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STRATEGIES FOR IDENTITY:
THE FICTION OF MARGARET ATWOOD

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ABSTRACT

This study is a critical reading of the fiction of contemporary Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Atwood. My analysis focuses on problems pertaining to the questions of genre, identity and female subjectivity. The thesis is thematically structured. Chapter One, 'The Question of Genre: Creative Re-Appropriations, explores the plurality of genres and narrative styles present in the novels. The second Chapter 'A Proliferation of Identities: Doubling and Intertextuality' examines constructions of the self in the light of psychoanalytic theories of language and subjectivity which conceive of the subject as heterogeneous and in constant process. Atwood's challenge to the notion of the homogeneous ego finds a gendered vision wherein woman assumes a multiplicity of roles and positions. Chapter Three 'Cognitive Questions' discusses the text's emphasis on sense receptivity and the epistemological question they pose in relation to language, reality and interpretation. Chapter Four 'Writing the Female Character' analyses Atwood's configurations of femininity, sexual politics and sexual difference.

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Edition used:

- The Edible Woman* (London, Virago, 1985)
Surfacing (New York, Warner, 1983)
Lady Oracle (London, Virago, 1986)
Dancing Girls (London, Virago, 1981)
Life Before Man (London, Virago, 1982)
Bodily Harm (London, Virago, 1983)
Murder in the Dark (London, Cape, 1984)
The Handmaid's Tale (London, Virago, 1987)
Bluebeard's Egg (London, Cape, 1987)
Cat's Eye (London, Bloomsbury, 1989)

Poetry:

- Double Persephone* (Toronto, Hawkshead Press, 1961)
The Circle Game (Toronto, Anansi, 1978)
The Animals in That Country (Toronto, 1968)
The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1970)
Procedures for Underground (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1970)
Power Politics (Toronto, Anansi, 1971)
You Are Happy (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1974)
Two-Headed Poems (Toronto, Oxford University Press 1978)
True Stories (London, Cape, 1982)
Interlunar (London, Cape, 1988)

All these signs can be ascribed to a generalized anti-Hegelianism: difference and repetition have taken the place of the identical and of the negative of identity and of contradiction.

Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*

And yet it is not the style of a woman: no, certainly, it is too strong and concise - not diffuse enough for a woman.

Jane Austen, *Emma*

INTRODUCTION

Nobody can claim to have the absolute, whole, objective, total, complete truth. The truth is composite, and that is a cheering thought. It mitigates tendencies toward autocracy.¹

A 'composite' quality informs Atwood's writing. This study aims at exploring the heterogeneity present in Atwood's novels and the implications which it carries. My analysis focuses on the manner in which this heterogeneous plurality permeates Atwood's fiction and can be seen in the use of literary genre; in the presentation of character and subjectivity; in the problematization of the notion of the 'real'.

These epistemological and ontological concerns which Atwood's writing explores are characteristic of postmodernist fiction. It is only recently, however, that critics of Atwood's work have contextualized her fiction within the parameters of postmodernist writing. Patricia Wough includes Atwood in her book *Feminine Fiction: Revisiting the Postmodern*. However, I find her definition of postmodernism rather reductive. She confines the postmodern almost exclusively within the problematics of the 'dissolution of identity' and

1 Jan Garden Castro, 'An Interview with Margaret Atwood 20 April 1983' in VanSpanckeren, Kathryn and Jan Garden Castro eds., *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form* (Illinois, 1988), pp.215-232 (p.232).

discusses how women writers have dealt with this predicament. Linda Hutcheon argues for Atwood's postmodernism more interestingly in a short essay which gives guidelines for further research on the topic.² Postmodernism, in fact, involves more than the challenge to humanist notions of stability of the self. Postmodernist fiction epitomises paradoxes and contradictions. In Linda Hutcheon's concise definition, postmodernism is presented as 'fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, inescapably political'.³ In postmodernist fiction the presence of parody and self-reflexive metafiction, probes into the nature of 'the self', coexist with political and ideological concerns. Similarly Atwood combines in her reflexive and multifaceted writing problems of identity and her interests in the political implications of patriarchal power.⁴

In Atwood's fiction, in so far as it is characteristic of postmodernism, the re-evaluation of *mimesis* is combined with a degree of self-consciousness. This is another postmodern paradox which Atwood's fiction articulates. The modernist view of art as an autonomous artefact separate from the world is

2 Linda Hutcheon, 'Process, Product and Politics: The Postmodernism of Margaret Atwood', in *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 138-159.

3 *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, (London, 1988), p.4.

4 Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (London, 1989).

refuted, as well as notions of realist transparency, that see art as the reflection of the world⁵.

Like many other postmodernist writers who were formed in the sixties, Atwood criticizes the values and ideologies of the sixties: the sexist nature of the sixties atmosphere of permissiveness, the cult of the 'natural', the 'authentic', the myth of spontaneity. What postmodernist writers like Atwood have shown, is that the natural is in fact the 'constructed'.⁶

One aspect of the postmodern interest in history is the parodic re-visitation of literary genres that it has produced. By means of this device postmodernist fiction incorporates the past and then tries to inscribe a criticism of that past.⁷ This is achieved by bringing together genres belonging to 'high' and 'low' forms of art traditionally kept apart, with the result that texts like Atwood's can be read at very different levels, as they are at the same time popular and academic, accessible and élitist.

This study starts with an analysis of how Atwood's fiction can be located at the 'interstices of genres' and traditions.⁸ To do so I shall explore, in Chapter

5 Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.10.

6 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto, 1988) p.12.

7 Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (London, 1988).

8 Jonathan Culler, 'Towards a Theory of Non-Genre Literature', in *Surfiction*, ed. by Raymond Federman (pp.255-262), p.258.

One, the plurality of generic strands present in her novels and the purpose of their re-visitation.

In the classical tradition inherited by the Renaissance, the writer's art was valued with respect to the adherence and observation of rigorous generic rules, the so-called 'laws of genre'. These consist of a set of principles and codes which the authors have to observe. Each genre has its laws, ideals, beauty, and mixing is not permitted; so the writer has to keep within the limits of the genre adopted. As a result, each genre preserves its unadulterated 'purity', its 'unity' of tone. The theory of genre established a rigorous separation between the genres and a hierarchy of higher and lower, 'great' and 'petty' genres considered essential for the scale of values in literature. ⁹

However, the purity of genres, as well as the dogmatism proper to traditional conception about literary genre, has been put into question by writers and poets since the Renaissance. Later, the Romantic aestheticians theorized the protean quality of genres, which are always subject to transformation and metamorphosis, and emphasized the importance of originality, the uniqueness and *sui generis* quality of a work of art. Since then, the inconsistency of

⁹ Joseph Strelka ed., *Theories of Literary Genre*, (Pennsylvania, 1978).

traditional conceptions about literary genres has become progressively evident. As critics have pointed out, any work violates in some way conventional rules with the result that the frontiers between genres became increasingly artificial.¹⁰ As Jacques Derrida has remarked, the principle that governs the 'law of genre' is one of 'contamination', a 'law of impurity'. Every text participates in one or several genres, without belonging to any of them.¹¹

The challenge of generic distinction does not lead to a dismissal of genre and traditions. On the contrary it implies a critical appropriation of them. As Northrop Frye observes, 'literature is created from literature, not from reality...every literary work is a matter of convention... Everything that is new in literature is a reworking of what is old'.¹² An immediate consequence of Frye's observation is that one should not consider the literary work entirely the product of an individual, of personal inspiration that bears no relation to the works of the past. Every text, as Todorov writes, 'is not only the product of a pre-

10 Gerard Genette, 'Genres, types, modes' *Poétique*, 7, 32 (1977) 389-421; Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London, 1982).

11 'The Law of Genre', *Glyph*, 7 (1980), 176-232.

