Canadianness in relation to the wilderness. Initially nature is presented in negative terms; the disappearance and death of the narrator's father is linked with the threatening wilderness, the Quebec bush. It is in the forest that the narrator herself goes insane. While the narrator's journey into nature produces 'a positive alteration of self,' nature also evokes 'a violent duality' within her, pointing towards the cultural schizophrenia of the Canadian settler subject (Rao, 1993: 7).<sup>40</sup>

The narrator's apparently emotionless state is reflected in the description of her uneasiness with the geography and the language of the community. An episode involving a marriage proposal (Joe, her present lover, proposes but she declines), expresses her state of alienation directly: 'I didn't feel awful; I realised I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time. Perhaps I'd been like that all my life' (*Surfacing*, 99). But ironically, as she admits, the lack of affect itself is something that her perception can never fathom: 'if that was true I wouldn't have noticed the absence' (99). In a state of psychic numbness, she feels only the presence of death: 'I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react,

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<sup>40</sup> Although there is no space to explore this issue in detail here, it could be argued that the representation of Americans in the novel illustrates another element of Atwood's Canadian cultural nationalism. 'As colonizers, agents of destruction,' in *Surfacing*, Americans are cast in a stereotypical model of 'the Canadian/American and the victim/victor oppositions' (Rao, 8).

relate ... But the only thing there was the fear that I wasn't alive' (105). Nonetheless, it is through her alienated and fragmented mentality that she can recognise the fragility of other human beings: 'David is like me, I thought, we are the ones that don't know how to love, there is something essential missing in us, we were born that way' (131). Insofar as the narrator is in a state of numbness, it is difficult to determine to what degree this recognition is the product of accurate perception. But it appears quite positive, as the narrator demonstrates an ability to empathise with others. Likewise, it is uncertain whether this understanding allows the narrator to develop a meaningful relationship toward the world in the last scene of the novel, where the narrator allows Joe to have intercourse with her after her father's body was discovered: 'He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake' (155-56). The narrator's reaction to the discovery of her father's body reaffirms her melancholic numbness, yet it is here that something like a unifying vision is conceived: 'I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive' (*Surfacing*, 153). I would suggest that this observation represents Atwood's vision of the possibility of reconciliation with the world.

As discussed earlier, the motif of the ghost in *Surfacing* represents another means by which Atwood seeks to reconcile oppositions. The amorphousness and elusiveness of the ghost point towards Atwood's enduring interest in liminal states, and it is because the ghost is envisioned in the narrator's numbness that it appears only in loose and fragmentary forms. In this respect, Atwood's ghost story posits a kind of ideal third space in which binary oppositions between victims or killers, for example, dissolve. As discussed earlier, the narrator's psychic numbness can be

interpreted in terms of the repressed unconscious, and this fact allows for a reading of trauma in which the ghost can be interpreted as a product of the narrator's split or fragmented self, or as an element buried in her subconscious. The narrator seems to interpret the ghost in these terms, describing a moment in which she perceives a trace of these ghostly entities: 'My breath quickens, it was true, I saw it. But the prints are too small, they have toes; ... I place my feet in them and find that they are my own' (*Surfacing*, 181). This observation posits the ghosts as an element of her own unconscious or repressed psyche. Aware of her own self-division, the narrator addresses the missing parts of herself, appearing to evoke the realm of the unconscious in which the repressed self registers lack or loss in herself: 'The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal' (*Surfacing*, 102). In her sense of deprivation the narrator argues: 'I was nothing but a head or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb' (102). Atwood herself has equated the ghost with the unconscious: 'the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off' (Atwood cited in Gibson, 29). The narrator in *Surfacing* uses similar language to describe her own repressions and self-divisions: 'A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget' (*Surfacing*, 42).

As is acknowledged in psychoanalysis, although the suppressed and forbidden parts of the psyche remain in the realm of the unconscious, they constantly push against the surface of the conscious realm. Significantly, the unconscious or suppressed material is modified in the process of moving into the outer limits of consciousness. In this novel, I would argue, the narrator's repressed psychic material enters into the realm of the (un)conscious disguised as the ghosts of her parents. As

in the case of hysterics, the narrator of *Surfacing* manipulates her own memories, if not consciously, and reveals hysterical symptoms later in the novel. And her act of revising the past serves to repress one particular traumatic event, the abortion: 'I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version ... A faked album' (*Surfacing*, 137-38). Since the narrator's memories are repressed and distorted, they are 'fraudulent as passports' for her (138). Here Atwood's use of the metaphor of passports is worth noting. Passports are supposed to authenticate one's identity, but at the same time they challenge the authenticity of the self when they are forged. The oxymoron used here indicates the narrator's doubt about the possibility of a 'true' life story. As she confesses, her own wedding is just one of the fraudulent memories that she has constructed to replace the repressed experience of the abortion: 'It wasn't a wedding ... I was emptied, amputated; I stank of salt and antiseptic, they had planted death in me like a seed' (*Surfacing*, 138). At the centre of the narrator's reconstruction of her past lies her affair with a married man which ended with her unwanted abortion. If her father projects her into a new mental crisis with his death, her former lover has left her in the trauma of the painful event of an abortion. It is the abortion that initially triggers the narrator's neurotic state. The repressed fear of death remains in her unconscious and 'surfaces' the moment at which she confronts her father's dead body under the water: 'It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead' (*Surfacing*, 136). What she sees in the water is not only her drowned father but also her own repressed unconscious. Linked with the scene of the abortion, the narrator's dizzy dive into the lake is identified as her

journey into the psyche which ultimately leads to her rebirth.

The narrator 'reconstructs' her memories and distances herself from the real world. As she remarks here, 'I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before I was born; but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all' (*Surfacing*, 137). The unreliability of the narrator's 'memories' signaled by her draws attention to the fact that she is living in fantasy, which in turn reinforces her isolation or alienation from reality. Significantly, it is not only the memories of her own past that are indeterminate: her friends' pasts are also vague to the narrator, as if they had an amnesia that others hadn't noticed. As the narrator observes, 'any one of us could have amnesia for years and the others wouldn't notice' (*Surfacing*, 24). This amnesia reinforces the narrator's difficulty in recalling her past. In this willed amnesia, her memories become the 'truncated form of each reminiscence' (Irvine, 1988: 269).

As stated above, the narrator's amnesia is largely a product of her repressed memories of the abortion; as the narrator herself observes, she has 'carried that death around inside [her], layering it over, a cyst, a tumour, black pearl' (*Surfacing*, 139). The numbness generated by her repressed memories of the abortion is then exacerbated by a developing hysteria triggered by her father's death. Yet I would argue that the narrator's numbness is also a product of her willed separation from her parents and the childhood alienation from her friends. In addition, I would argue that the narrator's psychic disorder also dates back to the childhood event in which she was unable to save the lives of the animals that her brother caught and kept in jars and tin cans. She was traumatised by the belief that her fear killed these creatures. This interpretation of the origins of the narrator's psychological distress is reinforced

by the fact that Atwood has always been interested in the way in which 'childhood experiences set patterns that are compulsively re-enacted or confronted in adulthood' (Granofsky, 52). Atwood comments of the narrator's trauma: 'she wishes to be not human, because being human inevitably involves being guilty' (qtd. in Fiamengo, 1999: 141). This comment on the narrator's psychic trauma in the novel accords with Kristeva's arguments on the relation between the melancholic and 'the elusive preobject of a mourning that is endemic with all speaking beings' (Kristeva, 1989: 152).

These originary traumatic events are, of course, masked by layers of obfuscation and fantasy. The narrator's conflation of her father's body with her drowned brother, for example, confirms 'a state of disavowal (denial) in which the actual past is veiled' (Barzilai, 1996: 165).<sup>41</sup> In addition, her brother's drowning is the product of her imagination: it is an 'image I'd kept from before I was born' (*Surfacing*, 137). The narrator's decision not to attend her mother's funeral, which is 'a rite of passage to allow the living to come to terms with death,' also draws attention to the narrator's psychic disorder (Ross, 1980: 10). This particular experience, I would argue, can also be considered in terms of the crisis of subjectivity caused by the separation from the mother, as explored in the work of Kristeva. For Kristeva, melancholic subjects are left in a permanent state of sadness by denying separation from the mother. The separation from the maternal body involves the subject's entry into the patriarchal realm of the symbolic, where language plays a central role in establishing the subject's relationship to the material world. The use of language enables subjects to keep a distance from each other and

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<sup>41</sup> Shuli Barzilai offers an illuminating psychoanalytic account of the narrator's alienation from 'reality.' See also her essay, 'Who is He?: The Missing persons Behind the Pronoun in Atwood's *Surfacing*,' *Canadian Literature* 164 (Spring 2000), 57-79.

secure autonomy from surrounding objects. To obtain language, however, the subject has to undergo a painful process of mourning, and so those melancholic subjects who deny the separation from the mother are unable to establish normal linguistic competence, instead experiencing signifiers as empty (Kristeva, 1989: 52)

In reading *Surfacing* as an example of hysteria and psychic dislocation, it is worth noting the way in which Atwood makes the narrator's story fluid and elusive, foregrounding her problematic relationship with language. Rather than appearing as a coherent life story, the narrator's account of her life is inconsistent and fragmentary, marked by ambiguity. There are several comments made in the text about the narrator's problem with language (*Surfacing*, 100), yet it is her dive into the lake, when she sees her father's dead body, that precipitates her linguistic disturbances. As Josie Campbell has noted, the narrative of *Surfacing* is 'disjointed, chaotic, as restive as the narrator's own mind' and 'this is due to the numerous flashbacks that suggest by their form the twists and turns of the protagonist's memories' (Campbell, 1978: 20). While Campbell does not refer directly to hysteria in her discussion of the narrator's mental and physical state, her argument centres on the narrator's distorted memories in which she represses a part of her life. In order to show how memories are reconstructed in the trauma, Campbell notes the narrator's fictive narrative of marriage and divorce. This act, I would argue, is not unlike the behaviour of hysterics, who rearrange their memories through fantasy.

In certain sections of the text, the narrator comments directly on her problem with language. She draws attention, for example, to her difficulties in understanding the meaning of words: 'the English words seemed imported, foreign; it was like trying to listen to two separate conversations, each interpreting the other' (*Surfacing*,

144). In one particular hysterical attack she loses her ability to understand language altogether: 'They are talking, their voices are distinct but they penetrate my ears as sounds only, foreign radio. It must be either English or French but I can't recognize it as any language I've ever heard or known' (*Surfacing*, 178). As Freud explains, the hysteric's experience of physical pain is often accompanied by linguistic disturbances. The hysteric may lose command of grammar and syntax, or may even become speechless (Breuer and Freud, 25). Further, the hysteric's narrative is often incomprehensible in itself, fragmentary and incomplete. Susan Edmunds states that the fragmentary nature of hysterics' narratives meant that Freud considered hysteria to be 'an obstacle to disinterested and truthful historiography' (Edmunds, 1991: 475). Yet Atwood explores what Freud considered as a problematic symptom as a positive means by which to restore repressed narratives. I would argue that Atwood, unlike Freud, represents the borderline condition of hysteria as a route to possible reconciliation. *Surfacing*, which I would interpret as an inversion of Freud's negative views on hysterical fantasy, suggests a vision in which the narrator experiences the dissolution of boundaries between different and opposing entities, albeit temporarily. Like Freud, Atwood highlights the fragmentary character of hysterical narrative, but she conceives of it as a way to undermine notions of fixed and unchangeable realities. What the narrator senses in her deranged state is none other than the transformation of her self, an experience of becoming self:

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you  
are a word  
I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head  
against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees  
and animals move and grow, I am a place (*Surfacing*, 175)

The narrator experiences this mystical state after she has eaten potentially hallucinogenic mushrooms. Yet it is worth noting that this nonrational state culminates in the narrator's seeing a vision of her mother. For the narrator, her mother is characterised by her capacity for love that complements her father's gift of knowledge. As I have suggested, then, the discourse of hysteria informs both the form and content of *Surfacing*. Resisting fixed positions, Atwood's open-ended narrative effects the reconciliation of oppositions through the condition of hysteria.

What I have been arguing in this section of the chapter is that although *Surfacing* contains the story of the repressed other which is embodied in the hysterical female narrator and the ghost, the narrative offers a vision of hope rather than utter despair. Although it is ambiguous, the note of hope is implied in the narrator's pregnancy (as her intercourse with Joe results in conception): 'My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply' (*Surfacing*, 162). The narrator also associates herself with the moon, suggesting that the harmony of nature is reflected in her pregnant body: 'The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry' (*Surfacing*, 171-72). In emphasising the presence of hope in Atwood's narrative, I am not suggesting the story necessarily ends happily. As William James has noted in his review of *Surfacing*, it is particularly because of the ambiguous resolution of the novel that critics are unable to reach any agreement that 'can be said

to be affirmative' (James, 1981: 174). Here, the narrator's temporary descent into madness is crystallised in her retreat from 'civilised' life. The novel ends with the scene in which Joe has returned to the island to search for her. He calls for her and waits, but she does not respond yet, although she observes her trust of him. It is problematic to argue that in *Surfacing* the narrator ultimately resolves all conflict, whether external or internal. Yet, I am suggesting that it is also misleading to suggest that the novel is ultimately characterised by uncertainty. I would argue that there is an affirmative solution that Atwood seeks in the novel: the possibility that opposing positions can be reconciled with each other. As she herself says of the novel: 'The ideal would be somebody who would be neither a killer nor a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony rather than a destructive relationship towards the world' (Atwood cited in Gibson, 1973: 27).

In demonstrating how and to what extent *Surfacing* can be seen as a novel which involves an exploration of 'harmony with the world,' I have drawn upon Freud's analysis of hysteria. Freud's theories are relevant to a reading of *Surfacing* because the novel constantly evades its own narrative through the presence of the hysterical narrator. Just as Freud's analysis of hysteria sought to free the repressed unconscious, so Atwood's use of the model seeks to restore what has been repressed. In Atwood's narrative, the ghost turns out to be the narrator's own self engendered through repressed memories, thus expressing a kind of hysteria. Despite psychical disturbance, the narrator herself ultimately experiences a sense of liberation, aspiring: '[n]ot to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me' (*Surfacing*, 169).

### 3. 'Memories that are at root fantasies': *Alias Grace*'s construction of reality through the narrative of hysteria

While Atwood's *Surfacing* has explored the hysteric's visionary experiences within the medium of pure fiction, her more recent novel *Alias Grace* (1996) moves back into historiography in which the hysteric's discourse, grounded in the disturbances of memory, disrupts the distinctions between history, truth and fiction. As Atwood points out in her acknowledgements, *Alias Grace* is an historical fiction based on a 'real' story. As she claims in the afterword, 'I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally 'known'' (*Alias*, 541).<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, to highlight fictional elements in her novel, Atwood notes the gaps in the 'factual' record: 'I was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there is a lot of invention. *Alias Grace* is very much a novel rather than a documentary' (*In search*, 35).<sup>43</sup> In writing an historical novel, which she metaphorically compares to the act of 'dredging up things' that society has buried, Atwood seeks 'to challenge an accepted version of history' (*In search*, 8). Thus her historical fiction, which relies on 'the parts left unexplained,' challenges notions of the whole and complete narrative, as well as historical methodologies that tend to ignore individuals and their unique experiences by seeking larger patterns and grand narratives (*In search*, 35).

In featuring Grace Marks, an alleged murderess in nineteenth-century Canada,

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<sup>42</sup> All page references will be to the Virago (1997) edition.

<sup>43</sup> Atwood gives a detailed account of *Alias Grace*'s historical aspects in her pamphlet *In Search of Alias Grace*. (1997). By focusing on the individual's life and memory, she challenges accepted versions of history and 'fact.' By questioning the reliability of memory, she seeks to blur the distinction between fiction and history, thus also 'rewriting' history.

Atwood grounds her narrative in a 'real' historical context, but at the same time she undermines the notion of historiography by intermingling Grace's 'true' or 'real' story with fiction. The account of the 'real' story asserts that Grace Marks (an Irish servant girl in Canada) and James McDermott, her alleged partner in crime, were sentenced to death, being convicted of the murders of their employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper/mistress, Nancy Montgomery. McDermott was hanged, but Marks's sentence was commuted to life in prison. Imprisoned in Kingston Penitentiary for thirty years, Grace was subsequently pardoned under a general amnesty following repeated petitions by local supporters. In *Alias Grace*, Grace tells her story to Simon Jordan, a young American psychiatric doctor, while in prison. However, the 'truth' about Marks's role in the crime has never been fully established. Atwood introduces a scene in which Marks is in a hypnotised hysterical state in order to highlight this fact, and leaves it to the reader to judge whether she is guilty. Through the very title of the novel, Atwood questions the notion of historical fact. The name 'Grace' is identified as an alias despite the fact that the main character is clearly Grace Marks, one of the historical figures in the famous double murder case. Grace's alias is traced back to her father's uncertain identity ('Marks may not even have been his real name') (*Alias*, 120), thus introducing an element of uncertainty in the narrative from the outset. The absence of Grace's surname in the title suggests Grace's slippery identity, and as Grace herself remarks, naming is not significant for her: 'I said that a new name would pose no problem for me, as I had no great attachment to my own, it having been my father's' (*Alias*, 311).

Just as Atwood calls for a close examination of the gaps in the original story in order to question the distinction between historical fact and fictional narrative, so

she emphasises the hysterical narrator's loss of memories to explore ways of reconstructing the story: 'Lost memories lie down there like sunken treasure, to be retrieved piecemeal' (*Alias*, 161). For Atwood, the act of narrative reconstruction is a process that challenges fixed categories of meaning and interpretation. As in *Surfacing*, it is through fragments of the narrator's memories that *Alias Grace* contests its presented narratives. Grounded in the narrators' emotional crisis or psychic dislocation, both novels explore the ways in which memory plays a role in the creation of the narrative either in a form of fiction or history.<sup>44</sup> The two narrators' loss of memories or amnesia, as reflected in their fragmented narratives, is one of the most obvious symptoms of hysteria.

As I will demonstrate, *Alias Grace* is an exemplar of Atwood's open-ended structure of writing, especially in its use of historical material. The gaps that Atwood finds in historical records are the starting point for *Alias Grace*, which collapses boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Atwood quotes various documents, newspaper reports and historical events in the novel to achieve a mode of narrative in which fact and fiction intersect. The meaning of the text cannot be fully accounted for through the perspective of any individual. At one level, the novel can be read as a meta-narrative of historiography. I would argue that *Alias Grace* enacts an ongoing process that moves between the two realms of history and fiction, with Atwood's elaborated version of the model of hysteria functioning as a central apparatus. Significantly, Isabella Beeton's description of hysterics is included as an epigraph in the novel:

*Hysterics*-These fits take place, for the most part, in young, nervous, unmarried women ... Young women, who are subject to these fits, are

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<sup>44</sup> Atwood's view on the role of memory in both fictional and historical writing is elaborated in *In Search of Alias Grace*.

apt to think that they are suffering from 'all the ills that flesh is heir to;' and the false symptoms of disease which they show are so like the true ones. (*Alias*, 157)

Grace's hysteria, I would argue, is manifested in various ways in the narrative. Along with the alias that underlies Grace's identity, her duplicitous story-telling and recourse to fantasy enhance the fragmentariness and indeterminacy of the narrative. Fragmentation and indeterminacy are key features of the discourse of hysteria. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the operation of fantasy in hysteria traces the hysteric's suffering back to childhood experiences. Freud's seduction theory relates 'hysterical suffering' to 'early scenes of sexual assault' in order to explain the way in which physical symptoms are produced through the hysteric's confusion of unconscious fantasies with memories (Edmunds, 1991: 474). Freud's theories on the causes of hysteria insist on 'the agency of the unconscious in the formation of memories', disrupting boundaries between fantasy and 'actual' memory (Radstone, 2000: 89). Freud's emphasis on fantasy has served as the basis for numerous psychoanalytic debates on the relation between sexual abuse and hysteria. As the experience of actual abuse is often distorted by traumatically experienced fantasy, the distinction between reality and imagination is evasive. The primal scene of the 'Wolf Man' case (Freud's case study on infantile neurosis and fantasy, which involves the infant's observation of parental intercourse) not only disrupts the distinction between fantasy and actuality, but has also caused controversy due to Freud's strategy of hypothesising about the cause of the neurosis. As Dorrit Cohn observes, Freud's speculative positing of the primal scene as the basis of the Wolf Man's neurosis blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. Yet Cohn argues that the 'primal scene' hypothesis is not invented by Freud but is rather located in the

patient's fantasy. That is, Freud as a case historian provides only a biographical hypothesis to explain his patient's illness. Therefore, Freud's discourse, which traces the origin of the patient's infantile fantasies, cannot be considered as purely fictional.<sup>45</sup> Noting that repressed memories give rise to hysterical symptoms, Freud relates hysteria to the significance of psychic factors that bear witness to fantasy. What he posits here is the mediation of fantasy through which memories are manifested as bodily symptoms. Fantasy is therefore a means by which hysteria becomes manifest.

In the previous section of this chapter, I analysed how Freud's analysis of hysteria is invoked but also inverted in *Surfacing*. While Atwood does not explicitly indicate a familiarity with psychoanalysis in *Surfacing*, she deliberately foregrounds Freud's analytic model of hysteria in *Alias Grace*.<sup>46</sup> In this context, it is significant that the historical period of Grace's existence overlaps with that of Freud. In the novel's exploration of the way in which repressed memories or the unconscious are interpreted through the dialogue between Grace and her doctor (Simon Jordan), the novel offers a direct elucidation of Freud's analytic process. In addition, the name of Simon's landlady's maid-of-all-work is Dora. Simon's description of Dora evokes the hostile relationship between Freud and his own patient, Dora: 'Dora is a hefty creature, and could snap a man's spine in two with her thighs' (*Alias*, 66). Engaging with repressed memories or dreams that project hysterical symptoms, the novel creates gaps that make a whole and coherent narrative impossible. As with the case

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<sup>45</sup> See also Cohn (1996).

<sup>46</sup> Breuer and Freud describe the relation between repressed memories and hysteria as follows: '*each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words*' (Breuer and Freud, 6; original italics).

history of Freud's Dora, the interpretation of Grace's situation ends in an incomplete narrative construction that implies the arbitrary nature of the story. Modelled on Freud's interpretation of hysteria in which the patient's and the analyst's narratives are conflated and fail fully to explain the repressed memories, *Alias Grace* portrays the impossibility of retrieving or representing historical fact. It is through the indeterminate hysterical subject that Atwood signals this failure, but at the same time the fragmentary narrative that creates productive dynamics in the novel.

Together with an identity (alias) that is not fixed, Grace's story is a mask that at once represents and hides her identity. In discussing this paradox, Roxanne Rimstead has noted in relation to the novel's title that '*Alias Grace* celebrates mask-wearing as a subversive technique for both the domestic/murderess in the world of the novel and the postmodern subject as one who eludes any definitive identity' (55). The duplicity represented by the mask of the alias is embodied in a patchwork of different texts in the novel. *Alias Grace* incorporates various textual fragments such as official historical accounts but also literary texts, as Grace's quilt patterns in each title page of the fifteen sections and epigraphs symbolically suggest. In the novel, Grace's stitching of cloth and her story-telling occur simultaneously: 'I am sitting in the sewing room, at the head of the stairs in the governor's wife's house ... Today I am in the sewing room before Dr. Jordan' (*Alias*, 71, 227). These connections imply that the fragments are none other than lost pieces of her own past. As Marie Delord has pointed out, Grace's quilt making is her effort to 'repair the past, to join the scattered pieces back together' (Delord, 1999: 118). Intricately linked with Grace's story-telling, the quilt is a central motif that encapsulates Atwood's rendering of a mosaic-like history. In quilt making, each piece of cloth has its own discrete pattern

and history and yet contributes to the overall design of the quilt as a whole. Through this motif, Atwood challenges the univocality of conventional historical accounts. As Magali Cornier Michael points out, *Alias Grace* presents history spatially through quilt patterns which highlight 'the processes of framing and arranging pieces in particular juxtaposition' (Michael, 2001: 421). Yet *Alias Grace* does not negate the notion of order or unification completely, although its fragmentary texts problematise linear or chronological order in the novel. Atwood's spatialisation of story or history in the arbitrary form of a patchwork quilt is used not to suggest chaos but rather to highlight the forms of those narratives which have been repressed in grand narratives or official histories. The individuals' scattered narratives function to subvert univocal historical narratives, yet on the other hand, they also conform to the unified mode of representation that historical narrative creates and validates. As is evidenced by Atwood's act of piecing together the scattered fragments, whether they are fragments of cloth or actual memories, the novel creates, in a sense, a unified whole. While the artistic strategy of *Alias Grace* takes the form of filling the gaps left by the various writings about the real event, the novel is inescapably founded on historical facts. Quilting holds the scattered pieces of Grace's mind or the text together. As this quilt is also a symbol of fragmentation, its unifying function illustrates 'a paradox of postmodernism' (Delord, 1999: 118), as implied in Atwood's theories on historical fiction discussed at the beginning of this section of the chapter.

Grace's history of hysterical fits or insanity is suggested as one reason for her reduced sentence, but her condition also contributed to the continuing controversy over the 'truth' of her story, and her alleged duplicity. As Grace herself muses, 'I wonder, how can I be all of these things at once?' (*Alias*, 25). I would argue that

Atwood's foregrounding of hypnosis and Freud's notion of free association in the novel increases the effect of fantasy which facilitates the text's disruption of historical evidence. Since fantasy paves the way for a discovery of Grace's unconscious or repressed memories, it becomes impossible to determine, with any certainty, her role in the murders.

As psychoanalysts and critics have recognised, fantasy, as one of the most unique and elusive aspects of hysteria, embodies contradictory qualities. As Linda Ruth Williams has aptly put it, 'fantasy is not wholly fabricated, but it is an active (creative) construction of an image or fiction never actually witnessed, a patchwork of impressions and desires woven through with direct experience' (Williams, 1995: 17). She goes on to argue that 'unconscious fantasy is neither real nor unreal, except that it has a paramount reality in the life and construction of the subject' (17). These arguments are useful in a consideration of Atwood's novel. Fantasy produces the ambiguous status of Grace's story and therefore the reader cannot judge whether the story is true or not. Just as Atwood sets out to reconstruct a 'real' story in fiction, so the central narratives that construct the novel operate within the framework of fantasy. The mode of realistic or historiographical writing is thereby challenged.

Further, the concept of fantasy also helps to account for the feminist and postmodernist aspects of *Alias Grace*. What seems clear is that Grace's story reflects the repressed condition of marginalised women. As I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, Freud has argued that repression causes hysterical symptoms. Significantly, Grace develops hysteria following the death of Mary Whitney, who is Grace's fellow servant girl and a victim of sexual exploitation. Mary's death is the immediate source of Grace's hysteria, yet Grace's mother's untimely death, which occurred before

Mary's, is also important here, being closely associated with Grace's psychic illness of melancholia that develops into hysteria. Grace's mother's tragic marital life ended in the ship on which she crossed the Atlantic in search of a new life. As was the case with the narrator of *Surfacing*, melancholia entraps Grace before the actual manifestation of hysterical symptoms. Unable to mourn properly for her dead mother, Grace exhibits melancholia and experiences her own death within it:

I did not cry. I felt as if it was me and not my mother that had died; and I sat as if paralysed, and did not know what to do next... As soon as the sheet was over her face I had the notion that it was not really my mother under there, it was some other woman. (*Alias*, 139-40)

Grace's denial of her mother's death is reinforced by the burial of her mother in the water. The association between death and water echoes the scene in *Surfacing* (discussed earlier in this chapter) in which the narrator's vision of a submerged body blurs the boundaries between life and death. As Grace argues, her mother's water burial makes it difficult for her to achieve closure: 'It was worse than being put into the earth, because if a person is in the earth at least you know where they are' (*Alias*, 140).

Just as the domestic violence under the patriarchal institution of marriage is ultimately responsible for the death of Grace's mother, the employers' son's sexual exploitation brings about Mary's death, as she perishes while trying to abort her child. The real force behind these despicable events, it is suggested, is patriarchal society, which represses women. Taking a feminist critical perspective on these events, Virginia Harger-Grinling and Tony Chadwick examine how social, cultural and institutional forces construct Grace's personal world. By emphasising the condition of individuals in history, they point to patriarchal structures as the source of the

oppression of women. Released Grace's acceptance of the 'role of wife and mother' which is imposed upon her by more powerful people regardless of her own views, succinctly expresses women's position as silenced others (Harger-Grinling and Chadwick, 2000: 56). Although Grace is freed from prison, she remains governed by patriarchal rules and her life is therefore, in a sense, an extension of prison life. While *Alias Grace* is not a simple or straightforward feminist critique, it is an extension of Atwood's feminist politics which interrogate male dominance in a patriarchal society. In allowing the reader to understand 'the complex interplay between the social and personal spheres' (Harger-Grinling and Chadwick, 2000: 56), *Alias Grace* suggests the existence of narratives that are hidden or marginalised in 'official' historical accounts. In disclosing Grace's repressed narrative, for example, Atwood brings to the fore Grace's social status as a female servant. Through Grace's anxiety dreams and somnambulism, Atwood hints at the vulnerability of lower-class females in patriarchal society. The fact that the servant-turned-housekeeper Nancy was also a victim of rape illustrates the frequent sexual violences enacted upon lower class women by middle and upper class men. Grace makes it clear that she has a deep anxiety about being watched: 'It is a strange thing, but however deeply asleep I may be, I can always sense when there is a person come close, or watching me. It's as if there is a part of me that never sleeps at all' (*Alias*, 303). Here Atwood once again introduces the issue of the male gaze to describe women's repressed state. As was demonstrated in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, it is through the invisible but present gaze that Grace experiences a splitting of the self. Like the narrator of *Surfacing*, Grace thus reveals signs of self-division.

Grace actually undergoes self-division when she confronts Mary's tragic

death. As she claims, 'when I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone ... because I said that Grace was lost ... I needed to search for her' (*Alias*, 208). According to Freud and Breuer, hysteria is an illness arising from unresolved emotions. The memory of traumatic experiences operates as an agent for the manifestation of the disease. Emerging as various neurotic symptoms, hysteria demonstrates a process in which the dialogue between the unconscious and the conscious realms breaks down. In other words, what is unresolved in the psyche, in this case Grace's traumatic experience of her mother's death, is converted into hysteria. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Grace has lost the memories of her traumatic experiences. Coupled with a split personality disorder, the symptom of amnesia signals Grace's hysteria: 'But I had no memory of anything I said or did during the time I was awake, between the two long sleeps' (*Alias*, 209). Through the self-division that Grace experiences on the morning before the actual murder, Atwood draws attention to the way in which the repressed unconscious triggers hysteria: 'I felt light-headed, and detached from myself, as if I was not really present, but only there in body' (*Alias*, 366). Grace's hysteria is also evident in her response to the murder case, where Grace identifies herself directly with Mary Whitney, repressing her own traumatic memories.

As I briefly noted in my earlier discussion of Freud's seduction theory, hysteria is often related to childhood traumatic experience<sup>47</sup> buried in the unconscious, thereby undermining any sense of a stable or unified subjectivity. Just as Freud locates the existence of the unconscious in the Oedipal Complex, the

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<sup>47</sup> Freud's 'Wolf Man' case is used to exemplify this theory. See Williams, pp. 10-17.

Freudian concept of hysteria is founded on a notion of psychological conflict that reflects 'an anxious, unresolved experience of infantile sexuality' (Williams, 1995: 5). Such approaches suggest that the hysteric's amnesia is a defense mechanism of 'the physical and emotional traumas of childhood sexual abuse' (Staels, 2000: 437). Hilde Staels has argued that while Grace's sexual abuse in childhood is not directly mentioned in the novel, it is implicit in the scenes which explore her dreams. According to Staels, there is 'a man who forces [Grace] to surrender' in her anxiety dreams, thus reflecting the repressed memories of her childhood sexual abuse by her father (Staels, 2000: 437).<sup>48</sup> Staels argues that Grace draws attention to this abuse in her reference to a man from her past, 'someone I knew well and had long been familiar with, even as long ago as my childhood, but had since forgotten: nor was this the first time I'd found myself in this situation with him' (*Alias*, 326). Interestingly, Grace likens her experience of sexual abuse to death itself. She is overwhelmed with fear, and yet is drawn toward it: 'it was Death himself who stood behind me, with his arms wrapped around me as tight as iron bands ... But as well as the horror, I also felt a strange longing' (*Alias*, 326). Grace's contradictory reaction to death might be explained by the notion of the ego that Freud noted in 'The Ego and the Id.' By foregrounding the duality of the ego in which the death instinct and the life instinct co-exist, Atwood portrays the sense of guilt that constitutes Grace's hysterical ego.

Grace discloses this death instinct through melancholia when her mother dies.

Like unconscious fantasy which the hysteric experiences as real, Grace's dream

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<sup>48</sup> Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory, Staels has analysed *Alias Grace's* intertextual elements. Staels notes the way in which Atwood's intermingling of a realistic narrative and fantastic intertexts is connected with the realm of the unconscious. Similarly, my argument is concerned with Grace's unconscious, but my analysis focuses on her hysterical fantasy and the fragmentary narrative that Atwood uses to challenge fixed categories of meaning and interpretation.

scenes display elements that are suspended between the real and the unreal. This is how the unconscious speaks of things which cannot be articulated by the conscious. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of course, Freud famously illustrated how the unconscious manifests itself in dreams. In keeping with Freud's theories on the dream work, Atwood's *Alias Grace* explicitly links dreams with hysteria as a manifestation of repressed elements in the unconscious. Grace believes that 'There are some things that should be forgotten by everyone, and never spoken of again,' and her repressed memories take the form of dreams or fantasies (*Alias*, 29). As the murder itself is combined with her state of self-division or psychic repression, her story is embedded in a kind of double repression, making it difficult to ascertain the 'truth' of her narrative. In this respect, the meaning of the entire text is elusive since it draws on revisionary or re-presented versions of the original historical accounts that are 'all suspect in one way or another' (Michael, 2001: 422). By presenting the story as told by an hysterical woman, Atwood effectively portrays 'the unreliability of all narratives' (Michael, 2001: 426). It is Grace's hysteria, therefore, that has motivated Atwood's textual intervention into historiography in this case. For Atwood, Grace's hysteria is a double-edged technique. In both forgetting and reconstructing Grace's memories, the text engages in the recovery of history or truth, and yet disrupts the significance or the authority of historical narratives.

It is through the different versions of Grace's confession in particular that Atwood concretises the suspicion of historiography or the existence of the truth: 'Grace appears to have told one story at the inquest, another one at the trial, and, after the death sentence had been commuted, yet a third' (*Alias*, 89). Since this also undermines the legal processes by which - we assume - law and order are maintained,

what is ultimately at stake is the dominant patriarchal culture that relies on the symbolic order. By presenting the lawyer's reconstruction of Grace's narrative, Atwood draws attention to the way in which the legal system enforces patriarchal authority. As Grace talks to Simon, 'He wanted me to tell my story in what he called a coherent way ... not to tell the story as I truly remembered it, which nobody could be expected to make any sense of ... And I should say what must have happened, according to plausibility, rather than what I myself could actually recall' (*Alias*, 415).

As I have argued, Grace's hysteria is a device which allows Atwood to explore the ambiguities surrounding the original murder case. One particular device Atwood uses to foreground this ambiguity is hallucination. One particular example occurs right at the beginning of the novel, which describes a symbolically suggestive reverie in which Grace meditates upon the red peonies in the prison yard:

Out of the grave there are peonies growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snails' eyes, then swelling and opening, huge dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin. Then they burst and fall to the ground. (*Alias*, 5)

The red peonies, which are described as 'a masked remembrance of Nancy's bloody face,' seem to be the only solid image that establishes Grace's role in the murder case (Delord, 1999: 118). However, it is notable that when the scene of the murder is related while Grace is in a hypnotic state, two contrasting colours of peonies are mentioned, offering a potential important clue for the murder inquiry. Whereas the red peonies appear after the event, it is white peonies that occupy Grace's mind before the crime takes place. Asserting that 'they are like the peonies in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear's, that first day, only those were white,' Grace herself locates peonies at the crime site itself, but they are not necessarily red (*Alias*, 5). While

Grace tries hard to subdue and obliterate the scene of the murders at the level of the preconscious or unconscious, distancing herself from the images that are associated with her guilt, the repressed image of the peonies keeps resurfacing. Grace's obsession with the peonies can be compared with the hysteric's attitude to the traumatic past that caused his/her illness. 'The hysteric,' according to Williams, 'is haunted by the past in terms of its eruption into the present as bodily symptom, and the inability to escape a past repressed but not erased' (Williams, 1995: 137). As a metaphor which reveals how 'repression and remembering are intimately bound to each other across the different moments the subject inhabits' (Williams, 1995: 144), the image of the red peonies not only explains Grace's hysterical state but also echoes the text's postmodernist ambiguity or indeterminacy. The red peonies, the symbol of Grace's guilt, are also influenced by the operation of fantasy. Despite the distinctive colours that hint at her guilt, the appearance or meaning of the peonies is elusive, since Grace cannot ascertain whether they are real or not:

I watch the peonies out of the corners of my eyes. I know they shouldn't be here ... Furtively I reach out my hand to touch one. It has a dry feel, and I realise it's made of cloth ... [Nancy] scatters into patches of colour, a drift of red cloth petals across the stones. (*Alias*, 6)

By using this narrative device, Atwood invites the reader to call into question the story that is offered to him/her. The red peonies repeatedly emerge in Grace's repressed memories, but they evade any fixed interpretation. As Grace's liminal state is superimposed on the red peonies, it is difficult to judge whether the scene of the peonies in Grace's description is real or imaginary. Grace herself never explicitly identifies the status of the peonies: 'But I did not say that they were made of cloth, nor did I say when I had seen them last; nor did I say that they were not a dream' (*Alias*, 281). It would be argued that the red peonies are equated with the quilt that

Grace is making, given that reference to cloth, adding a further layer of ambiguity.

Although Atwood's novel foregrounds the fact that Grace's lawyer's defence succeeded in 'proving' her innocence, the narrative always keeps in play the possibility of other alternative versions of Grace's story. As Grace says to Simon, 'Just because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God's truth' (*Alias*, 299). In keeping with the motif of hysteria which runs through the text, these repressed stories are not present, but never entirely absent either. Motivated by scepticism about the degree to which Grace was involved in the crime, Atwood seeks in her text to fill the gaps in Marks's story. The fragmentary nature of Atwood's text, however, serves to question conventional understandings of historiography and its methodologies. I would argue that Atwood's narrative strategies are analogous to the 'secondary revision' of the 'dream-work' that transforms elements from the unconscious through condensation and displacement. As Terry Eagleton argues, Freud makes the distinction between the latent and the manifest content of dreams in order to highlight the function of the 'dream-work' that 'systematises the dreams, fills in its gaps and smooths over its contradictions' (Eagleton, 1983: 180). I would argue that a similar process takes place in Atwood's novel.

In a sense, Atwood's text traces the unexplained parts of the 'real' story of Grace Marks in a manner which effectively undermines established fact and knowledge. In this sense, she presents literary construction as means by which history can be rediscovered or reconstructed. Her comparison of history to poetry at the end of the public lecture '*In Search of Alias Grace*' summarises her ideas about the reconstruction of historical 'fact.' In discussing the relationship between 'individual memory, history and the novel,' she argues that they are 'all selective' in

nature (*In search*, 38). In other words, no single narrative, whatever its form, expresses an incontrovertible 'truth.' In *Alias Grace* Atwood reveals, in her exploration of a crime and subsequent trial, how narratives which are intended to aid the process of discovering the 'truth' about a past event ironically expose the inaccessibility of objective 'truth.' In her own discussion of the role of narrative reconstruction, Grace claims that '[w]hen you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion ... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else' (*Alias*, 345-46). As the novel does not provide any definite answer as to Grace's guilt, it is clear that Atwood is not interested in endorsing a standard version of the story, but rather in exploring the narrativisation of history as a dynamic process. The past can only be presented through narrative, and is therefore subject to constant reconstruction and reinterpretation:

The past no longer belongs only to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it. (*In search*, 39)

Atwood's statement suggests, therefore, that the past is constantly reinterpreted and renarrativised according to its relationship with the present. This, for Atwood, is a feature which links historiography with fiction. In discussing this relationship, Burkhard Niederhoff has noted Atwood's sceptical attitude to the 'truth value of historical and biographical reconstruction' (81-82). In an overview of critical debates about historiographic metafiction, Niederhoff links the metafictional aspects of *Alias Grace* with Atwood's 'pessimistic' view of historiography. In examining how Atwood treats history in the novel, Niederhoff highlights the way in which Atwood

blurs the boundary between fact and fiction to reconstruct the story. Historiographic metafiction is characterised by 'a reflexion on the (im)possibility of arriving at historical knowledge and truth' (Niederhoff, 2000: 81), and *Alias Grace* displays Atwood's interest in the nature of story-telling which holds in suspension the reader's judgement of truth. Atwood's *Alias Grace* recovers a 'real' story by digging up forgotten or buried things, but it is founded in her awareness of 'memories which are at root fantasies' (Williams, 1995: 17).

Whereas conventional historical discourses often discard fantasy as an obstacle to objective and logical historiography, *Alias Grace* relies on Grace's visions, the individual imagination or fantasy, as a means by which to reinterpret or rewrite history. Grace experiences a visionary power which is linked specifically to her hysteria, a state which allows her to inhabit different identities and points of view. Under hypnosis, Grace speaks in multiple voices which make it extremely difficult to establish whether she has played a role in the murders: 'The voice is gleeful. 'Stop talking rubbish,' she says. 'You've deceived yourselves! I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!' (*Alias*, 467). In this context, female mental illness and physical weakness paradoxically serve as devices for empowerment. Grace's fantasy allows her to envision the world in a new way, blurring the boundaries between history and fiction. Yet it is not the case that the novel denies the validity of truth or the importance of history altogether. Instead, I would argue that Atwood's text demonstrates the way in which 'truth' or 'history' is represented through different forms of story. What I have been suggesting throughout this section is that *Alias Grace*, with its patchwork form, maintains a dynamic, ongoing narrative process which confounds attempts to situate the novel in a specific discursive context.

Grace's hysterical vision and fragmented narrative transcend generic oppositions by rejecting any single or fixed position.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, by exploring hysteria and borderline psychic states in Atwood's writing, presenting female subjects who envisage otherness or alterity within themselves, Atwood challenges fixed ontological and interpretative categories. The fragmentary nature of hysteria resists a complete narrative, as Freud himself demonstrated in his case history of Dora. The dynamic discourse of hysteria brings fantasy or the imaginative world into dialogue with the 'real' world, and the analytic process of foregrounding repressed narratives challenges dominant hierarchies and discourses.

In the texts I have discussed in this chapter, Atwood constructs a model of artistic creation that uses the incomplete, failed work of Freudian case history to open up a possible model for interpreting the open-ended structure of narrative. The double-edged nature of the discourse of hysteria is central to Atwood's aesthetic freedom, allowing her to escape fixed generic and ontological categories. My next chapter will demonstrate the way in which the process of identification enacts alterity and intersubjectivity.

#### Chapter 4. Love, identification and intersubjectivity

In Chapter 1, I examined Atwood's artistic writing in terms of the Kristevan speaking subject, whose mobile position(ing) challenges unitary social and ethical systems. My analysis of *The Circle Game* and *The Animals in That Country* focused on this positioning, and I argued that dynamic boundaries and borders permeate Atwood's entire oeuvre. Embedded in her ongoing concern with boundaries is an interest in the relationship between the self and language, (inter)textuality and subjectivity. While approaching Atwood's individual texts from various theoretical perspectives, I have repeatedly argued that Atwood insists on a duality that challenges any essentialist definitions or positions. In exploring the dynamics of boundaries, Atwood often deploys spatial metaphors such as edges, circles, and quilts. In this chapter, I want to consider her focus on love as a means by which to break down the self/other opposition. This chapter will focus on process of identification brought about by the experience of love, or empathy, focusing upon three particular types of inter-relationships: male-female, mother-child, and human-animal, as explored in Atwood's poetry collections *You Are Happy* (1974) and *Two-Headed Poems* (1978). If her early poetry suggested the way in which the amorphous speaking subject interrogates divisive binaries, then Atwood's collections *You Are Happy* and *Two-Headed Poems* include myriad images of interconnected relationships among men and women, mothers and children, and humans and animals. While the violence, conflict, and anger of earlier works, especially *Power Politics* (1971), recur in these volumes, Atwood's poems also emphasise reconciliation and harmony. In a study entitled *Violent Duality*, Sherrill Grace argues that *You Are*

*Happy* summarises Atwood's 'poetic journey thus far' (64).<sup>49</sup> Given that the collection includes echoes from her earlier works, self-reflexivity becomes a pervasive force throughout the *Two-Headed Poems*. Self-reflexivity, reflexivity, or the persona's reflective capacity is for Atwood central to the cementing of meaningful inter-relationships. It also underscores her interest in the open-ended structuring of texts, the basis of her aesthetic freedom which transcends the limitations of certain theories and ideologies. While reflexivity appears as one of the main poetic themes, 'love,' and the process of identification between the subject and other life forms, is also enacted on various levels. While aware of the pitfalls of a biographical reading, I would nevertheless argue that Atwood's own experience as a mother - and her own sense of fulfillment in motherhood - has a bearing on those poems that focus on love and empathy, particularly between mothers and children. During the mid-1970s Atwood became a mother and this fact coincides with her interest in the theme of maternity or interrelationships among women.