12 Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1971).

existing combinatory system... it is also a transformation of that system'.¹³

The most immediate consequence of the traditional approach to genre is the creation of hierarchy among literary works. Much of contemporary postmodernist fiction has created a 'generic uncertainty' which calls into question the system of genres and the hierarchy that it implies.¹⁴ This results in a 'destructioning', in a 'negation of hierarchy and its replacement by an indeterminate field of uncoordinated codifications'.¹⁵

The incorporation and intermingling of different genres in Atwood's novels brings about a strong focus on intertextuality. The texts do not repeat earlier writing, but echo and recall them, in a constant process of displacement and revision.¹⁶ Intertextuality cannot in fact 'indicate a monolithic process without change'.¹⁷ As Foucault points out, the 'frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop ... it is caught up in a system of reference to other books, other texts, other

13 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by R. Scholes (New York, 1975).

14 Fredric Jameson, 'Magical Narratives', *New Literary History*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1975), 133-163.

15 Francis Sparshott, 'The Last Word in Criticism' *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Centenary Volume, Fourth Series, vol. 20 (Ottawa, Royal Society of Canada, 1982), p.125.

16 Rosalind Coward & John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Development in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London, 1977).

17 Rosalind Coward & John Ellis, p.52.

sentences: it is a node within a network'.¹⁸ By inter-text I shall refer precisely to this 'dialogue' that Atwood's texts engage with those pre-existent or contemporary to them. The intelligibility of the text can in fact be derived from its positions in the network of all other texts.¹⁹

However, the questioning of the rigid line of demarcation between genres in contemporary literature should not lead one to conclude that genres no longer exist. The importance which contemporary fiction has attributed to genre, shows that a genre does not consist simply in a set of rules that have to be observed. A genre can provide a useful frame of reference for the writer and the reader. The creation of a generic framework within the text allows the writer to point out the generic norms and at the same time to subvert them in a recognizable way. As Todorov notes, 'the norm becomes visible - lives - only by its transgression'.²⁰

One could add that since generic norms are enmeshed with the norms and expectations of society as a whole, the critical revisitation of genre can provide a fruitful frame of reference to show 'how gender enters into and is constructed by the forms of the genre, and

18 Michael Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, translated by S. Smith (London, 1978), p.23.

19 Rosalind Coward & John Ellis.

20 Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Origins of Genres', *New Literary History*, 8, 1 (Autumn 1976), p.160.

how and perhaps why those constructions may change'.²¹ The re-visitation of literary genres has in fact been a privileged form of writing by women writers as it signifies a challenge to the literary structures that women writers necessary inherited.²² Many contemporary women writers have emphasised the importance of reworking old and familiar fictional forms from a new feminist perspective. They have shown that it can be an effective way to bring about an awareness and change in the perception of one's life.²³

Atwood's re-visitation of literary traditions and genres adopts a critical and ironical perspective on the genre it appropriates, and usually defies generic resolution.

The protagonist of *Surfacing*, for example, has been seen as resembling the stereotyped figure of the heroine of Gothic fiction, a maiden in flight, surrounded by 'a variety of dark threats, either psychological or hidden in the social structure', constantly confronted with

21 Helen Carr ed., *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (London, 1989), p.7.

22 Mary Jacobous, 'The Difference of View', in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobous, pp.10-21 (p.16).

23 Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *Gender and Writing*, ed. by Michelene Wandor, (London, 1983), pp.69-77; Sara Maitland, 'A Feminist Writer's Progress' in *Ibid*, pp.17-23; Annette Kolodny, 'Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism', *Critical Enquiry*, 2, 1 (Autumn 1975), 74-92; Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision', *College English*, 34, 1 (October 1972), 18-25.

masquerades, omens and doubles.²⁴ The Gothic is only one of the different traditions that are skilfully interwoven in this novel. As a whole, however, *Surfacing* goes beyond the limits of any single genre re-called in the text and the expectations which it carries. The victimized Gothic heroine by the end of this novel has overcome her position as a 'victim'. In *Surfacing* there are echoes of the pastoral resolution of identity achieved in the countryside. However, the novel also problematizes the very notion of identity. The latter is a theme that returns throughout Atwood's fiction, and is object of analysis in Chapter Two of this study.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* conventions belonging to autobiography, history, and science fiction are brought problematically together. The discontinuous and at times contradictory structure of Atwood's dystopia creates a non-realistic narrative which problematizes identity, as it suggests that discontinuity and contradictions can be constitutive parts of subjectivity.

The majority of critical readings of Atwood's novel, however, stress the presence of the motifs of the quest for unity and self-discovery in Atwood's treatment of the theme of identity. For example, the multiple identities of the protagonist in *Lady Oracle*

24 Eli Mandel, 'Atwood Gothic', in *The Malahat Review*, 41 (January 1977), 165-174 (p.167).

are seen in terms of a plethora of projected personae, centred on a inner, 'real'²⁵, or 'essential' self.²⁶ My reading, on the contrary, shows how Atwood problematizes to an extreme degree notions of unity, essence and authenticity in relation to the self and to reality.

There are a few exceptions to this. Eli Mandel points out that it is arguable whether in *Surfacing* unity is achieved as at the end of the novel, 'nothing is resolved'.²⁷ Robert Lecker maintains that Atwood presents us with fragmented visions of modern life. The novels enact a parody of the motifs and conventions associated with the search for identity, and that therefore self-discovery is treated ironically.²⁸ However, the final ambiguity of the protagonist's position in *Surfacing* that Lecker highlights is questioned by Linda Hutcheon:

25 Cameron, Elspeth, 'Margaret Atwood: A Patchwork Self', *Book Forum* 4, 1 (1978), 35-45.

26 Clara Thomas, 'Lady Oracle: The Narrative of a Fool Heroine', in *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Arnold Davidson & Cathy Davidson (Toronto, 1981), pp.159-176. Sharon Wilson interprets Joan's projections as a form of pathology, a sign of narcissistic identifications ('The Fragmented Self in *Lady Oracle*', *Commonwealth Novel in English* 1, 1 (Jan. 1982), 50-85.

27 p. 170; Also Rosemary Sullivan sees *Surfacing* as an attempt to negate plot and character development. 'Breaking the Circle', *The Malahat Review*, 41, (January 1977), 31-41.

28 'Janus Through the Looking Glass: Atwood's First Three Novels', in Arnold Davidson & Cathy Davidson eds. *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, pp.177-204.

Both Atwood's feminist and postmodernist impulses work to question the very notion of selfhood as it is defined in our culture; that is as coherent, unified, rational. Since...women (along with madmen and fools) have traditionally been denied access to this definition of self (and have been offered in its stead the realm of the 'feminine intuition'), perhaps irony becomes the only mode available for a female protagonist who realizes that the unified self in her culture has taught her to desire may be inappropriate for her as a woman. And maybe the human subject of the male gender too is more radically split or fragmented than our humanist notions of it might allow us to think? Feminist and psychoanalysis have pushed the postmodern questioning of subjectivity in these directions.... and, of course, so have novels like this one.²⁹

Atwood's treatment of character and subjectivity in fact presents the ego as inconsistent and in constant process. The novels challenge the notion of a coherent and self-sufficient subjectivity which is accepted by bourgeois ideology. They confute the humanist notion of 'human essence' that sees individuals as possessing a number of innate qualities, which would make change impossible. On the contrary, Atwood's poetic vision lays stress on metamorphosis and change.³⁰

The notion of 'subject' and subjectivity' to which I shall refer in the course of this study are categories of a linguistically based psychoanalysis. This theoretical framework provides useful insights for an understanding of Atwood's problematization of subjectivity. 'The erratic and devious presence of the

29 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.144.
 30 'It's been a constant interest of mine: change from one state to another, change from one thing to another', Interview with Linda Sandler, in *The Malahat Review* (January 1977), 7-27.

unconscious, without which the position of the subject cannot be understood, insists on heterogeneity and contradictions within the subject itself. Therefore it provides the most rigorous criticism of the presuppositions of a consistent, fully finished subject, and of the social sciences that base themselves on such a presupposition'.³¹ Linguistic and psychoanalytic theories have undermined the notion of a coherent, consistent subjectivity as it is conceived by the dominant ideology of Western culture, that is, humanism. Humanism contends that the subject is at the centre of his/her own history, more or less in control of his/her own actions and choices. In particular Lacan's re-reading of Freud represents consciousness as heterogeneous, fractured and in a state of flux and process. These theories have questioned to an extreme degree the capacity of the subject to fully express himself through language. Atwood's dissatisfaction with language problematizes its relation to the speaking subject. The protagonist's propensity to telling lies in *Lady Oracle*, 'a novel in which every "I" is a lie',³² and Elisabeth's lack of interest in honesty in *Life Before Man* may indicate a distrust in language itself. Truth is not 'in language but behind it'.³³ However,

31 Rosalind Coward & John Ellis, p. 94.

32 Robert Lecker, p.194.

33 Bersani, Leo, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Toronto, 1976).

the problematization of the subject's relation to language is also gender specific, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Four. Critical interpretations of *Lady Oracle*, for example, have stressed that the lack of honesty of the protagonist is the main cause of her misadventures. My reading, on the contrary, argues that her duplicity is a female strategy which enables her to cope and survive within a context that does not recognize her own needs and desires.