### **1. Love and the politics of gender**

This opening section of the chapter explores love and intersubjectivity through a focus on Atwood's representation of male-female relationships. Although several of the poems in *You Are Happy* and *Two-Headed Poems*, like her early poetry, explore the victimisation of women, her primary focus is upon relationality as it leads to reconciliation and harmony.

As argued in Chapter 1, sexual intersubjectivity is a vital aspect of Atwood's

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<sup>49</sup> Grace observes the way in which the duality of structure or metaphor in Atwood's work illustrates a sense of harmony in terms of the connection between art and life.

effort to challenge social realities through artistic practice. In these poems, references to the mirroring function of assertion and recognition, Narcissus's lover, woman's isolation and man's construction of woman, all point towards the feminist aspects of Atwood's work. Likewise, many of the poems in *Power Politics* (1971) are best explained in terms of their sexual power politics. The collection explores exploitative forms of power that create the impasse of mutual victimisation. As with the brutal image of the fish-hook in the first poem 'You Fit into Me,' women and men are caught in conflicting gender relations: 'You fit into me,' Atwood writes, '... like a hook into an eye// a fish hook/ an open eye' (*PP*, 1).<sup>50</sup> In juxtaposing victims of sexual violence and warfare, Atwood points to the gravity of sexual conflict. As the terrified victim of domestic violence says in 'You Have Made Your Escape,' 'I walk believably from house to store, nothing// remembers you but the bruises/ on my thighs and the inside of my skull' (*PP*, 13). Given that language is a primary tool for communicating with the other, its function seems profoundly damaged in 'Small Tactics,' where the speaker observes that her lover's 'last/ message to me [is] left illegible' (*PP*, 18). Each of the seven sections of this poem depicts a relationship in which all forms of communication lose their significance and paradoxically become foundations for one's isolation and pain. Silences are pervasive. Fingers, eyes and mouth cannot create movements or touches that can give pleasure for lovers. A reference to 'wire silences' implies that the means of public communication have also failed. To lose the means of communication is analogous to freezing oneself 'at the level of pre-reflective self-consciousness' (Sartre in Warnock, 1970: 115). Language which foregrounds an inability for subjects to commune with each other

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<sup>50</sup> Many of the poems in *Power Politics* are untitled. In the discussion of such poems, I use their first lines as title.

illustrates Atwood's perpetual preoccupation with the dangers of closed, hermetic structures. For Atwood, the exercise of power and its potential pitfalls points towards closed socio-symbolic structures. The female speaker's anger and resentment about the sheer silences and the closed insensate structures ironically culminate in her wish to escape her organic body and become an electric lightbulb: 'Get me out of this trap, this/ body, let me be/ like you, closed and useful' (*PP*, 19).

At other points in her poetry, however, Atwood represents the body more positively as a vehicle for the vitality of inter-relationships. Atwood implies that sensory deadness or the breakdown in interpersonal communication is the result of static situations created by sexual power games. In analysing male-female relationships, Atwood is centrally concerned with the position and role of the body in power structures. In *Power Politics*, for example, Atwood ascribes contradictory attributes to the human body. Her strategy is to explore the logics of power through a body deeply inscribed by power itself. The body somehow becomes 'a destructive reflexive flicker' of existing power structures, bringing about an eventual collapse of those structures (Murdoch, 1953: 76).<sup>51</sup> The speaker in 'They Are Hostile Nations' is well aware that the only means of survival is through the interpersonal dynamics of human beings: 'We need each other's/ breathing, warmth' (*PP*, 38). Foregrounding environmental disasters that bring about the destruction of all life forms, this speaker emphasises the need for disarmament. In this season of death; 'the (possibly) last summer,' armies, money and hostility are futile and meaningless (*PP*, 38). Atwood shows how the body reverses the Cartesian view of subjectivity and enables individuals to recognise their reflective capacity. The autonomy of the body, which

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<sup>51</sup> See Murdoch's discussion of Sartre's concept of freedom in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, (Fontana/Collins: 1953), pp.68-76. Reflexion is here explained as a process through which 'the sense of freedom' reconciles itself with socialism.

leads on to the ethics of participation, prevents the repression of the other's autonomy. Atwood attempts to illustrate the futility of power games and the importance of mutual relationships; supreme evil seems, to her mind, to be 'a power politics mentality' which does not recognise diversity (Grace, 1980: 63). It is worth noting that Atwood suggests human freedom through the body. As the speaker in 'You Want to Go Back' declares in her desire to restore the primal state of human beings, 'human bodies are 'perfecting/ their own demands, no trouble to anyone' (*PP*, 9). Further, the body is associated with the sense of honesty in 'We Are Hard On Each Other.' Highlighting the inefficacy of love, the female speaker asks, 'If I love you/ is that a fact or a weapon?' (*PP*, 25). In this barren world, the speaker draws attention to the material body that reflects what it is directly: 'Your body is not a word,/ it does not lie or/ speak truth either./ It is only/ here or not here' (*PP*, 25).

Not surprisingly, in *Power Politics* the sphere of love is depicted as an arena of power struggles. For example, in 'My Beautiful Wooden Leader,' the female speaker tells of the game of love in which both man and woman are losers. This blind and paralysed female speaker displays her love towards her lover, the 'wooden leader,' 'scattering floral tributes' under his hooves (*PP*, 7). But she acknowledges that 'My love for you is the love/ of one statue for another: tensed// and static' (*PP*, 7). Behind the image of the adoring female and people, there are lies and betrayals that undermine the meaning of love. In this sense her lover is also a victim: 'Magnificent on your wooden horse/ you point with your fringed hand;/ the sun sets, and the people all/ ride off in the other direction (*PP*, 7). Similarly, 'Their Attitudes Differ' explores a superficial form of love which frustrates hopes of genuine harmony: 'To understand/ each other: anything/ but that' (*PP*, 10). The speaker,

presumably female, addresses that male and female are different in their approach to love. Forms of love that both partners expect from their opposites only enforce the sense of an impasse: 'You asked for love/ I gave you only descriptions' (*PP*, 10). Love is no longer something through which people are able to feel or experience a sense of 'becoming one.' Instead, all that love produces is a sense of dispossession. As the speaker asks in 'Hesitations of Outside the Door,' 'Whose house is this/ we both live in/ but neither of us owns' (*PP*, 48). In this poem, the conflicting male and female relationship is illuminated by the bluebeard motif. The female speaker's anxiety about marriage is metaphorically illustrated in her obsessive thought of a house or a room that she wants to know about what is in it. Yet the speaker knows that her own entrapment of her lover creates her fear of him: as she observes, 'In the room we will find nothing/ In the room we will find each other' (*PP*, 51). In 'Because You Are Never Here,' Atwood conveys the conflict through mirror imagery. The absence of mutual recognition is a crucial element that Atwood suggests as the origin of conflict and struggle. Mutuality cannot be achieved when one is made into an object of the other's identification - this signals permanent solipsism. There is no question of discovering any hopeful signs in the situation where 'you' is always there, while 'I' forgets what you look like. As the speaker says, it is the walls of her room that absorb her lover and breathe him forth: 'You rest on the bed/ watching me watching/ you, we will never know/ each other any better// than we do now' (*PP*, 14). It is impossible for this male Narcissus to develop receptivity toward the other and the world. This closed pattern of love runs contrary to the subject of identification explored in the body, and exposes social and cultural limits that result in a failure to understand interrelatedness amongst human beings.

*Power Politics* presents circumstances wherein love and freedom lose their meaning, yet a sign of transformation emerges when the speaker in 'You Did It' renounces polarity and the logic of power that creates human suffering. Invoking the images of the victims of the holocaust and the creator, the female speaker says to her lover:

When will you learn  
the flame and the wood/ flesh  
it burns are whole and the same?

You attempt merely power  
you accomplish merely suffering. (*PP*, 32)

Though the tone is bitter here, the poem works toward a rejection and transcendence of binary structures. This, together with other poems in *Power Politics*, displays a holism also evident in *You Are Happy* and *Two-Headed Poems*. The poems in part 1 of *You Are Happy* repeat the images of separation and incommunicability that are grounded in the inherent conflict between men and women. 'Useless,' for example, presents a compelling commentary on gender distinctions, articulating a desire for meaningful communication between male and female: '... mouth against mouth,/ lips moving in these desperate/ attempts at speech' (*YAH*, 10). The implication here is that living with fixed gender roles results in an inability to recognise one another. To insist upon one's own world view signifies a life lost and opens up a communicative gap: 'When did we lose each other?/ These twilight caverns are endless' (*YAH*, 10). As in *Power Politics*, hostility is represented in the form of a language that loses its potential for communication.

'Tricks with Mirrors,' on the other hand, depicts the way in which female-male relationships involve not only conflict but also rapprochement. As in 'The

Circle Game,' the poem opens with the image of mirrors whose reflection enacts sexual intersubjectivity between man and woman. The speaker 'I,' female, recognises that she must repress her own identity to become a perfect lover: 'I enter with you/ and become a mirror// Mirrors/ are the perfect lovers' (*YAH*, 24). Sherrill Grace argues that the references to mirrors in the poem serve as an explicit reminder of the mythical Narcissus, representing the world of male narcissism (Grace, 1980: 66). Yet this narcissistic love costs the man dearly, as he shall live with the stasis of his own image: 'it will be your own/ mouth you hit, firm and glassy' (*YAH*, 24). As the speaker observes, to follow the example of Narcissus is to follow a 'life flattened' and a 'life of vision only' (*YAH*, 27). Within the man's sexual power struggle, the process of identification can be defined in Kristevan terms as 'the tragic, death-bringing solitude of Narcissus' (Kristeva, 1987: 118). Insisting that 'There is more to a mirror/ than you looking at [it],' the speaker criticises forms of male narcissism that use the repression of the other as a means by which to consolidate one's own world. This process of identification ultimately brings about the loss of one's own self. As Kristeva observes, 'Ego drives also include death drives. Narcissus in love hides the suicidal Narcissus' (Kristeva, 1987: 124). Accordingly, the return of the gaze from the figure on the other side shifts the position of domination from the man to his lover.<sup>52</sup> As the reflection is none other than a representation of himself, here the other is the presentation of the man himself. Paradoxically 'I' becomes the other:

You are suspended in me  
  
beautiful and frozen, I  
preserve you, in me you are safe.

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<sup>52</sup> Sartre's existentialism illustrates how the operation of the eye defines one's existence and position in the world.

It is not a trick either,  
it is a craft. (*YAH*, 26)

This is the means by which Narcissus constitutes his own image through the process of alienation. Narcissus of the semiotic realm embodies not only the love of identification with his/her own self, but also a space within which the relationship between self and other might form.<sup>53</sup>

In exploring the world of myth further, Atwood's 'Circe/ Mud Poems' in part 3 of *You Are Happy* explores the possibility of the transformation of male-female relationships. Each of these untitled poems is spoken by the mythical Circe. Foregrounding Circe's encounter with Odysseus, Atwood addresses corporeality and demystification in the context of the sense of empathy or interrelationships. In these poems, Circe, the great sorceress (who transformed men into pigs in Homer's epic) celebrates the power of metamorphosis, but the heroes and transformations of the mythical world are not her main preoccupation: 'Men with the heads of eagles/ no longer interest me' (*YAH*, 47). Instead, her interest in transformation is focused upon mundane or material reality:

I search instead for the others  
the ones left over,  
the ones who have escaped from these  
mythologies with barely their lives;  
they have real faces and hands. (*YHA*, 47)

Circe draws attention, for example, to the material reminders of Odysseus's humanity, his 'flawed body, sickle/ scars on the chest' and 'the botched knee,' thus demystifying and demythologising Odysseus by focusing on the materiality of his

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<sup>53</sup> It is a castration threat that moves the child, Oedipus, into the symbolic realm; the significance of the symbolic, the sense of separation, is consolidated by Oedipus's recognition of his/her guilt

body (*YAH*, 60). Yet, Circe's attempt to transform Odysseus fails and triggers the ill-fated love in which she begins to experience human feeling. Losing her powers and transforming herself into a human woman, Circe experiences the pain of love. Here Circe becomes a vulnerable female lover in the conventional pattern of love wherein the male lover imposes his vision of life upon a female partner. The process of demythologisation therefore costs Circe dearly. The mud woman in Circe's monologues to Odysseus marks a central position in the movement of the poems. Circe relates this story of the mud woman as told by a traveller, who reveals that he and his friend constructed a mud woman in boyhood as a sexual object: 'She began at the neck and ended at the/ knees and elbows: they stuck to the essentials' (*YAH*, 61). The image of the woman's body as a receptacle for male pleasure draws attention to sexual politics in the poem: 'His love for her was perfect, he could say anything to her,/ into her he spilled his entire life' (*YAH*, 61). Transformed into a human being, Circe asks Odysseus: 'Is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman?' (*YAH*, 61). Circe's transference identification with the mud woman is a clear point at which a sense of humanity manifests itself.

Analogies between Circe and the mud woman are disclosed through power struggles between Circe and Odysseus. Circe's role as a passive object is apparent in their relationship, as is the mud woman's function as a means of sexual gratification for the boys. However, Circe refuses the passivity that is forced upon her and chooses instead a self-reliant, non-ego state that is grounded in a strong sense of alterity through love:

You unbuckle the fingers of the fist,  
you order me to trust you.

This is not something that can be renounced,

it must renounce.

It lets go of me  
and I open like a hand  
cut off at the wrist

(It is the  
arm feels pain

But the severed hand  
the hand clutches at freedom). (*YAH*, 58)

The severed hand is a marvelous metaphor for Circe's abandonment of the egoic self. The dissolution of the ego is a painful process, yet it allows self-emancipation at the same time. The severed open hand cannot grip things. Circe is liberated from her desire to possess or control others. As Circe perceives, this abandonment is something that is enacted by one's own will.

The most peculiar characteristic of Circe's ill-fated love is the pain she feels towards other creatures. It is this universalising pain that ultimately triggers Circe's sense of humanity and allows her to identify with her victims, as she says to Odysseus, 'Don't you get tired of killing/ those whose deaths have been predicted/ and are therefore dead already?' (*YAH*, 51). As Kathryn VanSpanckeren notes, through experiencing human emotions such as 'the cycle of rejection, anger, and finally acceptance,' Circe highlights the relationship between herself and other beings (196). With the loss or death of self, the de-mythologised Circe learns the significance of death and hears the warning from the dead: 'Everything dies, they say,/ Everything dies' (*YAH*, 62). In this sense, Circe can be associated with an earth mother who breeds death and life simultaneously. Circe owns an island and has the power to name both the island and all the things on it. By abdicating the power to control and transform, however, Circe realises that she herself is a part of the island,

living in its web of relationships: 'You can have this water,/ this flesh, I abdicate' (*YAH*, 54). Unlike Odysseus who seeks the power of illusion, Circe faces real and living things. Whatever her experience, she embraces demystification, the recognition of the materiality of the body and of death, asking Odysseus

Don't you get tired of wanting  
to live forever?

Don't you get tired of saying Onward? (*YAH*, 51)

## **2. Living with me and the other: maternity and identification in Atwood's poetry**

Although it concerns every woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture) and the child's arrival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility - but not the certainty - of reaching out to the other, the ethical). (Kristeva, 1987: 259-60)

This section of the chapter focuses more specifically on maternity in a means of intersubjective identification in Atwood's work. Atwood explores interrelationships through the significance of bodies and suggests that the relationship between mother and child actually intensifies love. Her portrayal of maternity demonstrates love or transference in which 'a more integrated, holistic view of life' emerges (Grace, 1983: 9). As the above passage from Kristeva suggests, the maternal experience is directly related to the body and it is through her body that a mother can connect both with the other (the child) and with the world. For Kristeva, the transference and love that brings about a disruption of mother/child boundaries also constructs an outlaw ethics or (to use her term) a 'herethics,' which points towards a heterogeneous principle. This ethical framework accommodates self and other, sameness and difference, and

elaborates interpersonal dynamics. Freud's case history of Dora, however, shows transference to be a double-edged device capable of constructing a power imbalance. Despite the risk, however, Kristeva's concept of transference is largely positive. Transference binds the two subjects through dynamic effects that are akin to the act of love; the ego 'dies' for the other in the state of love. Kristevan transference or love illustrates an expanded sense of self. To the extent that love is one of the most basic emotions to affect human relationships, it is therefore central to establishing interrelationships. Atwood's *You Are Happy* and *Two-Headed Poems* together constitute an artistic model of maternity that is held together by transference, alterity, and ecology in relation to the body and love. With this in mind, I would argue that Kristeva's theories on maternity provide a useful theoretical framework for reading Atwood. Bodies or animals in Atwood's poems embody a borderline position as the site of the reflexivity of the external world.

For Kristeva, maternity begins with pregnancy. By defining pregnancy as 'an institutionalised form of psychosis: me or it, my own body or another body,' Kristeva associates the state of pregnancy with the division of identity (Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* (1986), 297); the mother undergoes an identity crisis when she adopts this borderline position. Her crisis is linked to the bodily relationship between mother and child where the 'maternal' becomes:

... the ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnamable that one imagines as femininity, nonlanguage, or body. (Kristeva, 1987: 234-235)

Kristeva calls pregnancy 'the threshold of culture and nature,' and argues that the maternal represents 'a bridge between singularity and ethics' (Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* (1986), 297). The maternal body can provide a means to accommodate

difference: 'A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh' (Kristeva, 1987: 254). Flesh or the body is a modality through which the external world or environment is perceived, and is fundamental to establish intersubjectivity or interrelationships. Kristeva's arguments on the body as a route to intersubjectivity are, I would argue, useful to a consideration of Atwood's writing.

In *Two-Headed Poems*, Atwood's attitude to the body is explicitly linked with maternity. George Woodcock points out that none of Atwood's other volumes has a more tender tone than this one. With its positive depiction of both humanity and life, Woodcock argues, Atwood's experience of being a mother diminishes her 'old theme of sexual aggression' (134). Similarly, Linda Wagner-Martin argues that it is through Atwood's maternal experience that the 'unflinching, and often macabre, humour' of her earlier works disappears for some time (Wagner-Martin, 1995: 71). In a similar vein, Sherrill Grace argues that the various forms, voices, and themes of *Two-Headed Poems* all mark new directions in Atwood's poetry. I would argue that the presence of Atwood's young daughter and the dynamics of daily motherhood inflect many of the poems in this volume: they become a defining feature of her work. 'Five Poems for Grandmothers,' for example, recalls women's lives and histories that have been forgotten in everyday life.<sup>54</sup> By identifying womanhood with household chores and with private and domestic realms, Atwood implies that conventional gender roles lie at the root of woman's marginalised position throughout history. Under western patriarchy the genealogy of women has often been

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<sup>54</sup> The connections between grandmothers, mothers and daughters further confirm the place of the body in the process of intersubjectivity, although Atwood explores matrilineal characteristics or maternity as part of a larger concern with daily living. Her focus on relationships between generations of women is best read in the context of bodily intimacy. In this section, my reading primarily traces Atwood's exploration of the maternal line of family dynamics. I will further examine poems about daily living in the larger context of intersubjectivity in the subsequent section.

an invisible history. This is implicit in the female speaker's sense of vulnerability when she attempts to write her grandmother's past. As her grandmother gets old and approaches death, the speaker writes about her, but with a certain self-consciousness: 'I make this charm/ from nothing but paper; which is good/ for exactly nothing' (*THP*, 39). The speaker begins to narrate the life of her grandmother, tracing the past and musing upon the future. What she discovers in this act of reflection is the enduring presence of the matriarchal bloodline. Unlike men who 'branch out,' women, it is argued, possess a bloodline that flows in a direct line between generations:

one woman leads to another.  
Finally I know you  
through your daughters,  
my mother, her sisters,  
and through myself:

Is this you, this edgy joke  
I make, are these your long fingers,  
your hair of an untidy bird,  
is this your outraged  
eye, this grip  
that will not give up?  
(*THP*, 37)

While the speaker presents woman and her matriarchal bloodline as outsiders in history, there is no aggressive expression of anger or frustration. The speaker's description of her grandmother evokes the image of a witch with skinny long fingers and untidy hair. Yet the tone is neither as poignant nor as negative as Susanna Moodie's in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Such a contrast reveals the degree to which this volume differs from earlier work in which the female bloodline takes the form of sibyl or witch, such as Circe. Here, a certain anger underlies Atwood's cynical wit while a gentler voice indicates an acceptance of the mother-daughter

relationship: the speaker invokes with affection the 'mother / of my mother, old bone/ tunnel through which I came' (*THP*, 40). This poem suggests that maternity no longer puts women in a victim position. Instead, it confers on women the capacity to establish intimate relationships between generations.

Kristeva's theories on maternity project these sorts of relationships among women. As Kristeva argues, it is through the experience of maternity that women are able to recover the forgotten body of their mothers:

Recovered childhood, dreamed peace restored, in sparks, flash of cells,  
instants of laughter, smiles in the blackness of dreams, at night, *opaque*  
*joy that roots me in her bed, my mother's*, and projects him, a son, a  
butterfly soaking up dew from her hand, there, nearby, in the night.  
*Alone: she, I, and he.* (Kristeva, 1987: 247; italics added.)

The special moods that the experience of maternity affords women are ones that cannot be expressed in words, but are evidenced instead in a feeling of comradeship. Not surprisingly, the relationships they manifest are not 'communication between individuals but connections between atoms, molecules, wisps of words, droplets of sentences' (Kristeva, 1987: 257). As Kristeva claims, 'women doubtless reproduce among themselves the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers' (Kristeva, 1987: 257).

Returning to problems of sexual polarity, in 'Marrying the Hangman', a prose poem, Atwood foregrounds comradeship among women and women's pasts or history through a story-telling metaphor. The poem is based on an historical episode in which a woman's wisdom saves her from a death sentence.<sup>55</sup> The woman is condemned to death for stealing clothes from her employer's wife. Ironically, the

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<sup>55</sup> In *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995* (1998) Atwood remarks this in the note: 'In eighteenth-century Quebec the only way for someone under sentence of death to escape hanging was, for a man, to become a hangman, or for a woman, to marry one. Françoise Laurent, sentenced to hang for stealing, persuaded Jean Corolere, in the next cell, to apply for the vacant post of executioner, and also to marry her' (*SP*, 211).

only way for her to escape the sentence is to rely upon the conventional gender roles of the eighteenth century and to marry the hangman. Negotiation with established institutions saves her but also represents a means by which gender distinctions are consolidated throughout history. Insisting several times that 'This is not fantasy, it is history' (*THP*, 48), Atwood attempts to disrupt the boundary between history and fantasy as in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Accordingly, in the poem the female speaker identifies with the historical woman:

My friends, who are both women, tell me their stories,  
which cannot be believed and which are true. They  
are horror stories and they have not happened to me,  
they have not yet happened to me, they have  
happened to me but we are detached, we watch our  
unbelief with horror. (*THP*, 49)

This story also signals what is to become a new focus in Atwood's work: women's bonds through love and friendship. The validity of community is suggested as an alternative vision that breaks the vicious circle and enables an understanding of the duality of life. The woman's success in saving her own life is further linked with the significance of story-telling and listening among women. Atwood implies that when women tell their stories they can challenge those institutions and opinions that are based on established gender dichotomies. The process of narrating personal horrors serves to engage listeners, and here hidden or oppressed women's stories become factual or truthful 'histories.' As Atwood herself argues, *Two-Headed Poems* emphasises the significance of identification or interrelationships among women: 'in my most recent poems, I seem to be less concerned about the relationships between men and women than I am about those among women (grandmother-mother-daughter, sisters)' (Atwood cited in Hengen, 1993: 66). In this text, the female

persona addresses her maternal forbears and traces her own mother's legacy within herself. Understanding women's 'horror stories,' however, the speaker notes: 'History cannot be/ erased, although we can soothe ourselves by/ speculating about it' (*THP*, 51). The speaker's attitude toward history runs somewhat contrary to Atwood's defense of subversiveness as often illuminated in women's story-telling. The speaker acknowledges that (women's) stories cannot change an impervious history. Shannon Hengen reads *Two-Headed Poems* from feminist psychoanalytic point of view, suggesting that the collection seeks to reclaim a primeval female existence. Despite her feminist approach here, Hengen also recognises that 'the politicized persona of Atwood's central female is discovered not in *Two-Headed Poems* where the voice is developed, but in *Lady Oracle*' instead (Hengen, 1993: 65).<sup>56</sup>

In 'Solstice Poem' Atwood (the speaker/mother) once again alerts women to their place in history: '... the women, who did not/ want to be involved... are involved' (*THP*, 83). At the centre of erased female history lies 'a numbed body/ with one more entrance than the world finds safe' (*THP*, 83). The poem uses an informal conversational tone of a personal diary in which the speaker addresses the vulnerability and political marginalisation of women. In section 4 of the poem, the speaker argues that dual impulses toward love and ruthlessness personify the duality of female history: 'I would like to tell her, Love/is enough, I would like to say,/ Find shelter in another skin ... Instead, I will say/ in my crone's voice, Be ruthless when

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<sup>56</sup> In Hengen's reading, in line with her feminist focus, Atwood's *Two-Headed Poems* is contextualized within Canadian socialist-feminism. Maternity is expressed in terms of identification or mirroring that reflects the relation between mother and daughter. In Kristeva's view, identification is a form of love and it is in language that such identification with another inheres. While Hengen's use of Kristeva's theory as a tool for reading Atwood provides a useful critical method, her analysis remains somewhat perfunctory.

you have to, tell/ the truth when you can,/ when you can see it' (*THP*, 84).

Atwood's acknowledgement of woman's identity in relation to maternity is developed perhaps most fully in 'A Red Shirt.' Maternity is represented as a badge of female identity in its intertwining of pleasure and suffering, and is explored through images of blood: 'But red is our colour by birth-/ right, the colour of tense joy & spilled pain that joins us/ to each other' (*THP*, 103). As Barbara Blakely argues, the focus on blood here is 'crucial for a feminist reading of Atwood' (47). The blood of menstruation and childbirth is inscribed within the history of women as 'a long thread of red blood' (*THP*, 103). For Kristeva, maternity can establish a herethics that is grounded on the subject of love and identification, just as the condition of pregnancy allows for the pregnant daughter's identification with her own mother. In Atwood's poem 'Daybooks II, 8: Black Stone Mother God,' this history is metaphorically manifested in a black stone which the speaker finds on the edge of a lake. This black stone, which is shaped like a female body, preserves and records the past and becomes an icon for the speaker with which to discover female identity: 'A river shaped her,/ smoothed her with sand and battered/ her against the shore, and she/ resisted, she is still here' (*THP*, 90). Here the female or mother's body seems to be conceived as belonging to 'the whole of Being or Flesh, governed by the principle of reflexivity' (Stawarska, 2002: 158). The body is a modality through which the external world or environment is perceived. Associated with the materiality of the body, the stone woman thus becomes a vehicle of intersubjectivity:

Worship what  
you like, what you want  
to be like. Old mother,  
I pray to what is  
and what refuses. (*THP*, 90)

Transcending binarisms, acknowledging 'what is and what refuses,' this speaker's prayer signals the permeable boundaries that maternity represents.

### **3. Transcending the species barrier: love and identification in Atwood's ecological writings**

In the previous section I demonstrated how the body, humanity and love are interlinked in Atwood's poetry. In this section I will further illustrate Atwood's use of imagery combining maternity, the body and love. Here, however, I will focus on the way in which Atwood develops an understanding of ecology which seeks to transcend the point of view of human beings. An obvious place to start is the animal descriptions in Atwood's poems. As signaled by an earlier collection, *The Animals in That Country*, animals are a recurring focus in Atwood's poetry. The thematic and representational roles played by animals in her work are as varied as their different manifestations and forms; we can trace the development of many themes through her depiction of animals. Whereas in the earlier collection Atwood introduces animals to highlight victimisation in a series of power games, in her later collections (from *You Are Happy* onwards), the anguish and terror that the animals express represent the sacrifice or death of the self for the existence of the other. Here animals take on a more 'universal' form and meaning. What these animals and human beings have in common is their corporeality, governed by the principle of reflexivity. The body is Atwood's basis of the value of mutuality. Challenging a kind of solipsism in power structures, the human body in Atwood's work is engaged in a borderline process where openness to otherness is possible, enacting a sense of empathy. Empathy is fundamental to the realisation of interrelatedness that transcends the species barrier.

Throughout this chapter, I have analysed intersubjectivity and

interrelationships in terms of participation rather than domination. In recognising Atwood's understanding of human beings as designed to exist in relation to other beings, my argument explores the way in which the body generates spaces of intercommunication, operating across both consciousness and perception. Yet what inevitably emerges in this process of relationship is the presence of power struggles: domination and submission. The phenomenon of power struggles persists insofar as the notion of difference is neglected in favour of interrelationships. While seeking to recognise the other, the mere shift of priority from the 'I' to the 'other' cannot sustain authentic mutual recognition. Yet despite the risk involved in these kinds of interactions, I would argue that Atwood nevertheless embraces and explores the validity of intersubjective relationships, or the state of being with the other. To put it another way, Atwood seeks to explore the meaning of our lived experiences: the interactions between human beings and the external world. Refined and celebrated in her depiction of corporeality and the ordinary reality of daily life, Atwood's belief in positive interactions manifests itself in her respect for the freedom of all beings.

'Songs of the Transformed' in *You Are Happy* provide good examples of Atwood's respect for all life forms, transcending the species barrier. These poems explore the possibility of positive connections between humankind and other creatures, suggesting that empathy is a basic element for the harmony of beings. Empathy or love requires identification with an other, and this in turn implies the capacity to transform oneself - hence the title of the sequence: 'Songs of the Transformed.' The sequence foregrounds interrelatedness by exploring empathy, beginning with a pig's grievance at his transformation into a mere commodity, and ending with a corpse telling of our silent future: death. In exploring empathy,

Atwood's poems represent this phenomenon not simply as an emotional response, but as something grounded in the actual physical bodies of her human and animal subjects. I would argue that these processes can be considered alongside recent developments in neuroscience which have sought to understand empathy in broadly analogous terms.

I want to begin by considering intersubjectivity from a neuroscientific perspective.<sup>57</sup> Positing that human beings have 'implicit certainties' about other individuals with which they establish intersubjective relations, Vittorio Gallese explores the functional mechanisms and the neural mechanisms that underpin their interactions. Drawing attention to the mirror neurons that activate the motor system through a form of simulation, Gallese posits 'the *shared manifold* of intersubjectivity' that substantiates the notion of empathy (Gallese, 2003: 172, original italics). According to Gallese, when we observe someone else's behaviour, the body responds as if the action was its own. This phenomenon, Gallese argues, occurs when mirror neurons mimic and simulate the actions of other individuals, creating the possibility of interpersonal relations. By this analysis, the self is potentially able to use the embodied actions in order to establish an empathetic relationship to the world of the other. Given this process of 'implicit, prereflexive ... action' in which 'a direct implicit link between agent and observer' is established, the 'shared manifold' appears to be inscribed in all human beings (Gallese, 2003: 174). Yet it is important to note here that these mirror neurons instantiate 'a *multimodal* representation of organism-organism relations,' involving more than a simple agent and observer connection (Gallese, 2003: 175, original italics). Instead,

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<sup>57</sup> The term intersubjectivity has its origin in Jurgen Habermas's social theory. Habermas's theory on the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding expresses the individual-social relationship and points to its existence outside the individual psyche. See Benjamin (1988):19fn.

by adapting this multimodal representation to different sectors of the body, mirror neurons engender 'a unified common intersubjective space, which paradoxically does not segregate any subject' (175). All interactive individuals are therefore initiated into a shared collectivity, and 'the self-other identity' is established.<sup>58</sup> Humans as organisms are constantly involved in the operation of neural networks stimulated by patterns of activity; intersubjectivity, therefore, is multidimensional. As Gallese shows, these neural networks are not activated by a simple witnessing of the other's action. While 'implicit certainties' involve identification with the other, at the same time they contribute to an awareness of the self-other distinction. Intersubjectivity, in this sense, both involves and transcends fixed borders and boundaries.

The point I want to make here is that the extension of one's experiential self, such as in a transpersonal sense of self, cannot just be confined to the insights of particular individual minds. According to this neurobiological approach, there is a mechanism in our experiential body by which we put ourselves into the position of others and understand them, whether they are humans, animals, or inanimate objects. What is emphasised is a sense of empathy generated not only by the mind but also by the body. Empathy is here primarily related to the body (as it activates self-other non-differentiation) and is not a phenomenon that we can consciously control. We can see this kind of process at work in 'Songs of the Transformed,' which features the voices of victimised animals or dead bodies and explores the way in which humans exploit nature and the environment. Human greed, cruelty and hatred are critiqued in 'Pig Song,' 'Bull Song' and 'Rat Song' respectively. Each of these three

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<sup>58</sup> When considered beyond the realm of action, the self-other identity referred to by Gallese is similar to the state of empathy in which the boundary between subject and other breaks down.

poems is spoken by an animal protagonist - a pig, a bull, and a rat - and the respective animals voice their grievances at their mistreatment by human beings and reflect upon the damaging ecological consequences of this. The pig in 'Pig Song,' for example, reminds people that humans exist in an interdependent relationship with the natural world. The deteriorating environment is not a problem restricted solely to the natural world, but is rather a process that affects the entire circle of life:

I am yours. If you feed me garbage,  
I will sing a song of garbage.  
This is a hymn. (*YAH*, 30)

In 'Songs of the Transformed' the violation of animals and nature is associated with a realm of power dominated by rigid reason and logic. Considering Atwood's attention to non-human life, Kathleen Vogt considers mankind's loss of contact with animals or nature as a focal point for Atwood's interrogation of 'the denial of the significance of anything outside the isolate[d] individual's will or mind' (Vogt, 1988: 169). I would argue that it is through empathy that Atwood spins out the web linking other creatures in these poems. As stated earlier, it has been argued that mirror neurons in the human body create the empathy by which self-other non-differentiation is initiated. Empathy thus intensifies relationships and is the primary source of dialogic interactions. In this context, the idea of a transpersonal ecology avoids the ethical pitfalls of anthropocentrism. Empathy enables the individual to not only establish mutual understanding between the 'I' and the 'other,' but also to realise the fact that 'all entities are aspects of a single unfolding reality' (Fox, 1995: 231).

It is my contention that what underlies Atwood's nature poetry is a process of 'identification' or love that facilitates interrelationships. In addressing the question of

human-centeredness and environmental damage, Atwood's ecological vision is strongly focused upon intersubjective or transpersonal relations. Warwick Fox has developed the notion of transpersonal ecology based on Arne Naess's sense of deep ecology, describing the transpersonal as 'a sense of self that extends beyond one's egoic, biographical, or personal sense of self' (Fox, 1995: 198). The process of identification as outlined in Naess's deep ecology theories involves an 'expansive, transpersonal sense of self' in terms of ordinary, everyday life (Fox, 1995: 217). Naess uses the term 'commonality' to describe the self's identification with another entity, whether or not the other entity is physically or mentally similar. Commonality involves similarity, yet it does not *correspond* to similarity, which is a mere superficial quality. The focal point is the '*common* experience' of identification itself, and the sense of self is expanded to include other entities through the identification process (Fox, 1995: 231). Here identification is explained as the experience of 'a sense of commonality' that is paralleled with empathy (Fox, 1995: 231).<sup>59</sup>

A transpersonal approach to ecology provides a means by which to move away from anthropocentrism. If there is a single ecological marker which challenges anthropocentrism or the concept of human self-importance, it is a love of all living things upon the earth. Atwood's defense of anti-anthropocentrism is demonstrated through the angry rat's shout in 'Rat Song': 'All I want is love, you stupid/ humanist' (*YAH*, 32). Rats are generally understood as parasites, but the insight of Atwood's poem is that if humans were placed in the same position as rats, they would act in an identical way. In 'Crow Song,' on the other hand, human life is seen to be riddled

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<sup>59</sup> In contrast to 'shallow' ecology whose anthropocentric based environmentalism involves everyday technical and scientific realms and their contents, deep ecology is concerned with a philosophical position in which we, as a part of the network of ecological relationships, ask 'deeper questions' that ultimately reveal *fundamentals*. See Fox 1995 (1990): pp.91-96.

with human foibles and foolishness. As the remarks of the head crow (the speaker in the poem) make clear, human society is regulated by people who 'have been through/ too many theories/ too many stray bullets' (*YAH*, 33). Waving banners, people fight each other over particular ideologies or causes and forget the value of life. Wars and politics strip people of reason and claim innocent lives. Ironically this is why the speaker is left alone with politics. In 'Song of the Worms' it is 'the philosophy of boots' that feeds human life, while the interconnections between various life forms are ignored. The image of boots, 'their metaphysic of kicks and ladders' which squash worms into the pavement, metaphorically illustrates hierarchical society and culture (*YAH*, 35). Worms are powerless and 'low' forms of life, but the implication is that they will prevail over humans in the end. The poem emphasises the fact that life is a process of transformation and metamorphosis. The worms themselves draw attention to the inevitability of change:

We have been underground too long,  
we have done our work,  
we are many and one,  
we remember when we were human. (*YAH*, 35)

This recognition that the worms were once human poses a challenge to the fixed boundaries sustained in the human world. The warning of the worms draws attention to the fact that human life co-exists with other life forms. The poem suggests that if humankind does not acknowledge these interconnections, there will be an apocalyptic moment in the near future. The worms will attack on the day of retribution:

Soon we will invade like weeds,  
everywhere but slowly;  
the captive plants will rebel  
with us, fences will topple,

brick walls ripple and fall. (*YAH*, 35)

The poem suggests that people will at first remain unaware of this threat. Individual indifference is here represented as a destructive element of organic life. Transformed animals and corpses in these poems celebrate death as transition, yet their particular deaths are described in terms of domination or a struggle for power.

In 'Owl Song,' this struggle is located within the realm of sexual politics. The angst of women in a male-controlled society resounds through the voice of an owl that represents 'the heart of a murdered woman' (*YAH*, 36). The owl enumerates many forms of death experienced by innocent women and seeks to understand why these injustices occur. The poem is a controlled and somewhat frustrated lament for the victimised woman, as is demonstrated in the owl's claim that there is 'only one death song,' 'though there are many ways of dying' (*YAH*, 36). In its exploration of 'the lost heart of a murderer' and the many forms of death, the owl/woman, however, is concerned neither with 'revenge' nor 'expiation' (*YAH*, 37). This ethical move, I would argue, is possibly explained by alterity as induced by the anticipation of the death of self. In discussing alterity with reference to Kristevan theories on maternity, Ewa Ziarek rightly invokes Heidegger's ontological account, which is not simply about existence but requires an awareness of death. According to Heidegger, when the subject is aware of his/her inevitable death, and the anguish of his/her own death is displaced by a fear for the death of the other, alterity enters and accomplishes the ethical movement.<sup>60</sup> As is the case when 'the Heideggerian being-toward-death gives way to being-for-the-other,' the owl (the murdered woman) is transformed into her own murderer: 'I am the lost heart of a murderer ... my claws/ will grow through his

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<sup>60</sup> See Ziarek (1993). Arguing for a female alterity that eludes essentialism, Ziarek explores the relation between mourning and ethics.

hands/ and become claws' (*YAH*, 37). Only when alterity precedes and displaces each subject can a genuine form of interrelationship be achieved. Although the conclusion of the poem (quoted above) implies the persistence of sexual polarity and its related power struggles, it also raises the possibility of harmony in the reaction of a victim whose interests go beyond the indictment or punishment of the murderer. Aptly, 'Owl Song' is followed by 'Song of the Fox,' which investigates a method by which to reconcile the individual with the other. Foxes kill hens or live-stock, but the killing is not due to a whim or a product of rivalry. There is a kind of insight in the words of the fox, who argues that the constant struggle between hunter and game, between humans and animals, is one that 'will never be won, let's leave each other alone' (*YAH*, 40). Atwood suggests that a possible answer to this dilemma lies in a recognition that nature has its own inherent roles and rights.

As I have demonstrated, many of the poems in 'Songs of the Transformed' explore the natural world from the point of view of animals. The animal speakers are what they are - pigs, bulls, rats, foxes, worms and so on - but at the same time they possess human voices that embody life as a process of transformation. As Sherrill Grace notes, the talking animals are vehicles for Atwood's criticism of the standard vices of human life, and these poems are designed to transform our perception of life (Grace: 1980: 68-69). I would also argue that the introduction of animal personae is further linked to Atwood's effort to avoid anthropocentric approaches to the natural world, although there is an unavoidable paradox that in giving voices to animals she is in a sense succumbing to anthropomorphism. Poems like 'Song of the Fox' clearly set out to explore the experiences of animals from their own point of view. According to Richard Hunt, when the fox says, 'let's leave each other alone,' he

signals a form of understanding that eludes 'a commonly held anthropocentric understanding of the natural world' (Hunt, 2002: 233). Hunt has analysed Atwood's nature poetry in terms of its environmental awareness and demonstrates how Atwood explores 'a renovated relationship between the human and the wild in nature' (Hunt, 2002: 241). Arguing that environmental issues have been an ongoing concern in Atwood's works, Hunt examines the way in which Atwood constructs the ethical stance of a transpersonal ecology.<sup>61</sup> According to Hunt, Atwood presents nature as an entity that belongs to itself and has its own rights, and this nonanthropocentric position is something which Atwood attempts to inspire in our perception of all living things (Hunt, 2002: 240).

'Corpse Song,' the last poem of the sequence, illustrates the silent world about which the worms warned: it is a world 'swollen with words you never said,/ swollen with hoarded love' (*YAH*, 44). As this title explicitly indicates, the voice of the dead reminds the living of the inevitability of death:

I bring you something  
you do not want:

news of the country  
I am trapped in,

news of your future:  
soon you will have no voice. (*YAH*, 43)

Recalling its own death, the corpse voice maintains that death is the moment when we resent the body and when the body itself turns against us. Thus the voice warns the living: 'sing now/ while you have the choice' (*YAH*, 43). Yet the voice of the corpse is not simply nostalgic. 'It was not a tragedy' for the corpse to have the fate of

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<sup>61</sup> I have drawn upon Richard Hunt's essay 'Transpersonal Wild in Margaret Atwood' in applying Warwick Fox's work to an analysis of Atwood's writing.

death (*YAH*, 43), and it has no desire to return to the world of the living. The corpse portrays death as a transition, as another way of affirming the significance of life and as a transition in the circle of nature. The after-life that the corpse reveals is not what one might expect having read various myths about the realms of the dead; in this case, the deceased 'did not become/ a tree or a constellation' (*YAH*, 43). The dead voice identifies itself variously with a winter coat, an illusion, a trick of ventriloquism, a blind noun and a bandage, drifting 'from head to head' (*YAH*, 44). Such an enigmatic transformation or metamorphosis of the body serves to present death as a process, even as a passage of birth. The last lines of the poem reflect the double existence of the corpse: 'I exist in two places,/ here and where you are.// Pray for me/ not as I am but as I am' (*YAH*, 44). This concluding rhetoric implies that death is another form of life and that life is inflected by dualities, both spatial and temporal. Figured as 'the condition of being doubly alive,' death confers duality on life (VanSpanckeren, 1988: 194). I would argue that this view of life is substantiated throughout Atwood's ecological poetry: her nature poetry cultivates our ability to perceive such a reality.

Throughout 'Songs of the Transformed,' empathy is suggested as the primary sense with which Atwood enables us to understand the condition or reality of living things. The non-human creatures ask humans to see that life itself is the transformer. The focus is upon humans as agents ruled by the motor system of empathy and as governed by the process of identification. The voices that speak for many kinds of victims demonstrate a basic feature of the operation of empathy. Ironically, by transposing themselves into humans, the others (or the creatures) become humans, and here the adversarial state no longer exists. Through an empathy that creates the dynamic relationship, the boundaries between the subject and the other are collapsed.

Acknowledging that the ability to speak is an essential element of human existence, Atwood uses the voices of her animals (victims) to posit open and unfixed subject positions and relationships. The combination of these elements is central to 'the duplicitic structure' of Atwood's poetry, thus conveying her views on the duality of life (Grace, 1980: 70). As a subject of enunciation (according to Kristevan semiology), the animal voices are able to 'receive the other's word, to assimilate, repeat, and reproduce them' and become like the other (Kristeva, 1987: 26). The animal voices illustrate the loss of the ego boundary through identification.