As I mentioned earlier, this study focuses on the epistemological as well as the ontological concerns present in Atwood's work. The challenge which the texts direct at humanist assumptions is not confined to the rejection of the idea of the fixity of subjectivity, but is extended to other notions characteristic of humanist thought which I shall discuss in Chapter Three.

Atwood's fiction shows a preoccupation with the limitations and inconsistencies that characterize traditional Western thought, and that have deeply influenced our way of thinking. Western metaphysics established structures founded on the principle of identity and resemblance. My reading of the novels aims to illustrate how the texts call for a re-evaluation of heterogeneity, alterity, multiplicity and difference.³⁴

34 See the work of Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, translated and introduced by Alan Bass (London, 1978) and *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Brass (Brighton, 1982).

In particular they expose the danger of thinking in terms of binary structures. As is characteristic of postmodernist fiction, Atwood's texts partake of a logic of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'. Oppositions that have been traditionally theorized in terms of mutual exclusion, of 'either/or' (subject/object; mind/body; fantasy/ reality; history/fiction), find a relation that is not mutually exclusive. My analysis of these dichotomies in Chapter Three focuses on the importance of their coexistence, and illustrates how Atwood's problematization of these oppositions works against the hierarchical principle usually attributed to them. Dichotomies establish in fact non-reversible, non-reciprocal hierarchies, and thus describe and perpetuate systems of domination. As the author comments on the numerous examples exposed in *Surfacing*, the 'humans vs. the land... Quebec Hydro vs. the lakes... the English vs. the French... the whites vs. the Indians... men vs. women... Canada vs the United States...they are all paradigms of dominance/subservience'.³⁵

Atwood's novels discard the binary opposition truth/fantasy as the dialectics established by the dichotomy implies that one term excludes the other. In the reformulation of the opposition achieved in the text we see how one term of the antithesis can be

35 Jan Garden Castro, 'An Interview with Margaret Atwood' in VanSpanckeren & Castro eds, pp.213-232 (p.223).

inherent within the other. Critical readings of Atwood's novels have highlighted the dangers of the characters' flights into fantasy or their habit of fictionalizing reality, which renders them unable to face real life. In *Lady Oracle*, for example, the protagonist's escape into fantasy is seen to 'prevent her coming to terms with reality and with other people'.³⁶ The 'lesson' from the novel, critics maintain, is that 'fantasy limits human potential, prevents communication, and creates potentially lethal distrust'.³⁷ To my mind the text withholds judgment on the protagonist, and my reading highlights the positive effects of achieving a balance between fantasy and reality.

In *Surfacing* the protagonist's elaboration of fictional versions of her past is presented as a strategy that allows the protagonist a refuge from a painful reality. The presence of lies is also a metafictional device which teaches the reader to see the referent as fictive, as imagined. However, on the psychological level, the acceptance her past is presented as crucial in the narrator's process of self-regeneration.

36 Linda Hutcheon, 'From Poetic to Narrative Structures: The Novels of Margaret Atwood', in Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir eds., *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System* (Vancouver, 1983), pp.17-32.

37 Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* (Vancouver 1984), p.136.

Atwood's later texts, like *Lady Oracle*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale* become more overtly self-conscious. The blurring of the borders between fantasy and reality, for example, is accompanied by a weakening of the distinction between art and life. In *Lady Oracle* the specular relation between the protagonist's own life and the adventures experienced by the female character in the Gothic Romance she is writing, blurs and destabilizes the line severing art from life. In *Bodily Harm* the protagonist constantly fictionalizes reality, as does the narrator in Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*. These elements produce a display of paradoxes and contradictions.

Atwood achieves these effects by means of an interweaving of realistic and fantastic modes of writing. The seemingly realistic frame of the texts undermines realistic conventions from within. The movement from the subjective to the objective, the presence of doubles, the use of caricature and parody, are examples of this. The works of fiction analysed in this study lack a conclusive ending. They enact a rejection of closure as conceived in classical realist narrative. In the latter, the movement towards closure 'ensures the reinstatement of order, sometimes a new order, sometimes the old restored, but always intelligible because familiar. Decisive choices are

made, identity is established'.³⁸ It is this progression, aimed at a resolution of order and identity, that the texts render problematic. In Atwood's texts, on the contrary, self-knowledge is presented as experimental rather than definitive. To my mind, in fact, the novels do not suggest a 'reintegration to society and a return to natural order'.³⁹

The interplay of fantastic and realistic modes of writing in Atwood's fiction enables the structures of reality and the structures of fantasy to coexist in the texts.⁴⁰

One example of the way the objective and the subjective mingle in Atwood's fiction is the maze that she inserts in the Gothic mansion described in *Lady Oracle*: 'The image of the labyrinth is an image of the objective world teetering on the brink of its opposite, of subjectivity; it is the real organization of the world become fantastic.'⁴¹ The labyrinth is a mental structure which exists in the narrator's mind before it exists in the external world.

38 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, (London, 1980), p.75.

39 Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood*, p.59.

40 'Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that 'real' world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite'. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p.20.

41 John Vernon, *The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture* (Urbana, 1973), p.63.

In *Surfacing* the use of hallucination involves the impregnation of the world with fantasy. As Margaret Laurence has noted, among the many themes of *Surfacing*, the exploration of 'the nature of reality is one of the most interesting'.⁴² *Surfacing* stretches the structure of reality to the extent that it becomes the structure of fantasy. The structures of reality are constituted however by means of a rigid separation between the real and the unreal: 'Separation... the principle of either/or, is thus the underlying structure of reality'.⁴³ The principle of either/or follows a logic of true and false that Atwood's fiction renders problematic. The texts in fact question the possibility of achieving an unmediated access to knowledge, reality and truth.

I have defined above the major premises of idealist thought: identity, presence and the unity of the speaking subject. The latter presupposes a parallel notion of the transparency of language and of pre-existent meanings that can be grasped by a thinking, unified subject. These concepts allow for a degree of certainty about life and about apparent access to

42 Margaret Laurence, Review of *Surfacing*, *Quarry* 22, 4 (Spring 1973), pp.62-64, reprinted in Judith McCombs, *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* (Boston, 1988), pp.45-47 (p.46).

43 John Vernon, p.110.

truth.⁴⁴ If meaning is reflected in language and mediated by experience, our knowledge of the world is potentially true knowledge. Chapter Three of this study will show how Atwood's texts unsettle these certainties.

The intermingling of the world of reality with that of fantasy has the effect of interrogating and problematizing our category of the 'real'.⁴⁵ As Barbara Godard has observed of *Lady Oracle*, 'Atwood plays with the notion of distorting mirrors, convex and concave, foregrounding here the central issue of the novel, that all reflections are distortions, all mimetic representations lies'.⁴⁶ Godard stresses the deceptive nature of surfaces present in *Lady Oracle* and in Atwood's poem, 'Tricks with Mirror'. However, this is a characteristic feature of Atwood's work. It is also found in later texts, as my reading of *Bodily Harm* and the short stories 'Travel Piece' and 'Hair Jewellery' in Chapter Three will illustrate. In these texts the presence of deceptive, sliding surfaces undercuts the privilege of the visual over the other senses. The certainty that is usually associated with the scopic economy is thus put in question. The texts in fact tend

44 Jacques Derrida in particular in his critique of the sign and his theorizing on the ontology of being has shown the limitations of idealist thought.