In Atwood's later collection, *Interlunar*, (1984) the transformative power of enunciation is further developed. The 'Snake Poems' in particular clarify how she interprets ecological phenomena with reference to the process of identification. In 'Snake Woman,' the speaker, a hunter of snakes, says: 'I was once the snake woman,/ the only person ... who wasn't terrified of [the snakes]' (SP, 268). She is depicted as a skilled snake hunter who 'could follow them by their odour,/ a sick smell, acid and glandular' (SP, 268). She even claims to capture the smell of the snakes' fear. This hunting is associated with gender distinctions as its pleasure lies in doing 'something even men were afraid of' (SP, 268). As the poem progresses, however there is a change in the speaker's perspective: 'Now, I don't know./ Now I'd consider the snake' (SP, 268). This shift signals a new sense of identification between hunter and hunted. 'Bad Mouth' draws attention to dead snakes in which a snake's putative killer nature is ironically highlighted: 'All are fanged and gorge on blood/ Each one is a hunter's hunter ... for whom killing is easy and careless/ as war, as digestion,/ why should you be spared?' (SP, 269). However, imagery of the snake as both killer and victimised animal effects a dual vision that recognises the unity of

life forms. Implicit in these descriptions of the deaths of snakes is Atwood's awareness of environmental destruction. Nonetheless, the speaker in 'Bad Mouth' still insists on distancing herself from these creatures: 'Shall I concede these deaths?// Between us there is no fellow feeling,/ as witness: a snake cannot scream' (*SP*, 269). The snake is portrayed as 'a snarled puzzle' that human knowledge cannot solve (*SP*, 270). The speaker claims that the snake is one of the most despised creatures and the only one that does not sing ('Alone among the animals/ the snake does not sing' (*SP*, 270)). However, the speaker eventually celebrates the uniqueness of the snake, demonstrating a non-anthropocentric process of identification: 'The reason for them is the same/ as the reason for stars, and not human' (*SP*, 270). This position can be explained in terms of a transpersonal ecology that accepts 'the existence of the egoic, biographical, or personal sense of self' even as it aims to evolve a 'Self-realisation' in which all entities are considered as one (Fox, 1995: 198). An awareness of the condition of the self or ego is a starting point for attaining this state of awareness.

In 'Eating Snake,' the snake that the speaker eats for her lunch is figured as a god: 'your teeth meet in divinity, in the flesh' (*SP*, 270). What underlies this provocative expression is Atwood's challenge to metaphysics and symbolism. The speaker is pragmatic rather than metaphoric: 'Forget the phallic symbolism:/ two differences: snake tastes like chicken,/ and who ever credited the prick with wisdom?' (*SP*, 270). While Atwood seeks to transcend anthropocentrism in order to construct a sense of identity or a relationship between humans and nature, her position is not grounded merely in metaphysics. As the speaker proclaims, 'it was only a snake after all' (*SP*, 270). Yet Atwood frequently returns to the celebration of

corporeality in which animals are associated with religious transcendence. In 'Psalm to Snake,' for example, the seer-poet describes the snake as 'an argument for poetry' and a 'Prophet under a stone' (*SP*, 272). The snake is also associated with the holy scriptures, described as 'O long word, cold-blooded and perfect' (*SP*, 272).

In 'After Heraclitus' the speaker claims that 'the snake is one name of God' and all nature is a holy fire 'we burn in and are renewed' (*SP*, 275). Imagery of the snake shedding its skin bespeaks the resurrection of the body. 'To talk with the body is what the snake does' (*SP*, 275) and the snake is described as a tongue formed by [a] letter on the grass. Once more, the speaker draws attention to the association between snake and god: 'This is the voice/ you could pray to for the answers/ to your sickness' (*SP*, 275). Through these associations between the snake, god and the body, the poem points towards a kind of resurrection. Significantly, the poem 'Metempsychosis' interprets the process of resurrection in terms of identification, a process in which one entity identifies itself with another entity. In the poem the snake is identified with someone known or loved. In the first line, the speaker calls the snake somebody's grandmother. By asking 'who were you when you were a snake?,' the speaker develops the idea of resurrection or identification:

This one was a dancer who is now  
a green streamer waved by its own breeze  
and here's your blunt striped uncle, come back  
to bask under the wicker chairs  
on the porch and watch over you.

Unfurling itself from its cast skin,  
the snake proclaims resurrection  
to all believers

though some tire soon of being born  
over and over

...

Who's that in the cold cellar

with apples and the rats? Whose is  
that voice of a husk rasping in the wind?  
your lost child whispering *Mother*,  
the one more child you never had,  
your child who wants back in.  
(*SP*, 271-272)

This extract foregrounds a sense of identification and interconnection between living beings. The identifying figure is the snake, a creature that plays its own particular role in the conceptual relationship between the body and death. The poem clearly reflects Atwood's ecological interest and its ethical voice can indeed be interpreted in terms of a transpersonal ecology.

As stated earlier, transpersonal ecology suggests that the process of identification occurs through the experience of commonality, whether it is interpreted in personal, ontological or cosmological terms. The basic premise underlying identification is the way in which single entities identify with all other existing entities, while simultaneously maintaining their difference. This identification does not involve an imposed form of unity or oneness, yet the process implies the loss of one's particular ego or ego boundary. This loss of ego enables one to experience 'impartial identification with all particulars' and to recognise oneself as a member of a larger collective (Fox, 1995: 256). As identification is enacted through 'steadfast friendliness,' there is no destruction or oppression of particular entities or life forms. The recipient experiences steadfast friendliness in a form of a deep love that provides him/her with 'room to move' (Fox, 1995: 257). I would argue that this concept of friendship is analogous to the sense of empathy which illustrates how life-forms are able to live together in symbiotic relationships, respecting each other's existence.

As I have already stated, empathy is a process that encompasses both psychic

and physical dimensions. Atwood's enactment of empathy challenges the boundaries between entities. Empathy underlies the connection between different species in her nature poems and draws attention to her love for life. As Atwood declares, 'There is only one of everything' (*YAH*, 92). By selecting this statement as a subtitle for the final part of her volume, *You Are Happy*, Atwood encourages us to be aware of differences beyond the solipsism of mere opposites. In 'Spring Poem,' the speaker seeks reconciliation with life forms that she has 'unbearably' damaged. Imagery of descent (although this is an act of weeding) in the poem illustrates the moment when the speaker withdraws from the human sphere and experiences an oneness with nature. The speaker crosses the species barrier to enter the natural world and becomes conscious of herself as part of it<sup>62</sup>:

I plunge  
my hands and arms into the dirt,  
swim among stones and cutworms,  
come up rank as a fox, restless. (*YAH*, 22)

Reinvoking a diving scene from the novel *Surviving*, the speaker symbolically unites with other life-forms and dissolves the boundary between humanity and nature.<sup>63</sup>

'There is only one of everything' presents the speaker's reverence for the process of daily living as it culminates in the 'living moment,' the pleasure of which relies on the physical presence of the other. Despite her awareness that life is quite repetitious, the speaker asserts that the fleeting pleasures of the body are precious and irresistible, asserting that 'I want this. I want/ this' (*YAH*, 92). In celebrating the paradoxical uniqueness of the quotidian, the speaker's focus moves from the external

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<sup>62</sup> As I argued in Chapter 1, in *Survival* Atwood explores the way in which Canadian cultural identity is linked with the victimisation of animals. See 'Animal victims' in *Survival*, pp. 71-79.

<sup>63</sup> See Arno Heller (c1996). Exploring Atwood's ecological vision presented in *Surviving*, Heller argues that the ecological vision is manifested when the protagonist recognises the equilibrium of external and internal nature.

landscape - invoked with references to tress, cats and domestic rituals - to the person she calls 'you.' In the poem the self needs to overcome its own fragmentation in order to achieve the transpersonal vision: 'I look out at you and you occur/ in this winter kitchen, random as trees or sentences,/ entering me, fading like them' (*YAH*, 92). In this vision, all living things become interrelated, affirmed in the speaker's perception of life, which extends to lives beyond the human realm. In this poem there is no sense of unity between the self and the other ('the person outside the self'), yet it is through 'a medium other than words' that being human or non-human comes to be experienced, communicated, and sensed in a process of mutuality (Vogt, 1988: 165).

The transpersonal concepts and visions that are evident throughout Atwood's poetry become more explicit in the poem 'Book of Ancestors.' The poem begins with a description of Aztec sacrifice, the excision of the heart of a living man for the gods of Mexico. The scene is portrayed in the carvings on a pyramid, described as 'the painted border' (*YAH*, 94). As one of the central motifs of the poem, the historic Aztec sacrifice serves as a model for victimisation. This illustration, however, is set apart from other images of passive victimisation in Atwood's earlier work. While the poet speaker is attentive to the significance of death, she attempts to instigate a change in the way death is perceived. Death is not for 'the gods and their/ static demands . our demands' (*YHH*, 95). Here, 'death patterns' are 'obscure as fragments of an archaeology' (*YAH*, 95). The speaker's attitude toward death reflects Atwood's sense of self, a form of process. Highlighting the condition of frescoes that cannot be pieced together, Atwood implies that death is indeterminate. In section 3 of the poem the image of the ritualistic Aztec sacrifice is still used, but it is now connected with

the process of the self's openness to otherness. Here Atwood represents death as a form of love that sets the individual free, encapsulated in the traditional imagery of the sacrificial victim. Death and love are related entities that enable the self to be open to life.

This is comparable to the condition of interrelatedness that Kristeva suggests in her analysis of the maternal body, an entity that absorbs the duality of primal fusion and its loss. What Kristeva actually traces in the maternal body is the working of love in which the self expands him/herself to 'the dimensions of the universe' (Kristeva, 1987: 5). As she argues, the moment of love is the moment at which 'ours, his and mine mingled, enlarged. Expended, infinite space, where, out of my lapses, I utter, through the interpolated loved one, the conjuring up of an ideal vision. Mine? His? Ours? Impossible and yet maintained' (Kristeva, 1987: 5). In keeping with these views, Atwood's poem suggests that death is not a performance to assuage the gods, but is rather a stirring of new life. The sacrificial victims are transformed into lovers: 'History/ is over, we take place/ in a season, an undivided space, no necessities/ hold us closed, distort/ us' (*YAH*, 95). The former victims' free and encompassing love is the source of a transpersonal sense of self and represents the kind of union that is identified as a feature of enlightened, ecological awareness. The transference between lovers is one means by which Atwood engages with the notion of intersubjectivity or interrelationships. Atwood's use of sacrificial ritual as a means by which to open up the self challenges the very concept of death as a destroyer of life. Atwood thus questions the significance of death within a metaphysical context. Through the Aztec metaphor, the paradoxical nature of death and life gives way to the process of becoming or life-as-process (Grace, 1980: 76). Atwood immerses the

lover in the image of subject-in-process:

You are intact, you turn  
towards me, your eyes opening, the eyes  
intricate and easily bruised, you open

yourself to me gently, what  
they tried, we  
tried but could never do  
before . without blood, the killed  
heart . to take  
that risk, to offer life and remain

alive, open yourself like this and become whole. (*YAH*, 96)

As Grace suggests, the poems in the last section of *You Are Happy*, especially 'Book of Ancestors,' provide 'an element of hope' in the volume which nevertheless recognises the existence of power struggles (Grace, 1980: 77). I would argue that Atwood extends and sustains this hope in later volumes through her nature poetry. 'Burned Space,' the first poem in *Two-Headed Poems*, is a good example of this process. Disastrous images of a forest fire are presented in elegiac terms, yet the poem transcends this sense of finality. As Atwood writes, 'Before the burn, this was a forest./ Now it is something else' (*THP*, 8). Despite the disaster that disrupts the natural cycle, there is still a sign of hope here. Atwood's reference to 'something else,' points towards a process of transformation that is oriented towards regeneration rather than degradation (Hunt, 2002: 239). Hunt observes that among these sombre images of destruction we can also see 'the reddish flowers and glowing seeds' which imply regeneration (*THP*, 9). I would argue that Atwood's belief in the union of nature is central to this process of transformation. The burning in this poem is not confined to the forest and its creatures alone: as if the burning had damaged her own body, the speaker senses that her 'hands are never the same' (*THP*, 9).

'Daybooks I' and 'Daybooks II' in *Two Headed-Poems* are remarkable

examples of this process, showing how country living can enhance the unity of life. 'Daybooks I' opens with a description of a landscape that is 'reduced to the basics' by drought (*THP*, 26). Here Atwood repeats the (same) difficulties of country living that she illustrates in the poem 'Nothing New Here,' where the speaker's unfamiliarity with nature is evident in her irritation regarding the vitality and cyclical vicissitudes of the natural world. As the speaker says in 'Nothing New Here,' 'what defeats us, as always, is/ the repetition: weather/ we can't help, habits we don't break' (*THP*, 24). Nevertheless, for Atwood nature is a life-force that 'still gives what we eat' (*THP*, 25). Rural life can offer emotional sustenance but it can also prove unyielding. As I have argued, 'Daybooks I' acknowledges the transformative aspects of living in the countryside. Comparing her life to a 'leaking boat,' the speaker dramatises the potential dangers in nature. The speaker makes reference to the life of the pioneer who faces a hostile landscape, and yet there is a deep sense of the gratification provided by 'the smells/ of cooking earth: baked roots, the comfort/ of windfall pears, potatoes' (*THP*, 32). In 'Daybooks II,' the speaker moves beyond the putatively hostile features of nature and instead celebrates a lifestyle that involves working closely with the earth and its fruits. The speaker embraces the organic, the archaic, and the emotional sustenance of rural life. As Barbara Blakely points out, here it is everyday work and woman's work that enables reconciliation with the earth and its elements (49). 'Daybooks II, 8: Black Stone Mother God' engages with the putative connection between woman and nature. Atwood suggests that woman functions as an important link to establish relationships with the non-human world. For Atwood, women's work draws attention to the way in which the earth creates gifts for all living things. Nature becomes a female haven, a place where woman

worships the earth and its biological processes. Whether or not nature sides with women, there exists an implied dichotomy between nature and culture, where culture is connected with male experience. Since this conventional model tends to relegate woman to the position of the other, *Two-Headed Poems* has generated a range of debates amongst feminist critics (Grace, 1983: 10).

Judith McCombs, for example, argues that 'nature becomes ... the body and identity of the woman *I*' in Atwood's work (McCombs, 1978: 72). In discussing Atwood's gender politics, McCombs also writes, 'The relation of the *I* to nature shifts from the men's sexual power struggle to the woman's identification and alliance' (72). McCombs's reading is founded upon the notion that men and women conceptualise nature in profoundly different ways. While Atwood's conception of nature eschews 'the virgin and temptress attributes' that are evident in conventional male representations of nature, McCombs argues that Atwood nevertheless retains an association between nature and the maternal (72). Significantly, Hunt has argued that McCombs's analysis of Atwood's attitude to nature and gender enacts an anthropocentric approach to Atwood's nature poetry. As I mentioned in my analysis of 'Burned Space,' although the speaker identifies with nature, Atwood's description of nature does not follow conventional notions of the relationships between woman and nature. It is true that women and nature are identified as life-givers or life-sources, suggesting connections with familiar images of 'mother nature,' but I would argue that Atwood's understanding of maternal caring or the bounty of nature goes beyond conventional gender dialectics.

Existing critical analyses of Atwood's nature poetry have often ignored the importance of maternity in her non-anthropocentric approach. Neither Hunt nor

McCombs, for example, engages closely with this issue. Invoking conventional conceptions of maternity, they do not fully recognise what Atwood's combination of maternity and nature represents. I would like to address this critical lacuna by engaging more closely with the notion of identification in Atwood's work, looking at the way that it instigates a transpersonal sense of self. I would argue that for Atwood, maternity serves as 'a sense of commonality' through which she embraces both humans and nature. As in the notion of commonality evident in Naess's deep ecology, maternity plays a role as identification itself, crossing the species barrier. In other words, maternity highlights the common experience of different life forms. Based on 'commonality' rather than 'similarity,' maternity, and the process of identification, transcends binary oppositions such as man versus woman, or humans versus nature. Identification is a fundamental process through which Atwood connects humans to all creation.

However controversially, Atwood clearly associates women with nature in 'Daybooks II.' In discussing this association, Carol P. Christ has suggested that Atwood's writing emphasises '[woman's] grounding in nature and natural energies' (qtd. in Grace, 1983: 10). The growth of apples in 'Daybooks II, 10,' for example, clearly traces the cycle of nature and the 'natural energies' that create life. This poem imbues the apples with female and maternal characteristics: the tree 'bleeds' and yields windfalls that feed other small creatures. Within the dynamics of the seasons, the apples fulfil their biological function, and the process continues whether humans acknowledge it or not. The speaker claims that when people say 'apple,' they don't fully understand what apples are; 'The word *apple*' cannot encapsulate the dynamic existence of apples as they are in the process of becoming. People easily forget

things that they cannot see: 'we are blunt & thankless' (*THP*, 92):

But the apples condense again  
out of nothing on their stems  
like the tree bleeding; something  
has this compassion. (*THP*, 92)

As a gift of the earth, the apples that co-exist with the environment or the presence of invisible natural energies point towards the interrelatedness of living entities.

In 'Daybooks II, 11: Apple Jelly,' the speaker celebrates the taste of life that is grounded in a co-operation between humans and nature. Insisting on the way in which country life enables a connection between humans and the natural world, the speaker proclaims the validity of physical labour as a process enacted in harmony with nature. The poem questions the commodification of nature in processed foods and thus raises environmental issues:

No sense in all this picking,  
peeling & simmering  
if sheer food is all  
you want; you can buy it cheaper. (*THP*, 93)

It is in apple jelly that the value of everyday work, the relationship between the sun, the muscles and the fingers, manifests itself. For the speaker, this is preserved in the sweet jelly itself: 'we keep/ the taste of the act, taste/ of this day' (*THP*, 93). Further, in 'April, Radio, Planting, Easter,' the last poem of the sequence, the speaker draws attention to the discovery or acceptance of the significance of everyday work in rural life that signals the possibility of reconciliation between human and non-human worlds: 'the earth that is here and browns your/ feet, thickens your fingers,/ unfurls in your brain and in/ these onion seedlings' (*YAH*, 97). This poem presents the moment in which humans experience becoming one with the earth and with other life

forms. The speaker depicts the earth as a 'massive tide/ warm as liquid/ sun' in which people realise that 'there is no *other*' (*THP*, 97). The earth presents a common ancestry for all life. In Atwood's metaphor, 'all waves are one wave' (*THP*, 97).

The poem 'Marsh, Hawk,' on the other hand, demonstrates Atwood's explicit support for environmentalists, a support that resounds throughout her work. In exploring the degradation of the environment, which is illuminated in diseased trees and industrial waste (including abandoned tires, bottles and cans), 'Marsh, Hawk' suggests ways in which humans can contribute to the resolution of environmental problems, advancing Atwood's belief that the world is a system of interrelated entities. As is the case in 'Pre-Amphibian,' a poem in *The Circle Game*, 'Marsh, Hawk' describes the swamp as a primordial realm whence all life emerges, although it 'spreads on the/ land like a bruise' and is described also as a 'mass grave' (*THP*, 88). Although these latter descriptions have negative associations, Atwood also reverses conventional understandings of nature as other. As Hunt argues, the poem posits 'a new role for humans in the natural world' (Hunt, 2002: 240). 'Intrusion is not what we want,' asserts the speaker, '... we want it to open' (*THP*, 88-89). Atwood suggests here that unity is not possible if nature is treated like an object or like the other, but that harmony is indeed possible when humans encounter nature as another form of themselves:

to have [the marsh] slide  
through us, disappearance  
of the skin, this is what we are looking for,  
the way in. (*THP*, 89)

In 'Night Poem,' Atwood similarly foregrounds the connection of humans and nature, life and death, whilst underwater spirits and landscape create a mystic and

supernatural atmosphere. As is the case in 'Marsh, Hawk,' there are many negative descriptions of the landscape: it is described as 'moon damp as a mushroom,/ its drowned stumps and long birds/ that swim, where the moss grows/ on all sides of the trees' (*THP*, 107). Despite this negative imagery, the spirits of nature are identified as the parents of humans. The nature parents speak to a human child about the wilderness: 'There is nothing to be afraid of/ it is only the wind' (*THP*, 107). Atwood challenges notions of the wilderness as a threatening space, interpreting it instead as a locus of 'natural energies' that are metaphorically presented as 'your father the thunder/ your mother the rain' (*THP*, 107).

'All Bread' is one of Atwood's most successful representations of the organic processes of life. I would argue that by tracing the process by which bread comes into existence, Atwood points towards the idea of 'the one and the many' that characterises the transpersonal sense of self (Fox, 1995: 259)<sup>64</sup>:

All bread is made of wood,  
cow dung, packed brown moss,  
the bodies of dead animals, the teeth  
and backbones, what is left  
after the ravens. The dirt  
flows through the stems into the grain,  
into the arm, nine strokes  
of the axe, skin from a tree,  
good water which is the first  
gift, four hours. (*YAH*, 109)

Illustrating the way in which the cooperation of nature and human labour creates bread, the poem draws attention to interconnections between different organic entities. Outwardly there is no similarity or association between cow dung, moss, and the remains of dead animals, but they represent a fecund mixture in which grain can

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<sup>64</sup> Notably, Mohandas Gandhi compared all living entities with water drops in the ocean, arguing that 'each drop is an entity and yet is a part of the whole.' See Fox's *Toward A Transpersonal Ecology*, p.259.

grow. The speaker associates the salty taste of good bread with human labour: 'nine/ strokes of the axe, the salt/ taste of your mouth' (*THP*, 239). Ultimately, the smell of earth is associated with mortality: 'the deaths/ before and after' (*THP*, 239). As an emblem of mutuality, the bread of communion, it is suggested, encapsulates all entities subject to the cycle of life and death. These processes are moving affirmations of community and unity that lead to a kind of consecration:

Lift these ashes  
into your mouth, your blood;  
to know what you devour  
is to consecrate it,  
almost. All bread must be broken  
so it can be shared. Together  
we eat this earth. (*THP*, 109)

Associated as it is with communion, the bread points towards and indeed encapsulates the ethics of participation that pervades Atwood's work.

As I have argued in this chapter, interrelationships are portrayed by Atwood as dynamic processes grounded in the indeterminate subject of love or empathy. Her representations of male-female relationships explore a form of corporeality that embodies openness and intersubjectivity, focusing upon the position and role of the (female) body in power structures. The body enables individuals to recognise their reflective capacity and is fundamental to establish interrelationships. The daughter who identifies with her own mother, for example, represents Atwood's ethical subject who can transcend both fixed boundaries in the human world, and the species barrier itself. The imagery of the body and maternity in Atwood's work undermines the boundaries between living entities. Atwood draws attention to the way in which the body, particularly the maternal body, challenges restrictive codes or binaries. Her

ethical subject thus can be explained by Kristeva's theories on maternity and Fox's theories on transpersonal ecology. Foregrounding the mother's love and the process of transference, Kristeva illustrates an individual's reflective capacity or empathy which facilitates openness to otherness. Similarly, the expanded sense of self in transpersonal ecology personifies identification that transcends the individual ego. The subject of identification or love in Atwood's poetry is a model of reciprocity in which self and other, sameness and difference, are reconcilable. This amorphous subjectivity accommodates Atwood's ethical vision.

My next and final chapter will explore death in relation to Kristeva's theories on mourning and melancholia. Death as a process of life is linked with the act of writing, and/or with the creation of art in which the inter-subjective self challenges fixed boundaries.