45 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by R. Scholes (New York, 1975).

46 Barbara Godard, 'My(m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hebert', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 426 (1983), 13-44 (p.17).

to favour a tactile modality of perception rather than sight, as the poetic voice in *Interlunar* announces: 'It is touch I go by'.⁴⁷ This aspect of Atwood's critical approach to the culture of the Enlightenment results in the undermining of the privileged position of language. The narrator's experience in *Surfacing* goes far beyond 'logic' and language. The novel in fact attacks the assumption that language is founded on a logical structure which faithfully reflects a supposedly objective reality.⁴⁸

The impossibility of reaching truth, of giving reality a definite, that is, single, interpretation is underscored in *Surfacing*, *Life Before Man*, *Bodily Harm*, and *Cat's Eye*. This modernist concern is, however, treated differently in Atwood's texts since, as is typical of postmodernist fiction, they combine *mimesis* with self-reflexivity. Postmodernist fiction does in fact 'hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever before, is plural'.⁴⁹

As Barbara Godard concludes of *Lady Oracle*,
'distorting, deflecting, the mirrors are all we have'.
50 The novels in fact show the difficulty of asserting
what is objectively real, and what has value or

47 'A Boat', p.97.

48 Merris T. Clark, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: Language, Logic and the Art of Fiction', *Modern Language Studies*, 13, 3 (Summer 1983), pp. 3-15.

49 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London, 1987), p.39.

50 Barbara Godard, p.17.

significance in a world where nothing is fixed. A reviewer of Atwood's recent collection of poetry *Interlunar* has noted how it 'explores many phases of growth and movement working through to recognition that nothing is ever lost, for all things are part of a continuum'.⁵¹

However, in Atwood's poetic vision male personae appear to be ill-at-ease with this absence of order and the existence of constant process, as they repeatedly attempt to control reality and fix it in stasis. Their female counterparts, on the contrary, are portrayed more at ease with disorder, in unison with their more flexible structures of being. This notion of female subjectivity has been theorized by certain French feminists who have drawn on Lacan's formulations of subjectivity and Derrida's deconstruction of binary structures.

The emphasis of psychoanalysis on the importance of gender and sexual ideology in the constitution of subjectivity and on the structure of language and the signifying practice within the symbolic order has produced a development and critical elaboration of Lacan's theory.

French feminist theorists have used Lacan's formulations as a basis for a materialist theory of

⁵¹ Anne Blott, 'Journey to Light' (*Interlunar*) *Fiddlehead*, 146 (Winter 1985) pp.90-95, reprinted in Judith McCombs ed., pp. 275- 279.

ideology which takes into account the structure of a gendered subjectivity. Lacanian psychoanalysis draws on structural linguistics to foreground a notion of subjectivity which is structured through language. For Saussure language is regulated by a set of differences rather than by positive terms. Loss or lack of the referent becomes then the condition of existence of the linguistic system. Lacan's linguistically based psychoanalysis conceives the phallus as the master representative of the lack which structures language. As a result, sexual difference is mapped onto linguistic difference. Access to signification for a woman thus becomes problematic, as Lacan aligns the phallus with the Symbolic order of communication, and posits woman as existing in a different, if not deficient, relation to language and therefore subjectivity.

Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva share Lacan's contention that woman's position within language and culture is defined by her negative entry into the Symbolic order. They have elaborated the implication of this theory, which locates woman in an impossible place, outside language and ideologies. It is only with difficulty that subjectivity can be attributed to woman: 'Any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine' writes Luce Irigaray,⁵²

52 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum: Of The Other Woman*, translated by Gillian Gill (New York, 1985), p.100.

since woman has been denied any specificity in relation to the imaginary.

Since Atwood's configurations of femininity attribute at times a 'negativity' to the female characters, the theories I have briefly mentioned provide, I think, a useful framework in order to discuss the texts' problematization of notions of femininity. I shall refer to these representations in Chapter Two and Four.

However, these critics have also highlighted the positive aspects of woman's ambiguous and marginal position and the strategies she adopts as a result of her marginality. They portray the feminine as plural and provisional. For Irigaray multiplicity begins at the level of women's anatomy: 'Women do not have one sex organ. They have at least two, which cannot be identified singly. Actually women have many more than that. Their sexuality, always at least double, is plural/multiple'.⁵³ Women can conceive otherness and alterity because they already contain otherness within them in this multiplicity. Irigaray and Cixous describe the phallic libidinal economy as unitary, linear and theological and therefore unable to think alterity. Femininity, on the contrary, they portray as circular, plural, without goals.

53 Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe Qui N'En Est Pas Un* (Paris, 1977) *This sex Which Is Not One*, translated by C. Porter (New York, 1985), p.27.

Atwood's texts suggest that it is scarcely possible to define female subjectivity as her needs and desires have been appropriated by a masculine logic that imposes its own (Self)representations on her. Masculine subjectivity is absolute and definite, as it tries to define or constitute woman through its gaze and manipulation. We shall see how, in *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist resists the objectifying and mastering look of the other. Man's perception of woman is obscured by his own expectations and constructions. As the poetic voice in *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* observes: 'You find only/ the shape you already are/ but what/ if you have forgotten that/ or discover you/have never known'.⁵⁴ Denied her own subjectivity, woman is represented as supporting male desire for self-specularization: 'You look past me, listening/to them, perhaps, or/watching/your own reflection somewhere/behind my head, over my shoulder'.⁵⁵

However, the focus Atwood places on difference, which I shall explore in Chapter Four, does not reveal a biological essentialist position, as Atwood emphasises gender construction. Moreover, Atwood's texts show an attempt to re-think heterosexual relationships and to reformulate them according to a logic that defies

⁵⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, (Toronto, 1970), p.25.

⁵⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Circle Game* (Toronto, 1978), p.46.

systems of male definitions. The writings of the late 70's and 80's investigate an alternative interrelation between the feminine 'self' and the male 'other' in a way that gives priority to alterity and difference over identity.

Atwood posits woman as more capable of both shaking and disturbing masculine values and oppressive binary and hierarchichal structures. She achieves this effect in a way that maintains difference by pointing at masculine values, 'by giving them life, by putting them into play one against the other'.⁵⁶

I want to conclude this introduction by mentioning that the predilection for multiplicity and difference has been identified as a Canadian strategy. Canada has reacted to the postcolonial question of defining a distinct cultural identity in a manner that distinguishes it from other countries. Canada has 'refused the monolithic stories of British and US imperialism and has been evolving from its marginal position a self-definition based on an ideology of decentralization which recognizes both its difference from the outside powers as well as its difference within'.⁵⁷ Canadian identity has therefore been spoken

56 Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris, 1977). This translation as in *The New French Feminism*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton, 1980), pp.136-141, (p.140).

57 Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Writers of the 1970's and 1980's* (London, 1987), p.26.

of as 'negative', 'plural', 'decentralized', and in fact the country 'evades any definition geographically and culturally'.⁵⁸

Coral Ann Howells, in her study on contemporary Canadian women writers, has noted striking similarities between the history of Canada as a nation and the position of women. As she writes, 'women's experience of the power politics of gender and their problematic relation to patriarchal traditions of authority have affinities with the Canadian attitude to the cultural imperialism of the United States as well as its ambivalence towards its European inheritance'.⁵⁹ This similarity together with a remarkable number of women writers in Canada has revealed interesting affinities between the quest for visibility and identity and Canadian search for a distinct cultural image.