## Chapter 5. The subject of mourning and melancholia

This chapter explores Atwood's interest in boundaries or duality, and her mixing of the genres of fiction and autobiography, with reference to the subject of melancholia and mourning. The melancholic subject, according to psychoanalysis, is characterised by an amorphous ontological state, occupying a borderline state regulated by the death drive. I would argue that the act of creativity in Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) can be interpreted with reference to psychoanalytic theories on melancholia, as these texts are fixated upon death and ambivalence, disrupting the boundary between the fictive self and the autobiographical writer, as well as the boundary between the artistic world and the material world. In these texts, Atwood foregrounds death in a variety of ways, and yet also demonstrates a belief in writing as a means by which to expand and develop the self constructively (*SW*, 348).<sup>65</sup> As I will demonstrate, in *Cat's Eye* and *Morning in the Burned House*, artistic creation is presented as a process through which the subject affirms itself and confronts painful realities. Art or writing not only sublimates the fear of death inherent in the self; it also bonds the self to others in an awareness of the 'human condition.'

Kristeva's elaboration of mourning and melancholia through the framework of signification is central to my reading of death and artistic creation in Atwood's work. Drawing upon Freud's theories on ego development in which the process of mourning is recognised as a primary step for character formation, Kristeva focuses on how the speaking subject embodies the nature of mourning. Kristeva declares that to some extent, all speaking beings are already and always melancholic, bearing the

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<sup>65</sup> As explained in the list of abbreviation at the beginning of this thesis, '*SW*' is an abbreviation of *Second Words*, and will be used throughout this chapter.

trauma of the division and the loss of the link to the maternal body.<sup>66</sup> But she suggests that the subject is able to live a meaningful life in so far as this pain can be symbolised and narrated. As Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*, the writing subject can be interpreted symbolically as a 'phobic' 'who succeeds in metaphorising in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs' (Kristeva, 1982: 38). In other words, the writer protects him/herself from the unnameable or the existential void by using metaphor. Here, Kristeva shows how art or writing enables the subject to confront trauma. The writer's repeated acts of filling the void created by the primal division can be compared with the myth of Sisyphus and his boulder. The mature writer, Kristeva explains,

... never stops harking back to symbolization mechanisms, within language itself, in order to find a *process* of eternal return, and not in the *object* that it names or produces, the hollowing out of anguish in the face of nothing. (Kristeva, 1982: 43; original italics)

For Kristeva, the death instinct resides in the ego and the writer brings it into the symbolic order, language. Despite the recognition that language cannot represent death, Kristeva suggests how the writer can alleviate his/her suffering by repeatedly evoking the void of death:

Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect - to sadness as imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway; to joy as imprint of the triumph that settles me in the universe of artifice and symbol, which I try to harmonize in the best possible way with my experience of reality. (Kristeva, 1989: 22)

The fear of death is a dominant emotion expressed throughout Atwood's work, and images of violence, death and isolation are common in her literary world. Atwood

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<sup>66</sup> Kristeva's book *Black Sun* (1989) offers a full elaboration of her interest in the 'writer's psychic investment in language, how it is that language enables or disables primary psychic processes' (Parkin-Gounelas, 56).

portrays death as an intimate stranger encountered sometimes in dreams, sometimes in reality. Earlier poems often disclose the fear of aging and ultimately death in an ironic and sometimes sardonic voice. Yet I shall argue that *Cat's Eye*, *Morning in the Burned House* and *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002) bring us to the point at which we can see the intimacy of death as a form of life. What I suggest here is that while the death drive propels the subject towards destruction, artistic transformations serve to alleviate the subject's crisis. The process of artistic creation allows the subject to fulfil the process of mourning and to escape from melancholia. Atwood has argued that oppression stems from 'a failure of imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings' (*SW*, 397), and I would argue that death in Atwood's writing demonstrates her resistance to this failure of imagination.<sup>67</sup> In the mourning poems of *Morning in the Burned House*, in particular, Atwood attempts a reconciliation with death which appears repeatedly as a threatening force throughout her poems. Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and *Morning in the Burned House* explore the way in which artistic creation protects the self against melancholia, and death serves as the catalyst for this enterprise.

### **1. *Cat's Eye*: ambivalence and sorrow for lost objects beyond conscious perception**

*Cat's Eye* explains the effects of childhood trauma on a middle-aged divorcee and mother of two, Elaine Risely, who was bullied as a child. Given that Risely is a middle-aged female artist whose father was from Nova Scotia (the home province of

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<sup>67</sup> In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood reveals that her interest in the relation between death and writing intensified after she read Dudley Young's book *Origins of the Sacred: The Ecstasies of Love and War* (1991).

both Atwood's parents), and given that the novel engages in intertextual dialogue with the imaginative world of Atwood's earlier works, it is tempting to see Elaine as a version of Atwood herself, but this is a risky strategy. As Sherrill Grace claims in her essay on Atwood's autobiographical 'I,' conflating the 'I' of the writing Subject with the real woman, the writer, is a potential blind alley (Grace, 1994: 189). In speculating about the reason why some critics identify Atwood with her female characters, Grace draws attention to the way in which women's writing in particular is often read as autobiographical. As Atwood has herself pointed out, 'A man's work is reviewed for its style and ideas, but all too often a woman's is reviewed for the supposed personality of the author as based on the jacket photograph' (*SW*, 331). Grace locates the origin of this misreading in some critics' inability to interpret the relationship between genre and gender. Exploring the autobiographical genre which conventionally enforces the 'I' of a unified identity, she claims that Atwood's introduction of the elusive female autobiographical 'I' in her novels undermines the conventions of the genre.

According to New Criticism, works of art are 'organic and self-identical,' and cannot be constrained by generic categories (Ramazani, 1994: 24). I would argue that it is through the melancholic seer-narrator that Atwood manifests her anti-generic views in *Cat's Eye*. The melancholic subject, Elaine, is obsessed with her childhood memories and thus dislocated from the present moment, and the autobiographical narrative she offers is elusive and calls into question some of the generic conventions of autobiography. While the narrator retraces her earlier selves and the selves of others, there emerges a gap between realities that the text and the narrator (or by extension the reader) expose. At the centre of this tension, I would argue, is an

underlying melancholia and narrative ambivalence. Atwood brings the autobiographical form to the fore to show how its literary conventions are transgressed. In analysing this phenomenon, I shall explore how melancholia and its effects are the main sources of her ongoing interrogation of boundaries.

In her analysis of *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jessie Givner also draws attention to *Cat's Eye's* pseudo-autobiographical form. Asserting that Atwood uses 'shifting structures of address' in the novel to destabilise 'the sense of a fixed autobiographical subject,' Givner notes the subversiveness that is embedded in her narrative structures. According to Givner, the deferring of 'the voice of the autobiographical subject' in the opening of the text, which is narrated by Elaine's dead brother, demonstrates how Atwood uses autobiography to disrupt the very notion of fixed subjectivity that the genre itself conventionally advances (Givner, 1992: 71). In my analysis of the autobiographical elements in *Cat's Eye*, I want to begin by investigating Atwood's own views on the writer and the act of writing.

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood uses Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (c1992) as an example of the duplicity or doubleness evident in the relationship between artists or writers and their creations. To clarify her argument that 'writing splits the self into two,' Atwood draws attention to the existence of doubles of Alice in Carroll's text, also emphasising the 'construction of alternate worlds' realised in the act of writing (*Negotiating*, 32; 56). Alice is described as 'a mirror-gazer' who looks at both sides of the world: life and art. In this sense, she can be interpreted as a seer-writer. For Atwood, Alice is 'both an eye-witness and an I-witness' and is a figure she often uses to symbolise the role of the writer (*SW*, 348). Atwood notes that Alice retains her doubles even at the

moment that she passes through the mirror. The ideal image of the writer whose self is constituted by a multi-layered 'I' is presented by the merging of 'the "real" Alice with the other Alice - the imagined Alice, the dream Alice, the Alice who exists nowhere' (*Negotiating*, 57). Metaphorically conceptualising the act of writing as the moment at which Alice walks into the mirror, Atwood underlines the process through which Alice becomes an indeterminate subject who doesn't belong exclusively to either world, and yet inhabits both worlds simultaneously. Linking Alice's doubles with the writer's duplicity, Atwood strives to defend her notion of writing as an act which represents dynamic processes and change. As she writes in *Second Words*, 'writing itself is a process, an activity which moves in time and through time, and it is self-less' (344). In her awareness that the process of reading is a necessary element in the act of writing, Atwood elaborates her view of writing-in-process which enables her to distance herself from her own works of art, allowing herself to become the writer of doubleness.

On the one hand, while Atwood tells us that writing is an act of creativity where the imagination works freely, she also argues that literature is nevertheless implicated in the material world, reflecting the writer's connection with his/her society. In her view, writers are not totally cut off from society; instead, they project or represent society and their own selves in their writing, whether consciously or unconsciously. She argues that 'fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community' (*SW*, 346), suggesting that fiction can engage in a critique of a world in which organised religions and social and political institutions are losing their moral or political credibility. Fiction is one of the possible mechanisms 'through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave

towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves' (346). In her argument for the moral function of literature, Atwood asserts that the writer 'bears witness,' rather than merely indulging in self-expression for its own sake: 'the writer is ... the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer *bears witness*. Bearing witness is not the same as self-expression' (348; original italics). I would argue that this double identity of the writer ultimately encapsulates Atwood's strategy of reconciling art with material reality in her work.

The autobiographical 'I' in *Cat's Eye* could be interpreted within this context, encapsulating a dynamism and duality through its consistent evasiveness. In the novel, the cat's eye marble becomes a symbol of the seer-narrator and her double vision. What is more, the cat's eye marble itself represents a form of duplicity or indeterminacy: 'The cat's eyes really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They're eyes of something that isn't known but exists anyway' (62).<sup>68</sup> While the cat's eye is invested with supernatural powers ('I look into it, and see my life entire' (398)), the meaning contained within the cat's eye can be elusive: 'Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees. I can see people moving ... without feeling anything else about them. I am alive in my eyes only' (141). The significance of seeing and the doubleness of the cat's eye marble, I would argue, correspond closely with the double figuration and ambivalence of the melancholic narrator's self and her traumatic experiences. Elaine Risley's girlhood friends' bullying culminates in her near death underneath the freezing ravine bridge in which she has her vision of the Virgin Mary. Linked with this agony, the Virgin Mary and the sign of the cat's eye

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<sup>68</sup> Page references will be to the Virago (1990) edition.

represent Elaine's melancholia and the doubleness of the artist's powers of vision. Notably Cordelia, Elaine's double and childhood tormentor, reinforces the narrator's amorphous subjectivity and narrative ambivalence caused by traumatic experiences: as Elaine observes, 'We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key' (411). Just as the cat's eye marble operates across boundaries between material reality and imagination, past and present, so the narrative of *Cat's Eye* remains double and incomplete.

In *Cat's Eye* it is Elaine's life painting that allows her to explore her harrowing past. Elaine's attempt to restore herself by drawing her past into the paintings, and to free herself from the traumatic memories of childhood, can be considered in terms of Julia Kristeva's metaphor of the writer as the melancholic. In Kristeva's view, art or writing is a means by which the phobic subject can face the void within the ego. If pain or trauma can be represented, the subject can overcome the fear inherent in the ego and protect him/herself from the unnameable, death. In *Cat's Eye*, however, the narrator's efforts to control and contain the endless sorrow that grips her ultimately fails, because she is unable to articulate her suffering. Even the perspective of her adult self is not strong enough to face the events of childhood. Elaine's failure to release the grief inherent within her ego is caused by the fact that she cannot locate the origin of it. It is melancholia that entraps Elaine in permanent sadness.

According to Freud, in contrast to 'mourning,' in which the ego overcomes the grief caused by loss through the work of mourning, melancholia entraps the ego within a state of perpetual sorrow. He considers melancholia as 'a pathological disposition' (Freud, 'Mourning' (1917): 243). The melancholic person's

unawareness of 'what he has lost in him,' even though 'he knows whom he has lost,' distinguishes melancholia from the simple process of mourning (Freud, 'Mourning' (1917): 245). Unable properly to release the grief from the loss of an object - what Freud calls 'the unknown loss' - the melancholic accommodates the loss within his/her ego and the ego becomes the lost object through this process of incorporation (245). As with his/her denial of the loss of the unspeakable object, the melancholic cannot complete the work of mourning which enables him/her to become free again. While gradually incorporating and internalising the loved object within the ego, the melancholic turns the world, 'the ego itself,' into a 'poor and empty' place (Freud, 'Mourning' (1917): 246). The self-reproaches that the ego manifests after identifying him/herself with the abandoned object can be explained by the notion of ambivalence. Thus Freud differentiates melancholia from the temporary work of mourning.

These arguments are relevant to a reading of *Cat's Eye*. Unable to understand what she has lost and what she has forgotten, Elaine is left with an undefinable feeling of loss. She laments the absence of something that she cannot identify, striving fruitlessly to bring it back. My reading of *Cat's Eye* focuses on the melancholia that is caused by the narrator's difficulty with anchoring herself in the world, and her loss of communication with the world, embodied in her narrative in an inarticulable sorrow. In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood substantiates her narrator's melancholic state with the repeated use of 'as if' patterns which serve to inscribe ambiguity throughout the narrative. The narration of uncertainty and indeterminacy in the text reflects the melancholic narrator's traumatic experience. As with Elaine's anxious return to the repressed memories in which she cohabits within the past and the present, the meaning of her story is subject to constant revision and reworking.

Thus, her story is never finished; it remains open-ended, leaving herself and the reader in a void of reverberating echoes.

Atwood opens *Cat's Eye* with the protagonist's description of time in a figurative image, a shape 'like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another' (3). Elaine Risley, the autobiographical 'I,' engages with the temporal patterns of her life story with the opening of the first retrospective exhibition of her work. Through this device, *Cat's Eye* becomes a novel in which the protagonist looks back through the present to the past in an attempt to define herself. We witness the protagonist growing old, and the world around her changes. However, these changes are cast in a temporal framework in which the present is an accumulation of what has preceded it. Evoking her dead brother Stephen, who told her that time exists as a dimension like space so that 'you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once,' Elaine situates her life story in a temporal framework in which 'nothing goes away' (3). Stephen's unified field theory explains that in a relational context, everything exists as 'a fossil, a leftover from the first picoseconds of creation,' and Elaine conceptualises her identity as 'fragments of the past' (*CE*, 332). In this matrix of space-time and matter-energy, Elaine inhabits the worlds of both life and death, past and present, and blurs the boundaries that constitute her identity. These various lines of temporal succession produce an amorphous subject, displaced and fractured in accumulated moments of time: as Elaine observes, 'There is never only one, of anyone' (6).

In keeping with this view, Elaine resurrects her dead brother in her narrative, opening her story with the voice of the dead. The narrating subject is thus suspended between the dead and the living. As Coral Ann Howells states, Elaine's life story is

'a memorial to the dead,' like other life writings (Howells, 1994: 209). Interpreting *Cat's Eye* as an autobiographical fiction which transgresses the generic conventions of life writing through its unreliable amorphous nature, Howells underlines the narrator's attempt to define herself through her life story. That is, only after drawing the pictures of her life can the narrator understand what those events of her life meant to her, and what her place in the world might be. In this sense, the narrative decides the place of the subject in the world. Although death is not her main concern in the essay, Howells notes the evocation of death in the narrator's dual perception, which she refers to as 'the sign of the artist's power of vision' (Howells, 1994: 211). The narrator's recognition that 'nothing goes away' in the universe mirrors the double vision with which she attempts to recall things that she cannot see but that she knows to exist, resulting in a kind of haunting. The narrator engages herself in a process of presenting a space of narrative and painting where opposites, specifically the living and the dead, can coexist. It could be argued that it is the narrator's artistic vision that propels her to challenge the nothing (death) that hovers over her as a form of emptiness. However, her attempt to escape from the gaping hollowness through artistic creation is not successful. In fact, it is only after seeing her paintings in the retrospective that Elaine experiences something resembling artistic insight. As Elaine says, she confronts the void again when she returns to Toronto (her childhood home) to stage her retrospective: 'Last night I felt the approach of nothing. Not too close but on its way' (*CE*, 41). Elaine's feeling of nothingness is not new to her. In addressing her childhood experiences, Elaine observes that 'nothing' was the word she used to explain herself: '*What do you have to say for yourself?*' Cordelia used to ask. Nothing, I would say. It was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was

nothing, as if there was nothing there at all' (41). Elaine's choice of words in this context is an intertextual reference to *King Lear*, where Lear's daughter Cordelia (ultimately) dies as a result of saying 'nothing' ('Nothing will come of nothing': *King Lear*, 1.i.92). Death, mourning and 'nothing' are crucial concepts in both Shakespeare's and Atwood's texts. In Atwood's novel, Cordelia is described as Elaine's double, underlining her boundary-subject status, and she confirms the existential void or nothing that Elaine feels. What is more, Cordelia is identified as an absent presence, illustrating Elaine's elusive subjectivity: 'Cordelia must be living somewhere. She could be within a mile of me, she could be right on the next block' (8).

Elaine's definition of herself as a nothing, I would argue, is similar to the way the melancholic perceives him/herself. Elaine's melancholic attributes are reflected in her repeated claims to having a connection with empty space or the void, a central motif in the novel. When the young Elaine watches the stars in the dark sky, she feels that she herself is fading. In this state of reverie, in something which resembles an epiphany, she perceives her own death-like emptiness: 'I feel as if my body is dissolving and I am being drawn up and up, like thinning mist, into a vast emptying space' (105). Just as the melancholic makes his/her world blank, so Elaine describes her inner and external worlds as nothingness. There is another incident in the novel in which Elaine identifies herself with a vampire, the undead. Elaine informs Cordelia of her doubleness and her own death: 'You've never known, but I'm one of a twins [sic]. Identical ones, you can't tell us apart by looking ... I'm just telling you the truth. You're my friend, I thought it was time you knew. I'm really dead. I've been dead for years' (233).

Elaine's identification with death or a state of nothingness strongly projects the melancholic's condition that dominates her story, creating an atmosphere of mourning and ambivalence. Elaine returns to Toronto, her childhood home, and attempts to map out the realm of her earlier selves. But she finds that the city is a place in which she is perpetually lost in her dreams. As she states, it is 'some limbo' in which 'nothing happens,' and yet she cannot escape from it (335). From the outset, there is no consolation here; all she can find are her 'pictures of the dead' (*CE*, 26), and it is death that awaits her. Since Toronto represents pain and suffering associated with Elaine's tormenting memories of childhood, her choice of this city for her first retrospective reveals a masochistic instinct. Indeed, it is masochism that motivates the narrator's attraction to death. As Freud explains in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920),' masochism is the substantiation of the death drive that culminates in ego-extinction (54). As a variant form of desire, masochism locates pleasure in pain. In this context, Elaine's return to the place in which her ego experienced dissolution is comparable to 'the journey toward not-being' that masochism embraces (Williams, 1995: 172).

In *Cat's Eye*, although Elaine is clearly traumatised by the childhood bullying, it is not easy to establish exactly what triggers her melancholia. A clue is offered when Elaine makes reference to the Life Drawing teacher Josef she met as a teenager at a night course held at the Toronto College of Art. The Life Drawing students call Josef a D.P. (*displaced person*) marked by melancholy and emptiness, and yet Elaine seems to identify with him as a fellow melancholic. Elaine is married to Joe, one of the course students, yet her affair with Josef results in her divorce and she consequently leaves Toronto for Vancouver. The dangers of melancholia become

apparent when Elaine attempts to commit suicide. Disillusioned with her married life, in which the demands of motherhood and Joe's affairs with women hamper her artistic aspirations, Elaine succumbs to melancholia. And the self-reproach that Elaine expresses before mutilating herself epitomises her melancholia:

I don't want to see anyone. I lie in the bedroom with the curtains drawn and nothingness washing over me like a sluggish wave. Whatever is happening to me is my own fault. I have done something wrong, something so huge I can't even see it, something that's drowning me. I am inadequate and stupid, without worth. I might as well be dead. (372)

In Atwood's novel, Elaine's melancholia appears to be related to the formation of her gendered identity. While gender is not explicitly discussed in the narrative, the text often hints at the narrator's difficulties in getting on with girls in childhood and adolescence, and her anxiousness in relation to her own daughters. In gendered terms, the ego ideal constitutes melancholia in Elaine's ego. This phenomenon can be considered with reference to the theories of Judith Butler, who argues that in a heterosexual context, the formation of gendered identity is associated with a melancholic denial of homosexuality. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that melancholia originates from gender identification established by the ego ideal (Butler, 1999: 73). According to her, the prohibition of homosexuality postdates the heterosexual incest taboo and consolidates discrete gender identity and heterosexuality. Incapable of naming the sex of the prohibited object s/he loved, the ego maintains the loss as an internalised prohibition. Where Butler highlights the way in which the law engenders melancholia (Butler, 1999: 82), David L. Eng presents a genealogy of melancholia which encompasses subjectivities beyond gendered distinctions. Nonetheless, Eng suggests that the re-evaluation of gender allows us to recognise 'multiple states of injury' in societies (Eng, 2000: 1276).

These arguments are useful to a consideration of Elaine's gendered identity. One particular incident which demonstrates her confused gender identification is the moment when she sees an image of her face on an exhibition poster which has been defaced by a graffiti artist. On seeing her face adorned with a moustache, rather than exhibiting a mature woman's generosity gained by life experience, Elaine displays an aloofness from herself which is comparable to the melancholic's ambivalence toward the object of mourning: 'It was defacing, it was taking away someone's face. If I were younger I'd resent it' (20). As I have argued already, for Elaine, the creative act cannot save her from her horror of death. At the centre of this failure lies her question of what she has lost along with gender identification. Yet nothing in Elaine's past or present gives a hint at what the lost object might be. It is never explained how she lost it and what that loss means to her. Apart from Elaine's statement that she has 'forgotten things, I've forgotten that I've forgotten them' (200), there is almost nothing in her story that reveals what the lost 'things' are. They are hinted at, however, in the narrator's memories of her nomadic family life in childhood and the experience of the Second World War: coupled with the fear of death, the memories of war inform her psychic darkness. Her sadness is reflected in images of empty roads, scarcity of food, a war game in which she is always dead, as well as a war song called 'Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer,' that her brother used to sing. The song, which focuses on a warplane, alludes to bombs and explosions, capturing the horrors and violence of war. These memories keep resurfacing, making her situation comparable to that of Freud's own patients who were traumatised by war. Just as Freud's patients (victims of war neurosis) relived their traumatic

experiences (through compulsive repetition),<sup>69</sup> so Elaine experiences repeated memories of the warplane song, which takes material form when Stephen is killed during a plane hijacking incident.