However, also the reverse is true. Canada's plural and decentralized identity mirrors women's experience of both participating in and standing aside from the dominant culture. Women's own position of marginality in the phallogocentric order makes them exist only negatively. As the French theorist Julia Kristeva, who firmly refuses to define 'woman' writes, to be a woman

58 Ivi, p.25. See also Robert Kroetsch, 'Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy', in *Canadian Story and History 1885-1985*, ed. by Peter Easingwood and Colin Nicholson (Edinburgh, 1986), pp.1-11; W.H.New, 'Beyond Nationalism: On Regionalism', *World Literature Written in English*, 23,1 (1984), 12-30.

59 Coral Ann Howells, p.22.

is to be inscribed in a negative practice that resist definition: 'a woman cannot "be" In woman I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.... It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say "that's not it" and "that's still not it"'.⁶⁰

60 *Polylogue* (Paris, 1977). This translation as in Marks and de Courtivron, p.137.

CHAPTER ONE THE QUESTION OF GENRE: CREATIVE
APPROPRIATIONS

Traditions are lovely things - to create traditions,
that is, not to live off them.
Franz Marc, *Aphorisms 1914-1915*

1.1 WRITING ACROSS GENERIC BOUNDARIES

As is characteristic of postmodernist fiction,
Atwood's novels display an eclectic use of genre. The
texts in fact provide a re-visitation of fictional
forms belonging to popular as well as to
sophisticated forms of art, a re-visitation that is,
as we shall see, never innocent, always ironical.

This Chapter focuses on the heterogeneous
presence of a variety of different genres, traditions
and styles that can be traced in Atwood's fiction.¹

1 To a certain extent this trait has been noted by critics; however commentators have not fully discussed its significance and the implications that can be drawn from it. Examples are found in the following readings: Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Woman Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston, 1980); Catherine McIay, 'The Dark Voyage: The Edible Woman as Romance', *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Arnold Davinson and Cathy Davinson (Toronto, 1981), pp.107-120; Lucy Freibert, 'The Artist as Picasso: The revelation of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*', *Canadian Literature*, 92 (Spring 1982), 23-33. Patrick Parrinder, 'Making Poison', *London Review of Books*, 8, 5 (20 March 1986), 20-22; Barbara Godard, 'Tales Within Tales: Margaret Atwood's Folk Narratives', *Canadian Literature*, 109, (Summer 1986), 57-86; Coral A. Howells, *Private and Fictional Words* (London, 1987); Charles Berryman, 'Atwood's Narrative Quest', *Journal of Narrative Techniques*, 17 (1987), 51-56.

My analysis aims to explore the plurality of genres present in the novels and to look closely at the mechanisms by which the texts 'shatter the limits'² of generic conventions and disobey the laws of genre.

It is Atwood's contention that to step beyond the boundaries, to reach beyond generic norms - which she calls 'brackets'- can be far more rewarding and fascinating than confining oneself within rigidly demarcated borders.³ As she remarks in an interview:

Every-one of these art forms has a certain set of brackets around it. You can say, *this is what happens with this form*, and, *these are some of the things that don't happen within it*. Some of the most interesting things happen when you expand the brackets. Then you change the rules.⁴

Atwood's fiction, in fact, reveals a marked tendency to revisit conventional fictional forms inherited from traditions of both 'high' and 'low' forms of writing, as for example the Gothic, the sentimental novel, the picaresque, the fairy tale and ancient myth. The way in which different genres and traditions are present in the texts illustrates the author's ability to work within a set of generic conventions in order to subvert them. Atwood's

2 Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Paris, 1959).

3 Edward Said, 'An Ideology of Difference', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 38-58.

4 Geoffrey Hancock, *Canadian Writers at Work* (Toronto, 1987), p.260.

interest lies not simply in discarding literary traditions, especially when it comes to the stereotypical representation of woman. Rather it lies in shaping the material from which she borrows in order to 'transform it, rearrange it and shift the values'.⁵

Generic features and norms reverberate in the novels but are frequently reversed in an effective way. For example the 'rebellion' against the conventions of Women's Gothic Romance in *Lady Oracle* occurs at the same time as those conventions are being pointed at.⁶ The narrator's refusal to play by the rules of the game makes the reader acutely conscious of these rules.

The interaction between different generic modes of writing in Atwood's fiction has further implications in that it calls into question the difference between so called 'high' and 'low' forms

5 Gail van Varsveld, 'Talking with Atwood', *Room of One's Own*, 1, 2 (Summer 1975) 66-70, quoted in Nancy Peterson, "'Blubeard's Egg': Not Entirely a 'Grimm' Tale", in Margaret Atwood: *Reflection and Reality*, ed. by Beatrice Mendez-Egle (Edinburgh, Texas, 1987), pp.131-138 (p.138). Nancy Peterson's article is a close study of how Atwood shapes the material of Grimms' fairy tale to produce a story that distances itself from the morals of the original, which condemns female curiosity. 'Blubeard's Egg', on the other hand, is a reflection on the power politics of a love relationship and a warning against the dangers of romantic love, highlighting the importance of women gaining control over their life and art.

6 Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Origin of Genre', *New Literary History*, 8, 1 (Autumn 1976), 159-170.

of art, challenging conventional hierarchies existing among genres. In addition, the presence of a plurality of genres has a further effect. A genre does not simply constitute an aspect of a given work, but represents 'one of its principles of unity'. A genre is an 'invitation to form', 'a struggle for order'.⁷ As a consequence, the use the author makes of genres, and the device of doubling and intertextuality, challenges notions of unity, singularity, and order, displaying a predilection for multiplicity. As I shall argue in Chapter Two, Atwood also undermines unity in relation to character, producing a challenge to the notion of the homogeneous ego.

As a result of the presence of different generic strands, the narrative becomes a locus where a plurality of styles and traditions are echoed and recalled. The multiplicity of styles and narrative forms which Atwood employs is another example of the way plurality appears to be a modality privileged in

7 Carlo Guillen, *Literature as a System* (Princeton, 1971), p.386; p.12. Luce Freibert's a reading of the novel in terms of the Picaresque, does not account for the implications of the contamination within genres that is present in *Lady Oracle*. Undoubtedly certain elements of the Picaresque do appear - the most evident being that of the artist as a trickster - but on the whole the novel defies generic classification (Carlo Guillen, 'Toward a Definition of the Picaresque', in *op cit.*, pp.71-106).

the narrative.⁸ The diversity of styles employed in the text signifies authorial freedom from a unitary and single language. The unity of style implies, as Bakhtin argues, 'on the one hand the unity of language (in the sense of a system of general normative forms) and on the other hand the unity of an individual person realizing himself in this language'. On the contrary, the plurality present in the novels, 'opens up the possibility of never having to define oneself in language'.⁹

However, the challenge to generic classification does not imply that the reader has to abandon generic thinking altogether. On the contrary it calls for an investigation of genre itself and of the relationship between genres.¹⁰ Atwood herself has stressed the necessity of understanding how generic rules work before making any alteration to the norms:

You have to understand what the form is doing, how it works, before you say 'Now, we are going to make it

8 Frank Davey posits the existence of a sub-language in Atwood's texts which possesses 'subtexts either implied or embedded within it - superhero stories, Shakespearean comedy, quest romance, descents to the underworld, television newscasts and commercials, billboards, horror movies'. However Davey's comment suggests a topic for further research since he does not discuss how the genres interweave in the texts. Margaret Atwood (Vancouver, 1984), p.162.

9 Michael Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, London, 1981), p.364; p.315.

10 Fredric Jameson, 'Magical Narratives', *New Literary History*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1975), 133-163.

different, we are going to turn it upside down, we are going to move it so it includes something which isn't supposed to be there, we're going to surprise the reader.¹¹

The Edible Woman, for example, re-shapes the standard conventions of eighteenth-century comedy in such a way that the novel concludes with an example of the reversal of the convention, resulting in what can be called an 'anticomedy'.¹² *Surfacing* comprises elements of the ghost story, the quest novel and the thriller, besides being an example of a peculiar appropriation of aspects of the Canadian literary tradition. The novel presents many of the recurring features of Canadian literature which Atwood has traced in *Survival*. In *Surfacing*, however, these features are used in a rather different way, since the author works within the tradition only to signal a way out of it. As Atwood writes in her critical study: 'A tradition doesn't necessarily exist to bury you: it can also be used as material for new departures'.¹³

The eclecticism of Atwood's use of genre is particularly striking in *Lady Oracle* where several generic strands and modes are interwoven. The novel displays an ironic use of the generic norms of Women's Gothic Romance fiction, parodying them in a

11 Geoffrey Hancock, p.260.

12 Graeme Gibson, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', *Eleven Canadian Writers* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 1-31.

13 (Toronto, 1972), p.246.

manner similar to Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. However, as we shall see, there are significant differences between the two. *Lady Oracle* undermines the conventions of Gothic characterization and challenges conventional stereotypes of womanhood. It explores the compensatory function of so-called 'escapist' literature, using parody to reveal an authorial concern with the pleasures of reading romance. Advertised as a novel of adventure, intrigue and betrayal, *Bodily Harm* draws on the Gothic, especially in its representation of the female character as persecuted, and on the journalistic, camera-eye style adopted by its main character, Rennie, the 'lifestyle' reporter. In the displacing of certain episodes of the action to the rural setting of the Caribbean, *Bodily Harm* reveals elements of the pastoral which, in actual fact, find a thematic correspondence in the novel, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. The heterogeneity of narrative forms is a distinctive trait of *Murder in the Dark*, while the *Handmaid's Tale* contains, besides the features of the political dystopia, elements from the tradition of folk and oral tales. A re-visitation of fairy-tale motifs recur in Atwood's narrative, as well as furnishing the subtext for the title story of the collection *Bluebeard's Egg*.

Opening up generic boundaries is also important in the respect that it reacts against woman's 'conventional confinement within the divisions and paradigms of patriarchal thinking'.¹⁴ A similar function, connected in particular with the role of female characters, is performed by the plethora of intertextual references present in the narratives. In Atwood's re-writing of fictions from earlier periods, the past is inscribed in the present (through literary genres and the typicality of its characters), with special attention to the representation of woman. Her utilization and re-working of plots belonging to popular genres, makes these modifications more clearly recognizable. This intertextual dialogue between present and past, old and new, implies a belief in the value of change.¹⁵

The female figures whom Atwood takes as models for her own characters are often 'heroines on the run' or tragic figures doomed to be victims.¹⁶ Atwood, however, shapes her narrative material in such a way as to contrast her characters' survival

14 Linda Anderson, 'The Re-Imagining of History in Contemporary Women's Fiction', in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. by Linda Anderson (London, 1990), pp. 129-141.

15 Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York and London, 1989).

16 Atwood also draws from fairy tales and mythology on account of their celebration of female magic powers, as for example Circe in *You Are Happy*. Karla Hammond, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', *American Poetry Review*, 8 (Sept.Oct.1979), 27-30.

qualities, their fake deaths and/or re-births, with these conventionally tragic fates. In her revised version of fairy story and myth the female characters not only survive but also write about their survival.

Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*, treats many of the themes mentioned above. These are developed in the texts she published subsequently. In *The Edible Woman* one finds the re-visitation of the standard eighteenth-century comedy plot from a feminist perspective; the use of intertextuality, especially in relation to fairy tales and Lewis Carroll's Alice novels; and the rejection of narrative closure, which sees in the ending an indication of a new beginning.

The re-visitation of tradition in Atwood's fictional texts generally results in a defiance of literary and social conventions. *The Edible Woman*, for example, with its 'shift' of emphasis escapes the confines of the heterosexual romance plot. Here the convention of 'the two suitors', deriving especially from Jane Austen, is simultaneously echoed and refuted.¹⁷ Although the novel deals with one of the most traditional subjects, marriage, Atwood's narrative solution rejects the closure which the

17 Gayle Green, 'Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* "Rebelling Against the System"', in *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, ed. by Beatrice Mendez-Egle (Edinburg, Texas, 1987), pp.95-115.

theme often implies. Marriage, especially in eighteenth-century fiction, symbolizes the heroine reaching maturity, signalled by her choice of the 'right' suitor. In achieving this goal, the heroine 'has perceived his values to be the correct ones and has adopted them for herself'.¹⁸ In *The Edible Woman*, once Marian has chosen the right 'suitor', she gradually lapses into passivity. It is this link present in the tradition, between becoming an adult and choosing a man, that the novel questions.

From the publication of her first novel Atwood has engaged in confrontations and controversies with her literary predecessors and contemporaries. Her inventive re-working of tradition and genre illustrates that no literary work, or any work of art, exists in isolation. The self-consciousness that the texts display in this respect invites a critical reading which looks carefully at the ways in which the narratives transform, distort, oppose, affirm or deny tradition. This study aims to demonstrate that the texts show a 'rule-changing creativity' rather than a 'rule-governed creativity'.¹⁹

18 Jeane E. Kennard, *Victims of Convention* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1978), p.20.

19 Umberto Eco, *A Theory Of Semiotics* (London, 1977), p.161.

1.2 SURFACING AND CANADIAN LITERATURE: A CRITICAL RE-
APPROPRIATION

It is Atwood's contention that to work within a tradition does not necessarily signify fidelity to the original model. On the contrary, it can signal a desire to invent, to insert new episodes and motifs which will contrast with accepted conventions: 'If you are a writer, you need not discard the tradition, nor do you have to succumb to it Instead, you can explore the tradition - which is not the same as merely reflecting it - and in the course of the exploration you may find some new ways of writing'.²⁰

The revised version of Canadian literary patterns and conventions which Atwood creates in *Surfacing* modifies and subverts their major characteristics. The author questions these traditions and patterns, signalling an attempt to initiate alternative possibilities. As she writes in *Survival*: 'When you have recognized a pattern or a tradition, the best course is not to bemoan the fact that it is what it is but to explore the possibilities for using that pattern in as many significant ways as possible'.²¹

20 *Survival*, p.238.

21 *Ibid*, p.174.

Both the themes and the location employed in *Surfacing* echo Canadian literary tradition and themes in their typical aspects. There is, for example, the image of a vast uncontaminated natural terrain, with its forests and lakes, where Canadians themselves, though natives, feel like intruders. Outer space in Canadian literature is explored rather than inhabited, unlike American literature where it signals a desire for solitude.²² As Robert Kroetsch notes, the Canadian poetic imagination seems to be inspired by the vista of vast, silent, unstructured spaces.²³ A consequence of Canada's unique geographical features is that the country appears too big to be inhabited. With its great stretches of wilderness, the countryside evokes an experience of 'profoundly inhumanized isolation',²⁴ which in *Surfacing* is reflected in the narrator's sense of estrangement as she steps onto the remote island

22 Marshall McLuhan, 'Canada: the Borderline Case' in David Staines ed. *The Canadian Imagination* (London, 1977) (226-248).

23 'The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition', *English Quarterly*, 4 (Summer 1971), 46-49 (p.46).

24 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto, 1971), p.164. In the afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood discusses the sense of estrangement the Canadian feels towards his country: 'We are all immigrants to this place if we were born here; the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen - it is so easy to leave - and if we do choose it, we are still choosing a violent duality' (Toronto, 1970).

where she spent her childhood. As she ironically comments, 'Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory'.²⁵

As a result, Canadian literature often conveys a sense of a dead, hostile or indifferent Nature. In *Surfacing*, however, the theme of the dangerous wilderness is recalled and at the same time rejected.

Nature is presented as having both positive and negative connotations. The disappearance of the narrator's father from the island can be ascribed to a 'death by nature', usually caused by drowning or freezing, or by 'bushing', when the character isolated in the wilderness goes crazy. The latter in particular is also recalled by the experience the narrator undergoes in the forest, when she flees from her companions, that is from civilization, to be alone in the wilderness. She will then discard any sense of social identity, of time and history to become a 'natural woman, state of nature' (p.222). Her journey into nature is dangerous and terrifying in some respects. But the narrator manages to 'surface', and the experience, as we shall see in Chapter Two, brings about a positive alteration of self.