Elaine is thus plagued with traumatic memories and a sense of loss. Her urge to know and come to terms with the 'nothing' within herself spurs her into making pilgrimages to various churches. Not surprisingly, the object that the narrator is seeking out in the church to cure her psychic wound is not a religious figure or entity, but rather art. To Elaine, an artist, it is art that provides the transfiguring power with which she can confront the images of her and others' past and present selves: 'Art has been accomplished, elsewhere. All that remains to be done with it is the memory-work' (276). Here *Cat's Eye* suggests that the healing power of art is equivalent to that of religion. For Elaine, art, instead of religion, enables us to understand ourselves and the world and to transform life. As young Elaine says of the significance of art as experienced through her Life Drawing class, 'it is my lifeline, my real life. Increasingly I begin to eliminate whatever does not fit in with it, paring myself down ... there is something to it. I am letting myself go' (277).

Lesley Ann Hales has also discussed Atwood's treatment of religion in her novels. Arguing that in *Cat's Eye* the narrator's suffering from the lost object stems from a fault in her personality, Hales notes how institutionalised religion and its followers exert a negative influence on the individual. Here, she attempts to connect the suffering that the narrator experiences in the novel with Atwood's antipathy towards certain organised religions, such as right-wing evangelical Protestantism. For her, the narrator's search for the thing that she has lost in her life is 'a spiritual

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<sup>69</sup> In his works 'Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through' (1914) and 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), Freud foregrounds the death drive that the compulsive repetition of traumatic events manifests.

search,' not an institutionalised religious one (Hales, 1990: 382).<sup>70</sup>

Significantly, some of the trauma of Elaine's childhood is attached to the memory of the religious zealot Mrs Smeath, the mother of her friend Grace, who attempts to 'save' Elaine from her non-religious or atheist parents. Posing as Elaine's friend, but adopting the attitude of an overzealous missionary, Mrs Smeath justifies Cordelia's and the other girls' bullying of Elaine on religious grounds. The adult Elaine depicts Mrs Smeath negatively in her paintings as a form of revenge, but she appears not to be consciously aware of the reasons for this compulsion, reflecting that 'It is still a mystery to me, why I hate her so much' (352).

I would argue that this represents a form of melancholia, and can be considered with reference to the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who likens the resolution of mourning in the infantile depressive state to sublimation in the creation of works of art. Emphasising the ambivalence the child manifests in relation to the lost loved object, Klein develops and revises Freud's interpretation of mourning and melancholia. Noting that the child, the mourner, experiences hatred for the lost person, Klein traces this impulse back to infantile death-drives. According to Klein, the mourner's feeling of triumph over the dead person is tempered by an ambivalence in which s/he experiences guilt and persists in a state of melancholia (Klein, 354). An example of this process can be found in Elaine's relationship with Mrs Smeath, resulting from the moment when the young Elaine overhears that Mrs. Smeath has known about and even approved Cordelia, Grace and Carol's torment of her. As an expression of resentment, Elaine has a vision of the woman's death,

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<sup>70</sup> Hales concentrates on the religious image and its significance in *Cat's Eye* and views the narrator's journey as a pathway to become 'a person of more mature spiritual understanding' (Hales, 386). My argument parallels Hales's insofar as we take the narrator's feeling of loss as the focal point of the argument. Whereas my analysis concentrates on Elaine's melancholia which render the narrative uncertain and open-ended, Hales's reading examines the transcendental aspect of the human spirit.

seeing: 'Mrs Smeath going through the flesh-coloured wringer of my mother's washing machine' (180). Elaine's desire for revenge does indeed appear to be motivated by melancholia; as the young Elaine notes, 'I know I don't like the thought of Mrs. Smeath, but I've forgotten why. I've forgotten about fainting and about the stacks of plates, and about falling into the creek and also about seeing the Virgin Mary. I've forgotten all of the bad things that happened' (200-201).

It is through melancholia, in which neither art nor religion can function as a meaningful form of expression, that Elaine experiences the pang of nothingness. As she herself observes, she doesn't know exactly what she is seeking in the churches: 'For a long time, I would go into churches. I told myself I wanted to see the art; I didn't know I was looking for something' (197). Elaine's melancholic state becomes clearly evident when she sees a statue of the Virgin Mary in an old church in Mexico, which she visits as an adult. The experience of viewing the statue makes her aware that she has lost something, but she does not yet know what it is. In other words, the Virgin can only restore an awareness that Elaine has forgotten something (Grace, 1994: 201). Elaine is attracted by this 'Virgin of lost things':

...she was a Virgin of lost things, one who restored what was lost. She was the only one of these wood or marble or plaster Virgins who had ever seemed at all real to me. There could be some point in praying to her, kneeling down, lighting a candle. But I didn't do it, because I didn't know what to pray for. What was lost, what I could pin on her dress. (*CE*, 198)

Dressed in the unconventional black gown to which are pinned 'brass or tin arms, legs, hands, sheep, donkeys, chickens, and hearts' (198), the statue represents the absence or loss of the real object. As Sonia Mycak points out, the statue points towards the loss of the referent (Mycak, 1996: 187). In the novel, the narrator's

elusive subjectivity, and her ambiguous description of events, point towards shifting and mutating referents. She appears to associate the Virgin Mary with her traumatic experience under the bridge, making reference to a shadowy figure who appears to be coming to save her. It could be argued that if the Virgin Mary represents maternity, the Virgin of lost things encapsulates the narrator's melancholia. Kristeva, for example, locates the origin of melancholia in an unsuccessful separation from the mother and the failure of language to bring the mother back. Extending upon Freud and Klein's theories on mourning, Kristeva examines the relation between the melancholic and language. According to Kristeva, both temporary sadness or mourning and melancholy are 'supported by *intolerance for object loss*' and '*the signifier's failure* to insure a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal' (Kristeva, 1989: 10; original italics). The primary loss that the mourning subject has undergone is manifested in the process of signification, which itself becomes fragmented. In this context, it could be argued that Elaine's fragmentary and halting reflections are a direct expression of her melancholia.

However, Elaine's disjointed narrative can also be viewed more positively: I would argue that in foregrounding the melancholic narrator's multi-layered and fluid subjectivity, Atwood points towards the possibility of openness and communication. Judith McCombs explores this argument in relation to Elaine's art, arguing that her paintings, which examine the passing of time through various perspectives, represent the flexibility of the female subject. McCombs states that it is only by working through the past with the power of the cat's eye marble, which enables her to see her entire life, that the narrator can create 'paintings as luminous slices saved from time' that show a 'long-buried eidetic childhood image, now retrieved' (McCombs, 1991:

12). Linking the narrator's creative acts with those of Atwood herself, McCombs locates the narrator's possible reconciliation with the world in her female identity that is established on 'the compassionate acceptance of multiple perspectives on suffering' (14). As if endorsing this perspective, the young Elaine speaks of her capacity to understand human suffering: 'I can sniff out hidden misery in others now with hardly any effort at all' (129). However, one of her main motivations for painting is a desire to bring back the dead: in recalling a series of paintings focused on her mother, she observes: 'I made this right after she died. I suppose I wanted to bring her back to life' (151).

Here Elaine's belief in the function of art as bringing the dead to life echoes Atwood's own words about the evocation of death in fiction writing. In *Second Words*, Atwood writes: '[Writing] is bringing the dead to life and giving voices to those who lack them so that they may speak for themselves' (347). As such, Elaine's paintings reflect Atwood's arguments on the resurrective potential of art, as well as its function as a surrendering of the self. In this respect, Atwood is again in agreement with Klein, who illustrates mourning or art as a means by which the self regains his/herself through love. Observing how the child overcomes melancholia, whenever s/he comes to experience loss, Klein points out that the child contains the lost loved object inside his/her body to secure him/herself (1975: 354).<sup>71</sup> This is the way in which the mourner incorporates the lost object into the ego and thereby experiences the grieving process. Through this process of internalisation, as Klein

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<sup>71</sup> As Klein argues, the inner world reflects the subject's relation to people and the external world, though altered by his/her own phantasies and impulses (345). Depending on the child's reaction to people and to reality, the inner world can be composed of either 'good' objects or 'bad' objects. Klein's point is that when the child establishes good inner objects, s/he can transcend the depressive state. When the child succeeds in internalising good objects and regains the securities of the inner world, s/he can live successfully in society.

states, deep sadness in the ego opens up the possibility of love for others:

While grief is experienced to the full and despair is at its height, the love for the object wells up and the mourner feels more strongly that life inside and outside will go on after all, and that the lost loved object can be preserved within. At this stage in mourning, suffering can become productive. (Klein, 1975: 360)

In other words, love comes into being with the withdrawal of hatred, and makes creative processes possible. In this sense, sadness caused by death becomes the foundation of love on which the bonds with others are established (see Lechte, 1990: 346).

Significantly, in *Cat's Eye* Elaine transcends her hatred for Mrs Smeath through a moment of empathy which, in Kristevan terms, expands her symbolic and imaginary capacities and opens a route to love. This transformation occurs when Elaine recognises suffering in the eyes of Mrs Smeath as depicted in her own paintings. Kristeva argues that suffering and death mark the point at which the semiotic irrupts into the symbolic realms, effacing the boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' (Kristeva, 1982: 25). Melancholy persons settle 'the lost Thing within themselves' and efface the boundary that marks out the separation from other subjects: 'She and he, life and death, here are entities that reflect each other in mirrorlike fashion, interchangeable' (Kristeva, 1989: 167).

These processes, I would argue, are evident in Elaine's encounter with Mrs Smeath in her paintings. In Elaine's estimation, Mrs Smeath's eyes in the paintings are 'defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man; the eyes of a small-town threadbare decency. Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was' (405). In effacing the boundaries between the two women,

Elaine now attempts to see herself through the eyes of Mrs. Smeath. In this mirrorlike formation, the two women reflect each other and open up the possibility of reconciliation beyond separation: 'Now I can see myself, through these painted eyes of Mrs. Smeath: a frazzle-headed ragamuffin from heaven knows where, a gypsy practically, with a heathen father and a feckless mother who traipsed around in slacks and gathered weeds' (405). By looking at her paintings, Elaine gains this compassionate recognition. Now Elaine's artistic creation seems to constitute a form of forgiveness that enables her to establish potential - though tenuous - relations with others. Just as the stars are 'echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing,' Elaine still remains in the state of melancholia, but now she acknowledges that the light is 'enough to see by' (CE, 421).

## **2. Mourning the father, mourning me: reconciliation between life and death in *Morning in the Burned House***

Picking up again on Atwood's metaphorical illustration of the writer's doubleness through allusions to *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, one might argue that the Atwood of *Morning in the Burned House* (1995)<sup>72</sup> is closer to Carroll's Alice than the Atwood of *Cat's Eye*, although this sort of distinction itself is contrasted with Atwood's own view on the relation between the writer and his/her writing. The double figuration of the writer and the process of writing is the organising principle of Atwood's artistic vision. While the melancholic narrator of *Cat's Eye* evades our attempt to find Atwood's own voice through its ambiguity, the

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<sup>72</sup> For the poems quoted here I will use Atwood's *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995* (Virago press, 1999, 2000). Subsequent quotations will be marked SP and page references given parenthetically.

speaker's constant mourning of her dead father in *Morning in the Burned House* opens up a possible reading of Atwood's personal voice through the mode of the elegy. The elegiac form has a long history, with many different variations, yet in all cases it is defined by the process of mourning. As Jeffrey Thomson notes in his analysis of mourning in the contemporary elegy, the elegy enables the poet or the reader to move 'from grief to reconciliation, from loss to consolation' (Thomson, 2002: 153). He explores how elegies help individuals to negotiate the grieving process, whether or not these poems represent a successful work of mourning. Insofar as the elegy simulates mourning, it is a literary construction that allows the poet to contain his/her real grief in the fiction.<sup>73</sup> I would argue that Atwood's attraction to the elegiac form is related to its characteristic intertwining of the fictional and the real or material.

Asserting that the work of mourning is an ongoing concern in Atwood's writing, Janice Fiamengo approaches *Morning in the Burned House* from the angle of personal elegy. For her, mourning in Atwood's text is a self-reflexive effort to engage with loss and find an outlet for grief, although the 'I' and 'the figures represented are always constructions' (Fiamengo, 2000: 151). At the heart of her argument lies the 1993 death of Atwood's father, who appears as a central figure in the mourning poems.

My reading of *Morning in the Burned House* might be seen as one of the many potentially reductive autobiographical interpretations of Atwood's text in the sense that my argument analyses the significance of elegy in which the speaker, probably Atwood, engages in the work of mourning through which she is able to

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<sup>73</sup> See also Ramazani (1994).

revitalise herself. Nonetheless, I agree with Grace's point that to conflate the 'I' with the writer is risky, as I already stated in the previous section of this chapter. While approaching Atwood's mourning poems from the perspective of personal elegy, the objective of my reading is not to suggest that we encounter Atwood's personal voice and emotions directly in these poems. Rather, I emphasise how Atwood's work of mourning is substantiated in the act of writing. Unlike the traditional elegy, in which the mourner seeks substitutes for his/her loss, the speaker of Atwood's elegy challenges loss and death by incessantly conjuring up what she has lost. What I shall suggest in my reading is how works of art lead the subject, the poet, to re-establish meaningful relations with the world. Atwood's incorporation of a version of her father in the poems manifests a self-willed effort to reconstruct what his death has set in motion for her. While her father's death is central to her grief, I would argue that she brings him into her writing to facilitate the process of mourning and to protect herself from the horror of death, or at least to familiarise herself with the chilling reality of death. Atwood's mourning poems therefore illustrate how writing and narrating can act as agents through which to overcome personal fears and melancholia.

Drawing upon Kristeva's work on art and melancholia, I aim to analyse the melancholic subject in Atwood's elegiac poems in a manner which challenges the boundaries between fictive and real selves. Kristeva elaborates her view on art or writing by linking artistic creativity with melancholia. According to her, artists and writers can take pleasure from pain or fear when they have control over the use of signs. The production of art gives them a sense of power normally denied to melancholics *per se*: 'As far as writers are concerned, they can extract jubilation out

of [fear or pain] through the manipulation they are able, on that basis, to inflict upon signs and things' (Kristeva, 1989: 182). Kristeva therefore views the creation of art and writing as a means by which the artist can rise above the fear of death and return to the process of living. She argues that this artistic process is characterised by the repetition of certain figures and tropes which, rather than naming the object of loss itself, foreground the '*process* of eternal return' of the archaic authority that propels the writer or artist: 'Handling that repetition, staging it, cultivating it until it releases, beyond its eternal return, its sublime destiny of being a struggle with death - is it not that which characterizes writing?' (Kristeva, 1982: 23-24).

These arguments are useful to a consideration of Atwood's poems. In 'You Come Back,' for example, a poem in which an unidentified speaker appears to address a loved one from whom s/he has been separated (perhaps through death), Atwood illustrates death as a strange moment we experience in our ordinary life. As with Doppelgänger encounters in which the self meets his/her alienated half, the poem effectively presents death as both familiar and unfamiliar. To enhance the atmosphere of ambiguity that death causes in the entire poem, Atwood does not give any hint of the speaker's gender. In the opening, the speaker is stunned by the strangeness within the familiar, as the room where s/he has been living becomes strange to him/her. The speaker's experiences can be analysed with reference to Freud's theories on the uncanny, which is 'in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1925): 241).

Freud analyses the uncanny with specific reference to his neurotic patient's

'uncanny' reaction to the female sex organs, which are associated with the 'forbidden' mother's body, and thus represent a nexus of desire and the death drive. The mother's body, which is familiar but unfamiliar to the conscious mind due to primal repression, is characterised for Freud by the uncanny, evoking death and desire simultaneously. In elaborating his theories on the uncanny, Freud invokes the terms 'heimlich,' which refers both to that which is 'familiar and agreeable' and that which is 'concealed and kept out of sight' (see Williams, 1995: 179). Looking at the etymology of the word *Heim* [home], Freud links the *unheimlich* [uncanny] mother's body to the concept of home. He writes that home is the very place where we all come from - the mother or the woman's genitals:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. (Freud, 'The Uncanny (1925): 245)

Thus Freud argues that the home we are compelled to return to is the mother's body. Here death is the mother's body. Freud argues that desire culminates in the subject's returning to this uncanny home. In other words, the uncanny occurs with the return of the repressed that we have expelled from our conscious perception.

Freud's argument that the death drive constitutes the uncanny is useful to a reading of Atwood's poem, 'You Come Back,' where the speaker's relationship to his/her room appears connected with death and the *unheimlich* [uncanny] mother's body. In Atwood's poem, the uncanny room burdens the speaker, as s/he observes the room with reference to the voice of another located within him/herself: 'You say: What's been going on/ while I was away?' (*SP*, 294). The speaker emerges as a ghost-like figure who is 'setting foot on the middle ground/ between body and word, which

contains,/ or is supposed to, other/ people' (SP, 294). Arguably, this is the moment at which the unconscious, the death drive, surfaces. The speaker's words evidence this as s/he feels as if others have lived within him/her.

Confused and in a death-like trance, the speaker ironically persuades him/herself that: 'I must have taken time off' (SP, 294). The bedspread, stained by buttered toast and love-making, encapsulates mundane daily living as a relic of another or past life: 'Who/ got those sheets dirty, and why/ are there no more grapefruit? ... someone else/ has been here wearing/ your clothes and saying/ words for you' (SP, 294). Like many of the quotidian poems in *You Are Happy* and *Two-Headed Poems*, this poem explores death and the separation of loved ones as a natural process of life. At the end of the poem, the speaker appears to suggest that s/he exists outside of time: 'there was no time off' (SP, 294). Further, indeterminacy is created through Atwood's deliberate syntactic ambiguity; the frequent use of pauses and the alternate use of 'You' and 'I' make it difficult for us to establish the identity of the subject of the enunciation:

You know it was you  
who slept, who ate here, though you don't  
believe it. I must have taken  
time off, you think, for the buttered  
toast and the love and maybe both  
at once, which would account for the  
grease on the bedspread, but no,  
now you're certain,...  
because there was no time off. (SP, 294)

In the poem Atwood thus portrays what appears to be a dead person's thoughts through a living person, illustrating a liminal ontological state. She explores the transitory moments when a dead person hovers somewhere between death and life, but this experience is conveyed in a tranquil voice, serving to alleviate the grief of

death or loss. The speaker's sense of fusion with death is similar to that of the *Cat's Eye's* narrator, yet here the primary concern lies in the significance of life itself. Thus the possibly dead speaker comes back to one of the many ordinary days in life, a day which represents neither an historic event nor a particular memorable moment. The recognition of death triggers an awareness of the importance of the quotidian.

Further, the opening of her poem 'Waiting,' which witnesses the repetition of the euphemistic phrase 'dark thing,' apparently reflects the melancholic speaker's obsession with death: she refers to 'the dark thing/ the dark thing you have waited for so long' (*SP*, 297). This 'dark thing' appears to be death, and the fact that the speaker only refers to death indirectly demonstrates how much the fear of death demoralises her. Despite the speaker's assertion that figures of death exist only in the imagined world, death threatens the 'real' world as well. In the opening of the imagined scene in which the speaker depicts the 'dark thing,' for example, we witness the mingling of imagination and reality. Atwood conceives death as a process; the mist of imaginary death that obscures the speaker 'in a damp enfolding' is likened to 'the mildew shroud on bread' (*SP*, 297). Revealingly, the speaker is only able to refer to death as an 'it' obscured by familiar things. But to the speaker, this image of death is 'strangely like home' (*SP*, 297).

I would argue that the speaker's reaction to death here can be considered in terms of the death drive that resides in the ego; she speaks, for example, of 'news of disasters/ that made you feel safe,/ like the voice of your mother' (*SP*, 298), implying that news of death becomes a source of comfort. As Freud points out, from its birth the ego cannot escape from the influence of the id which contains 'the instinct to return to the inanimate state,' and he therefore declares that 'the aim of all life is

death' (Freud, 'Beyond (1920)': 38). These arguments are relevant to Atwood's poem, where the death drive is represented through the same structures that are attributed to the speaker's death instinct - repetition and compulsion:

listening to the radio, news of disasters  
that made you feel safe,  
like the voice of your mother  
urging you yet again to set the table  
you are doing your best to ignore,  
and you realized for the first time  
in your life that *you would be old*

*some day, you would some day* be  
as *old* as you are now,  
and the home you were reading the funnies in  
by the thick yellow light, *would be gone*  
with all the people in it, *even you,*  
*even you* in your young, smudgy body. (SP, 298; italics added)

Here, the repetition of certain phrases (represented in italics) therefore foregrounds the inevitability of death, and as Freud notes, repetition itself betrays the presence of the death drive (Williams, 1995: 158).

Building upon Freud's arguments, Kristeva links the mother's body with the death drive. The term 'the Thing' that Kristeva introduces in her analysis of melancholia symbolises the melancholic's failure to express what s/he has lost - the mother's body. To the melancholic, the mother's body cannot be represented, and can only be evoked through 'the Thing.' Here Kristeva's 'Thing,' a vague, indeterminate, familiar yet unfamiliar entity connected with the mother's body, corresponds to Freud's notion of the uncanny. Kristeva states that melancholic subjects are left in a permanent state of sadness through their denial of the separation from the maternal body. Falling back on the real object of their loss, melancholics are unable to retrieve the mother in language. Without entering into the symbolic at all, without separating from the mother, the subject collapses into a state of living

death.

These arguments are useful to a reading of Atwood's poem 'Waiting,' where the 'dark thing' can be interpreted as the 'Thing' that the melancholic subject fails to understand. The poem explores the unnamed speaker's fear of ageing and death through references to brownout (a dimming of the vision) in her adolescence, and these fears are located in the quotidian, so an outwardly calm and peaceful ordinary moment informs an apocalyptic vision. The speaker expresses her fear of bodily change brought about by the ageing process, which is connected with the uncertainty of death. In the last stanza, the 'dark thing' that has been referenced throughout the poem is finally quantified as death. Not surprisingly, however, 'it is nothing new.' I would argue that by employing melancholia in her poem, Atwood personifies the nature of death that is inherent in the ego: in its exploration of death, the poem dramatises 'a memory of a fear ... you have long since forgotten/ and that has now come true' (*SP*, 298).

The death drive which resides in the ego is similarly explored in Atwood's poem 'OH,' which could be interpreted as an example of the melancholic's failure in the use of language. As the title suggests, Atwood doesn't use many words in 'OH.' With her use of this interjection, Atwood highlights a kind of grief that cannot be expressed in words. In the poem, the grieving speaker views Christmas as a time which always reminds her of her loss. Christmas wreaths with red holly berries are 'the shocked mouths grief has made' (*SP*, 352), and rather than celebrating Christ's birth, they evoke the loss and sorrow associated with his death. Likewise, the sign 'oh' in the poem draws attention to the pain and loss that the speaker suffers: they are 'round silent Ohs,/ leafy and still alive/ that hurt when you touch them' (*SP*, 352).

The 'ohs' are ubiquitous: 'Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh.' (*SP*, 352), and are the only words the speaker is able to articulate as she observes, 'What else can be said?' (*SP*, 352). I would argue that this linguistic failure can be interpreted in terms of Kristeva's theories on melancholia and language. As outlined earlier, Kristeva argues that the melancholic is unable to use language to compensate for the lost mother's body. Paradoxically, the acquisition of language is associated both with the loss and the negation of the loss of the mother's body; signs

are arbitrary because language starts with a negation (*Verneinung*) of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. "I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother," is what the speaking being seems to be saying. "But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language." (*Black Sun*, 43)

In their denial of this process of negation, Kristeva argues, depressed individuals cannot access those signs that have the power to bring the mother back or express the pain of her loss. Unable to unite signs with objects, melancholic or depressed individuals cannot transcend the painful loss of the real object, 'the Thing' (Kristeva, 1989: 44). Kristeva argues that the speech of these individuals therefore reflects a breakdown in the process of signification:

Depressed speech built up with absurd signs, slackened, scattered, checked sequences, conveys the collapse of meaning into the unnameable where it founders, inaccessible and delightful, to the benefit of affective value riveted to the Thing. (Kristeva, 1989: 52)

These arguments are relevant to Atwood's 'Oh,' where the melancholic speaker cannot accept the 'meaning' of Christmas the way many people do: she observes that it is 'Strange how we decorate pain' (*SP*, 352). I would argue that the speaker's reaction reflects the death drive that breaks down boundaries between the living and

the dead. As the speaker deflects the significance of Christmas; 'Do we think the dead care?' (*SP*, 352), her melancholia again becomes evident in her view on the cycle of the seasons: 'We will go around/ in these circles for a time,/ winter summer winter,/ and, after more time, not.// This is a good thought' (*SP*, 352). The logic of her statement is again centred upon death.

In another of Atwood's poems, 'Man in a Glacier,' death is associated with the realm of the conscious. Despite the fact that death is a central image in the poem, as is the case in 'Waiting' and 'Ohs,' it is once again referred to indirectly. In other words, while the amorphous melancholic subject is intimately associated with death, the poems avoid the confrontation of death. Here the speaker opens the poem imperatively, referring the reader to an ancient man whose body is found in a glacier: 'Now see' (*SP*, 340). In a subdued voice, the speaker enumerates the things that the dead man carried with him at the time of his death. It is ironic that everything is preserved by the very snow that destroyed the man, particularly given that one of these items is a charm worn by the man against the dangers of death. The speaker juxtaposes images of the ice man with images of her father in slide pictures, rendering death more intimate.

The poem explores death through a chain of association: the white snow in which the ice man is preserved reminds the speaker of the moment when she and her brother found a 'box of slides in the cellar.' The slides, covered with mildew-like dust, turn out to be her father's pictures. Like the ice man, her father is preserved in an image 'younger than all/ of us now' (*SP*, 340). The sense of intimacy conveyed in the poem seems to invite an autobiographical reading, yet I would argue that Atwood's use of the 'chain of association' device can be

interpreted as a form of melancholia that highlights fluid subject positions. In the poem the discoloration of the slide pictures overwhelms the speaker, making it difficult for her to embrace death as a universal reality. Again, it is the melancholic's preoccupation with loss that inhibits her determination to confront death. The traces of time and ageing in things still disturb the speaker: as she observes 'a film/ of ageing gelatine spread thinly/ with fading colours,/ the reds pushing towards pin, the greens greying' (*SP*, 340), she senses 'an intimation of transience, of evanescence, and thus of mortality' (*Negotiating*, 158). The speaker, in her melancholy mood, offers a negative interpretation of death, observing that 'This is all we got,/ this echo, this freeze-framed/ simulacrum or slight imprint,/ in answer to our prayers for everlastingness' (*SP*, 340). But melancholia is to some degree circumvented by the speaker's ecological awareness. As Fiamengo aptly points out, this poem 'foregrounds the ambiguous relationship between preservation and loss' (Fiamengo, 2000: 152). The conclusion of the poem situates the recognition of death within the context of ecology and an awareness of the false claims to immortality offered by modern science and technology. As the speaker claims, the denial of death is to be 'rocked with neither love nor malice in the ruthless/ icy arms of Chemistry and Physics, our/ bad godmothers' (*SP*, 341). In a parodic reversal of the fairy-tale 'Sleeping Beauty,' the 'blessing' of immortality offered by science is translated into a curse: '*You will not sleep forever*' (*SP*, 341). Observing inhuman technologies that work against the laws of nature, the speaker does not repudiate the realities of loss and death. The speaker's attitude toward death is no longer ambivalent, and thus departs from melancholic reactions to the object of mourning. The acceptance of death, or the process of

rendering death intimate, paradoxically enables the speaker to affirm her stance on life.

Throughout *Morning in the Burned House*, the link between memory, dream and death is a primary feature of Atwood's representation of the indeterminacy of boundaries. In poems like 'Bored,' 'Flowers,' 'Two Dreams' and 'Two Dreams 2,' references to memory or dream underscore the way in which death erodes boundaries and absolutes. 'Bored' foregrounds the speaker's reflection on her father and the past. In her confession the memories are somewhat negative: 'All those times I was bored/ out of my life' (SP, 346). As in Atwood's work as a whole, the poem is inflected by her feminist position. The speaker's comparison of her life to that of animals takes up once again the analogy between the marginal status of women and animals that she explores in her poetry: 'The boring rhythm of doing/ things over and over, carrying/ the wood, drying/ the dishes. Such minutiae. It's what the animals spend most of their time' (SP, 346). All that the female speaker can recall is the repetition of monotonous ordinary days. To emphasise her boredom, Atwood uses repeated syntactic constructions:

Holding the log  
while he sawed it. Holding  
the string while he measured, boards,  
distances between things, or pounded  
stakes into the ground for rows and rows  
of lettuces and beets, which I then (bored)  
weeded. (SP, 346)

As the speaker observes, this repetition of menial tasks causes a 'myopia' which develops from her state of 'boredom.' Despite her desperate wish to escape from that life, however, the speaker's attitude reveals the melancholic's ambivalence. She asks herself 'Why do I remember it as sunnier/ all the time then, although it

more often/ rained, and more birdsong?' (SP, 346). The speaker uses boredom, a state of mind which conceives of life as unchanging, as a way of consoling herself for the death of her father: 'Perhaps though/ boredom is happier' (SP, 346). Again, here it is the 'awareness of death' that leads the speaker to see life from a different perspective (Fiamengo, 2000: 157). The recognition of mortality changes the speaker, as everything is invested with different meanings: 'Now I wouldn't be bored./ Now I would know too much./ now I would know' (SP, 347). Filtered by her present consciousness, memory reconstructs the things that she regarded as boring and trivial as beautiful and precious.

In her elegiac poem 'Flowers,' Atwood uses a female voice - presumably her own - to bring her dead father into the poem. As a mourner, she suggests that the melancholic condition can be converted productively into the creation of art that heals the wound. Here, Atwood insightfully views this tragic condition as a mainspring of artistic creation. The poem affirms the power of art to transfigure painful reality. In the poem she engages in the work of mourning by foregrounding her father's frailty, and his impending and actual death: 'He lies flattened under the white sheet./ He says he is on a ship,/ and I can see it' (SP, 347). Metaphorically transforming her father's death into a sea voyage, the speaker initially evades the process of mourning. The references to a watery grave intensify the speaker's ambivalent attitude toward death, raising echoes of *Surfacing*, which also involves an 'unmarked grave and inadequate mourning' (Bazilai, 2000: 72). Marked by the irreducible sadness of imminent loss, the speaker's self-recrimination and act of taking refuge in the memories of the past, I would suggest, can be interpreted as signs of melancholia in the poem; as the speaker tellingly deflects, 'Can't we do

anything but feel sorry?' (*SP*, 348).

As Fiamengo puts it, 'mortality is at the root of our relations to others, every act of mourning is also a mourning for oneself' (Fiamengo, 2000: 156). In this poem the speaker, in a state of depression, searches for her strong father of the past. This leads to an exploration of her own past and subjectivity. Memories offer a means by which the two subjects can meet and achieve a process of identification: the speaker envisages the father 'who carried the green canoe/ over the portage, the painter trailing/ myself with the fishing rods, slipping/ on the wet boulders and slapping flies' (*SP*, 348). The speaker's perception that everything has its end suggests a possibility for her to recover from her grief: 'But somewhere in there, at the far end of the tunnel/ of pain and forgetting he's trapped in/ is the same father I knew before' (*SP*, 348). In this way the speaker initiates the process of mourning.

The last section of the poem begins with the speaker's acceptance of death. While the speaker sees the presence of the past within the present, she is aware that 'There will be a last time for this also' (*SP*, 348). For the speaker, the memories of the past serve as a mechanism to protect herself from impending death. Therefore, this speaker's linking with the past is different from the melancholic narrator's relation with the past in *Cat's Eye*, where the narrator is constantly haunted by the past. Whereas the narrator's past eclipses her present life in *Cat's Eye*, in 'Flowers' it is through the memories of the past that the speaker connects herself to the present and future. In *Cat's Eye*, the narrator Elaine is trapped in a past imbued with grief, yet the speaker in 'Flowers' stylises mourning, allowing the mournful past to inflect the self-reflexive interpretation of the present. She knows that her

present act of bringing flowers to the dying father will help her to break free of the past. Nothing lasts forever:

Sooner or later I too  
will have to give everything up,  
even the sorrow that comes with these flowers,  
even the anger,  
even the memory of how I brought them  
from a garden I will no longer have by then. (SP, 348)

Yet although these lines suggest an acceptance of death, by revisiting what she has already discussed in the earlier part of the poem, the speaker once again betrays her melancholic state. The repeated words and syntactic structures in this excerpt suggest the subject is in the grip of the death instinct, a repetition compulsion. Concluding the poem with the speaker's desire to save the father from death, Atwood suggests again how difficult it is to embrace and accept death.

Atwood's dream poems, 'Two Dreams' and 'Two Dreams, 2,' further illustrate her views on death and mourning. I would argue that both of these poems, in which the speaker repeatedly conjures up her dead father, point towards Atwood's strategy of reconciling herself with death through artistic creation. In a sense we prefigure our own death by witnessing the death of a parent who stands between us and death, and in this respect, the speaker's mourning for her father is also a mourning for herself. In the dream poems, Atwood seems to teach herself how to accept the fact of separation and to transcend the fear of death within herself. As Atwood states in *Negotiating with the Dead*, 'all writing is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality - by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead' (156). Taking the example of Dante, she argues that he brings the dead to life

by writing about them (*Negotiating*, 172). In this extended discussion of who writers are and why they write, Atwood draws attention to the relation of death to writing, and the writer's role of negotiating with the dead. As I cited above, she acknowledges that the writer's 'reaction to the fear of death' compels him/her to write (157). This impulse, I would argue, can be compared with Kristeva's 'spiraled temporality' of 'aesthetic forgiveness' as developed in her analysis of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where she points out that the act of writing allows the writer to experience separation from the unconscious and to undergo renewal:

Because I am *separated* from my unconsciousness through a new transference to a new other or a new ideal I am able to *write* the dramatic unfolding of my nevertheless unforgettable violence and despair...Because it is forgiveness, writing is transformation, transposition, translation. (Kristeva, 1989: 206, 217; original italics)

Kristeva's analysis of the unconscious here is relevant to a reading of Atwood's dream poems. As with dreams in which one discloses his/her unconscious without constraint, Atwood suggests an ability to release her own unconscious here: 'we open to [the dead] in sleep' (*SP*, 351). The textual form effectively shields her from the need to distinguish between the real and fictive self. Accordingly, the poems introduce indeterminacy in the complex interplay between the dream content and the speaker's own interpretation of the dream.

'Two Dreams' opens with the speaker's factual description of her dreams in relation to her dead father: 'In the seven days before his death/ I dreamed my father twice' (*SP*, 349). By positing the speaker as the narrator of the dream, Atwood establishes two narratives in the poem. This narrator-speaker relationship provides a sense of actuality in the poem. In the first dream, the speaker's father disappears into

the lake and her effort to dive to recover his body fails, because 'he was too far down' (*SP*, 349). This failure, I would argue, reveals the speaker's resistance to witnessing her father's death even in the dream which mirrors her unconscious. Yet her desire for reunification with the father is suggested by the quotidian familiarity of his image even when drowning: 'He still had his hat on' (*SP*, 349). The second dream more clearly projects the world of the unconscious. The dead father who appears but constantly evades the speaker demonstrates what Atwood calls 'a fear and a fascination with mortality' (*Negotiating*, 156). As the speaker remarks, 'Such dreams are relentless' (*SP*, 349).

In 'Two Dreams, 2,' the dead father is presented in images of deprivation. Appearing as a blind man in a strange nightgown, he seems to be still alive and asks to have his life back. 'Assumed to be hungry and unsatisfied,' the dead thus visit the world of the living (*Negotiating*, 160). The speaker's ambivalent reaction to her father's resurrection hints at how painful the loss was for her: she reveals that 'I wasn't happy to see him' because 'now we would have to do the whole thing over again' (*SP*, 351). I would argue that the introduction of dreams, the sense of factuality, and the melancholic autobiographical 'I' illustrate how 'aesthetic forgiveness' is implemented in these poems. In 'Two Dreams, 2' in particular, the speaker's questioning of the meaning of dreams serves to blur the boundaries between the speaker and Atwood: 'Who sends us these messages,/ oblique and muffled?' (*SP*, 351), implying that the text is working through elements of Atwood's own experience of grief.

Significantly, in the final part of the poem, the speaker makes a direct reference to the relationship between mourning and melancholia, arguing that

‘Nothing gets finished,/ not dying, not mourning’ (*SP*, 351). As I have argued, melancholy emerges when the process of mourning is inhibited, and we can see this melancholy in the poem in the speaker’s repetition of words, phrases and self-recrimination. Internalising the dead, the speaker recognises that ‘the dead repeat themselves’ (*SP*, 351). The dead, and the memories of the past, continue to disturb the outward calm of the living: ‘In the daylight we know/ what’s gone is gone,/ but at night it’s different’ (*SP*, 351). The dead reside in the living in ‘absent presence or present absence (Fiamengo, 2000: 153). The melancholic speaker in Atwood’s poem argues she is unable to escape from ambivalence and guilt: ‘they clutch at us, they clutch at us, / we won’t let go’ (*SP*, 351).

We can notice Atwood’s personal or autobiographical voice more clearly in ‘The Ottawa River by Night,’ where the speaker reveals an occasion when ‘Once, my father/ and I paddled seven miles/ along a lake near here’ (*SP*, 353). References to specific details of geographical location and a tragic canoe accident in which many children drowned invest the poem with a sense of ‘autobiographical’ factuality, drawing attention away from the artistry of construction. The speaker knows where she is: ‘the Ottawa River/ far up, where the dam goes across’ (*SP*, 353), but references to dreaming suggest that the speaker revisits her past through her unconscious. The speaker observes that dreams cannot recapture the past in all its detail. (‘None of this/ is in the dream ... Just the thick square-/edged shape of the dam’ (*SP*, 353)), and the real event is refigured through the intervention of the unconscious, which recasts the speaker’s father as young and strong: ‘my father,/ moving away downstream/ in his boat, so skilfully/ although dead, I remember now; but no longer as old’ (*SP*, 353). Again, in the poem the father acts as an intermediary

between the speaker and imminent death. Death is ultimately portrayed positively, allowing a process of reconciliation: the sea that the father moves towards is not the real sea of suffering but 'the other sea, where there can still be safe arrivals' (*SP*, 353). The poem thus defines death as a liminal state; it is 'Nowhere familiar. Somewhere I've been before./ It always takes a long time/ to decipher where you are' (*SP*, 354).

The title poem of the collection, 'Morning in the Burned House,' explores the sense of total alienation that the self can experience through loss or death. The image of a burned house colours the poem with blanks and voids, ultimately signifying death. The negation of relationships is illuminated by the figure of the paranoid schizophrenic that Atwood explored in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. The poem opens with the speaker's dialogue with memory in conflict with present actuality: 'In the burned house I am eating breakfast./ You understand there is no house, there is no breakfast,/ yet here I am' (*SP*, 367). This neurotic edginess enables the speaker to achieve an enlightened vision which lets her rejoice in solitude without relinquishing the will to establish lived relations: '(I can almost see) ... holding my cindery, non-existent,/ radiant flesh. Incandescent' (*SP*, 368). The speaker's act of restoring a landscape that has disappeared represents an attempt to return to the world of relationships. The situation of total loss causes the subject to feel alien toward her own body, but the experience gives an insight into the terrible beauty of death that is mirrored in the speaker's acceptance of sitting at her mourning [morning] table, 'alone and happy' (*SP*, 368).

Drawing upon psychoanalytic concepts of melancholia, mourning and the

death drive, this chapter has traced the effects of artistic transformation upon the subjects in Atwood's works. In exploring the potential of artistic works to challenge and transform the reality of death, I have drawn in particular on Kristeva's elaboration of Freud's theories on the death drive. Focusing upon the unfixed boundary of the ego, Kristeva emphasises how the repetition of the death drive negotiates hope within this dynamic between the ego and the death drive. Ultimately, Atwood locates death within the symbolic process of artistic creation, suggesting that the inevitable return of death can, paradoxically, precipitate the renewal of the subject. Kristeva's term 'aesthetic forgiveness' offers a useful context within which to consider this renewal. Although there is a tension between a dystopian view of female subjectivity and the possibility of liberation through mourning in *Cat's Eye* and *Morning in the Burned House*, the mode of mourning and melancholia enables Atwood to manifest or accept the possibility of indeterminacy in self and text.

## Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, throughout her writing career, Atwood has sought to challenge and subvert social and aesthetic divisions and orthodoxies by creating dynamic subject positions and open-ended textual structures in her literary works. Her work evinces a postmodernist interest in foregrounding the process of textual and artistic construction, and yet also seeks to engage with and transform material realities, betraying a humanist 'moral imagination' which I have interpreted in terms of Kristeva's theories on 'aesthetic forgiveness.'

As I have argued in the Introduction, Atwood is well aware that the writer has a responsibility to confront and challenge social inequalities. Her representations of female subjects located on social borders and peripheries, as well as her interest in the environment, which is focused upon the geographical borderlands of Canada as postcolonial space, and upon animals as victims of human cruelty and domination, suggest the metamorphosis of life into art and vice-versa, demonstrating her belief in the potential of art to facilitate transpositions between different sign systems.

Throughout the thesis, I have drawn upon Kristeva's psychoanalytic and narratological theories in order to illuminate the manifold ways in which Atwood's representation of social and ontological oppositions and divisions works towards an aesthetics of rapprochement and reconciliation. Kristeva's theories on poetic language and the semiotic have been of particular relevance to this analysis, given that her arguments on the potential of the semiotic to occupy and transform the symbolic realm encapsulate the recurring patterns of unity-in-division which inflect Atwood's work. Kristeva's adaptation of Bakhtin's theories on dialogism into her own unique theory of intertextuality has also proved useful to an analysis of the

generic and textual fluidity of Atwood's writing, which mixes different genres and registers in a manner which disrupts conventional approaches to literary aesthetics. According to Kristeva, intertextuality is a form of dialogue which reveals the paradox that 'one is all'; in this context, processes of signification thus produce a never-ending negotiation of sameness and difference, and these dynamics are abundantly evident in Atwood's work. Similarly, Bakhtin's theories on the revolutionary potential of carnivalesque discourse provides a useful model within which to consider the ways in which Atwood foregrounds utterances or signifying practices as a means by which to challenge notions of autonomous or fixed social domains.

In addition to focusing upon intertextuality as a route to the transcendence of social and aesthetic boundaries in Atwood's work, I have also explored her interest in intersubjective relationships – between men and women, mothers and children, humans and animals – with reference to Kristeva's theories on the process of identification as a means by which to embrace alterity and yet, paradoxically, also to undermine ontological boundaries between 'self' and 'other.' As I have demonstrated, the process of intersubjective identification in Atwood's work is a dialogical process which is grounded in empathy or the dissolution of the human ego. This sense of empathy pervades Atwood's work, pointing towards her ethical 'logic of hope,' and her celebration of both life and death as essential and interlinked aspects of human experience. This empathy dissolves the boundaries between different entities and species and reinforces a love for life which pervades Atwood's work, in spite of her recurring focus on death and suffering.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, Atwood's writing epitomises what

Kristeva has termed 'aesthetic ethics,' an ethically-charged artistic vision which – in spite of her scepticism regarding essentialist models of gender – Kristeva associates primarily with women, who have the 'luck and responsibility of being boundary-subjects' (Kristeva, *Nations*, 35). Kristeva's theories on the centrality of female subjects to 'aesthetic ethics' and the process of 'aesthetic forgiveness,' as I have demonstrated, are particularly relevant to an analysis of Atwood's work, where various marginal female figures become subjects-in-process who disturb ontological and intersubjective boundaries, raising the possibility of relationality and rapprochement. My arguments for the presence of Freudian hysterical or borderline subjects in Atwood's works have illustrated a world of female otherness that embodies the potential for the transformation of conventional semantic and ontological systems. As I have demonstrated, the fragmentary narrative of hysteria, and of other 'borderline' states (such as melancholia) in Atwood's work, can be interpreted as representing the discourse of the minority psyche – what psychoanalysts have termed the repressed narrative – yet in signaling their alterity, Atwood's marginal female figures also challenge and transcend the boundaries between self and other. Kristeva has argued that because they exist on the boundaries of language and society, women in particular are able to recognise and accept the 'otherness' of others, and to facilitate reconciliation, not only at an interpersonal level, but even at a national level:

The maturity of the second sex will be judged in coming years according to its ability to modify the nation in the face of foreigners, to orient foreigners confronting the nation toward a still unforeseeable conception of a polyvalent community. (Kristeva, 1993: 35)

Kristeva's arguments here, I would argue, are directly relevant to a consideration of

Atwood's artistic vision, which similarly extends the process of intersubjective empathy into a wider social or national context. This potential is located not just within women, but within humanity more generally, embodying Kristeva's poststructuralist theories on the potential of art or discourse to transform social 'reality.' Atwood's 'aesthetic ethics' – her drive towards reconciliation and renewal through art – is perhaps best captured in the following excerpt from 'Spring Poem':

I dream of reconciliations  
with those I have hurt  
unbearably, we move still  
touching over the greening fields, the future  
wounds folded like seeds  
in our tender fingers, days  
I go for vicious walks past the charred  
roadbed over the bashed stubble  
admiring the view, avoiding  
those I have not hurt

yet, apocalypse coiled in my tongue,  
it is spring, I am searching  
for the word:

finished  
finished

so I can begin over  
again. (*YAH*, 23)

The 'dream of reconciliation' referenced in this poem, I would argue, encapsulates the aesthetics of rapprochement, forgiveness and renewal that forms the very foundation of Atwood's artistic vision.

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