Another theme that *Surfacing* explores, which constitutes a significant aspect of the Canadian way

²⁵ *Surfacing* (New York, 1983, p.14). All further references appear in the text.

of thinking and a common motif in Canadian literature, is the representation of Americans as colonizers, agents of destruction, who go to Canada to hunt and bring back the beaver which is hung up as a trophy. However, Atwood here treats the motif critically, depicting it as a questionable stereotype. The Canadian/American and the victim/victor oppositions, described by Atwood as the most pervasive in the country's literature, are revised in *Surfacing*, with these motifs played one against the other. The way Atwood exposes the 'American question' and 'the victim complex' is in itself an indirect commentary on the tradition. The character David, who has clear-cut ideas about America and the Americans' imperialistic and exploitative tendencies towards Canada, is revealed in the end to be an 'impostor' (p.179). He is portrayed as an unconvicted and unconvincing individual, composed of 'layers of political handbills' who 'didn't know what language to use, he had forgotten his own' and was now unthinkingly imitating 'secondhand American' (p.179).

The perception of America as a predatory nation, exploitative and brutal, is closely related to the Canadian 'victim complex' which Atwood discusses in *Survival*. Such an attitude inevitably creates an oppressor/victim dichotomy which Atwood strongly

rejects. As she emphasises, to define oneself as a victim simply means denying responsibility, and regarding oneself as totally blameless. The most gratuitous and horrible act of slaughter which occurs on the island in *Surfacing* - the killing of a heron which is left hanging in the bush - is discovered eventually to have been carried out by Canadians. As the narrator comments, 'But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they are from, my head said, they are still Americans' (p.152). Rather than signifying an actual nationality, the Americans come to represent in the novel a 'state of mind'.²⁶ This indicates the pointlessness of splitting the world into discriminatory categories and opposites. Atwood implies that we should transcend the politics of victims and victors and thus try to 'achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony rather than a destructive relationship towards the world'.²⁷

A consequence of the 'victim attitude' in the realm of fiction is that Canadian characters frequently appear to be doomed to failure. If they do not die or fail, they merely survive. The narrator of

26 Graeme Gibson, p.15.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Surfacing, however, at the end of her journey states very strongly her desire to go beyond this impasse.

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recount, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death (p.223).

As this passage shows, the narrator is striving to become a 'creative non victim'.²⁸ She is, in fact, one of the numerous characters in Atwood's fiction portrayed as an artist. This role is relevant when considering the author's position in relation to the number of 'thwarted' writers and 'paralyzed' artists one finds in Canadian literature.²⁹ Their presence can be explained by considering Canada's colonial mentality, which has led to a lack of energy and of belief in the nation's potential. Such absence of confidence has been a major impediment to the production of Art in Canada. As E.K. Brown notes in a seminal essay on the consequences of Canada's state as a cultural and economic colony,

A great art is fostered by artists and audience possessing in common a passionate and peculiar interest in the kind of life that exists in the country where they live. If this interest exists in the artist he will try to give it adequate

28 *Survival*, p.38-9.

29 *Survival*, p.187; p.177.

expression; if it exists in the audience they will be alert for any imaginative work which expresses it from a new angle and with a new clearness... (but) in a colonial or semi-colonial community neither artist nor audience will have the passionate and peculiar interest in their immediate surroundings that is required.³⁰

The situation of the artist severed from society recurs in Canadian fiction, where writers are somehow cut off from an audience which either ignores them or is indifferent to them.³¹ Deprived of this essential link with the public, the artist is inexorably doomed to failure. Atwood again appears to be writing within this tradition - with its emphasis on the artist as (anti)hero - and at the same time against it. Her portraits of the heroine-as-artist, in fact, though sometimes depicting her as 'crippled' at the beginning, displays creativity used to a positive end.

The presence of an artist figure in *Surfacing* is a sign of the author's concern with the necessity of the creative appropriation of tradition and of place. Atwood stresses the connection between the acquisition of a sense of place and creativity in *Survival*: 'One way of coming to terms, making sense of one's roots is to become a creator...'.³² It is

30 E.K. Brown, 'Canadian Poetry' (1943), *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, edited and introduced by Eli Mandel (London & Chicago, 1971), pp.29-47 (p.40).

31 Examples discussed by Atwood include, Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (1941); Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952); Graeme Gibson, *Five Legs* (1969).

32 *Survival*, p.181.

writing that constitutes the most significant form of appropriation. The importance attributed to creative appropriation and, in particular, to writing may be explained by the fact that writing involves an entirely different orientation to knowledge and interpretation. In a country which is in the process of recovering from a colonial mentality this function becomes crucial. It involves, for example, the establishing of one's own standard, rather than the acceptance of those imposed from the outside.³³

Writing has a significant function in the process of re-definition of self and place. The concern with place and displacement, present in *Surfacing*, is a major feature in post-colonial literature. Atwood's novel presents at its outset a situation of alienation from self and from place exemplified by the protagonist, as I shall illustrate in detail in the course of this study. Suffice to say here that the protagonist's detachment from her place of origin, and her psychological and artistic block, find a positive outcome. At the end of the novel the narrator metaphorically *becomes* the place (p.213), and is re-born, both as an artist and as a woman.

Commentators have noted how *Surfacing* re-inscribes fairy tales and Canadian folk stories with

33 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin eds., *The Empire Writes Back* (London 1989).

critical intent. While on the island, the unnamed narrator is working at one of her assignments - a set of illustrations for a series of *Quebec Folk Tales*. She notes with disappointment that certain stories which traditionally form part of Quebecois folklore are missing from the collection. She observes that "There should be a 'loup-garou' story in *Quebec Folk Tales*, perhaps there was and Mr. Percival took it out, it was too rough for him" (p.65). 'Loup-garou' (werewolf) introduces the theme of the terrifying transformation of man into wolf or some other beast. A characteristic of 'werewolf' stories is the negative and violent connotation of the adventures involved. In *Surfacing*, however, Atwood reverses the connotations of the Quebec werewolf motif, laying stress on the positive rather than negative aspects of metamorphosis.³⁴ The latter however retains in *Surfacing* both its frightening and positive aspects, which Atwood evokes in their full ambiguity. The visions, for example, which the narrator sees of her parents, especially that of her father, are quite disturbing. However, the outcome of these experiences is supposedly positive. They enable the subject to transcend the fixed dichotomies which Atwood presents so critically. Examples of such dualism include

34 Elisabeth R. Baer, 'Pilgrimage Inward Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs in *Surfacing*', in VanSpanckeren, ed., pp.24-34.

subject and object, body and mind, spirit and matter. The way the texts undermine these mutually exclusive oppositions and the priority of one term over the other, which characterizes their conventional treatment, will be discussed in Chapter Three.

However, as I mentioned in the introductory part of this Chapter, Atwood's fiction also rejects mutual exclusion in terms of literary genres. As we shall see in detail in the course of this Chapter, the texts draw heavily on different traditions and genres in a way that provides critical, often ironical re-visitations of literary practices from the past and present.

1.3 CONTRASTING WORLDS: FROM PASTORAL TO DYSTOPIA: *SURFACING*, *BODILY HARM* AND *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Close encounters between different worlds, employed by Atwood as a narrative device to foreground their respective structures and disparities, emerge as characteristic features of *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, both of which employ the traditional device of the displacement of the action to an alien location associated with the adventure novel and the dystopia. In other novels, for example *The Edible Woman*, the contrast between

the two worlds takes a more personal, subjective dimension in the development of the protagonist's crisis. In *Surfacing* the juxtaposition of different worlds is based on the pastoral contrast between nature and culture. The displacement of the action to the rural environment of the Canadian wilderness plays a crucial part in the narrator's process of self-healing.

Atwood's work of dystopian fiction *The Handmaid's Tale* displays a disturbing opposition between the world as we know it (the past in this novel is our present) and a nightmarish future, where the characters confront oppressive forms of social and institutional changes. However, the displacement of location associated with dystopian fiction was already present in *Bodily Harm*, a novel published earlier, where a complex intertwining of two distinctly different environments occurs.

The pastoral myth with its nostalgia for a world of peace and protection informs *Surfacing*, the novel I intend to discuss first. The contrast between nature as the pure, the simple, the untamed, in antithesis to the cultivated and civilized city, is presented here with all the complexities and ambiguities belonging to the genre. Although the regional idyll has been a consistent theme in nineteenth-century Canadian poetry and fiction,

pastoral forms and topoi have been increasingly present in recent years.³⁵ The use of the pastoral set of conventions by modern writers has added other elements to the tradition, with the effect of creating a 'non-realistic mode suitable for exploring mythical, psychological, even ideological layers below the empirical surface'.³⁶ It is in this 'tradition' that *Surfacing*, in certain respects, may be located.

A 'novel of awakening', the text displays elements of the quest motif, which feminist critics have recognized as recurrent in women's fiction. They have drawn a distinction between novels of spiritual, and of social, quest.³⁷ In the latter, the alienated self of the female protagonist seeks integration into the social community through a gradual and accumulative process of self-understanding. In the spiritual quest, the protagonist's journey does not aim at social integration, but at a 'qualitatively different sense of self'.³⁸ The dissimilarity between

35 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto, 1971).

36 Walter Pache, 'English-Canadian Fiction and the Pastoral Tradition', *Canadian Literature*, 86 (Autumn 1980) 15-28 (p.27).

37 See, for example, Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (Boston, 1980) and Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Womens Fiction* (Brighton, 1982). Barbara Hill Rigney sees *Surfacing* as containing both elements of the spiritual and the social quest (*Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel* (Madison, 1978)).

38 Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London, 1989) p.143.

the two kinds of quest is also reflected in the literary structure of the texts. In the novel of social quest there is a narrative of chronological development and a representation of a social environment. On the contrary, the 'novel of awakening', exemplified by *Surfacing*, is concerned primarily with 'the symbolic realm which echoes and affirms the subject's inner being' in a mode that is often lyrical.³⁹

As is frequently the case in pastoral literature the flight of the protagonist of *Surfacing* to the country implies 'a return'. The latter, however, is not the focus of the narrative. In its concluding stages the novel centres mainly upon the process of 'psychological transformation' which the protagonist undergoes. The text signals, as we shall see in detail in the next Chapter, that certain radical changes have taken place, but their actual outcome is projected beyond the boundaries of the text.⁴⁰ The return, to civilization and to personal relationships, does not, however, signify conciliation. It is understood that the narrator will now be able to negotiate her future with society. The ending of the novel, with its lack of closure, functions in fact as beginning. As the narrator

39 Rita Felski, p.144.

40 Rita Felski, p.133.

reflects, 'We can no longer live... the way it was before... we will have to begin' (p.224).

The motif of the journey from the city to the country recurs in *Bodily Harm*. The discovery of place is here associated with discovery of self. This notion is also highlighted by Atwood's blackly witty use of punning. After the operation for cancer she has suffered, Rennie is in a period of 'Remission'. She describes this as 'a good word', while regarding 'terminal' as a bad one. The latter makes Rennie think of 'a bus station: the end of the line'.⁴¹ But the significance of Rennie's journey lies precisely in its being a point for new 'departures'. 'Terminal' signifies not only 'the end of the line, where you get off'. It also signifies the place 'where you can get on, to go somewhere else' (p.299). In this novel the protagonist's travelling to unknown places resembles the journeys undertaken in the adventure story.⁴² In contemporary American literature this fictional genre is associated with the notion of quest. The exotic and distant places become 'not only the land we export and colonize; but also the space

41 (London, 1983, p.59). All further reference to this novel appear in the text.

42 Rennie knows hardly anything about the islands. In a hurry to leave, this time she is travelling 'blind' (p. 30).

where we meet our darkest self or double'.⁴³ In these fictions, as as in *Bodily Harm*, the journey becomes a response to a need to find the truth about oneself, and to overcome fear of death. It is ultimately a learning experience.⁴⁴

The opposition between town and country takes place in *Bodily Harm* on different levels, and creates a complex net of interactions. Structurally and thematically, the novel indicates the existence of dissimilarities, as well as affinities, between the two different environments which Rennie encounters. The conventional contrast between rural simplicity and the urban atmosphere of moral corruption and psychological stress, is recalled and simultaneously rejected. The islands prove not to be a blissful refuge from pain and suffering but reveal their own horrendous realities. The pastoral desire to escape the city, depicted as a place where inner and outer confusion as well as evil and violence reign, to find a refuge in a simpler place, is treated in *Bodily Harm* in a complex and ambiguous manner.⁴⁵ In the supposedly simpler environment of the Caribbean

43 Ihab Hassan, 'Quest: Forms of Adventure in Contemporary American Literature', in *Contemporary American Literature*, ed. by Malcom Bradbury and S. Ro (London, 1987), pp.123-137 (p.130).

44 The ending of *Bodily Harm* could in fact be seen as another beginning for Renata Wilford (Renata, that is born again). See Chapters Two and Three.

45 Peter Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London, 1971).

islands, complexities different from those of the city arise. As in *Surfacing*, the motif of pastoral withdrawal functions here as an illuminating experience which reveals many different facets. In traditional pastoral literature the journey from the life in the Court or the city to the country is ultimately one from Art to Nature to Art. This finds a correspondence in the way Rennie learns to achieve a clearer view of reality about her experiences and perceptions. Rennie will learn 'how to see'. As I illustrate in Chapter Three the acquisition of a renewed sense of perceptions, of a renewed sight is an indication that Rennie has learnt to be creative.

One major result of Atwood's juxtaposition of these two dissimilar locations is the effective representation of power relations at work, with their ramifications of politics and gender. The theme of sexual politics permeates *Bodily Harm*. As in *Surfacing*, Atwood repeatedly highlights the male view of sex as a contest and struggle for power. Images of violence against women are disseminated in the episodes of the novel set in Toronto, while the islands provide a picture of vicious political intrigue and sexual abuse. The connections the novel creates between sexual and political perversions

shows how the two are linked.⁴⁶ As we shall see in the course of this section, the interrelation between power and sex continues to be a major theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

It is the intrusion of the stranger in Rennie's flat - along with the unexpected and ominous piece of rope he leaves in her bedroom - that makes Rennie decide to take a break and leave Toronto for a while since she 'didn't want to turn into the sort of woman that is afraid of men' (p.40). Towards the end of the novel, however, Rennie, who is now a prisoner, witnesses acts of violence perpetrated against other male prisoners. At this point the connection between sexual and political abuse is made clear:

She leans against the wall, she's shaking, it's indecent, it's not done with ketchup, nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only because they haven't thought of it yet, they are still amateurs. She is afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she is afraid of men because men are frightening. She has seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like' (p.290).

Rennie leaves Toronto on account of her fear of violent assault, but finds violence magnified in the islands. Indeed the novel implies the impossibility of running away, of avoiding facing up to reality.

46 Clark Blaise, 'Tale of Two Colonies'[review of *Bodily Harm*], *Canadian Literature* 95 (1982), 111-2.

Atwood suggests that, on the contrary, the individual must confront the facts of violence.

Similarly the text creates a link between Rennie's personal experience and the manipulation of the woman's body in pornography. The descriptions of some of the sexual 'games' performed by Rennie's partner Jake are in fact followed by an episode in which she makes a journalistic survey of pornography. The linkage between the two episodes suggests that these two spheres of life, the private and the public, are connected, and that a consideration of the sexual exploitation of women cannot be separated from the analysis of the power structures of patriarchal society in general.

The contrast between the two different worlds present in *Bodily Harm* is also highlighted by the extremely diverse educational and social backgrounds of the two female characters, Rennie and Lora. In this case their difference is presented mainly in terms of social inequality. However, there are also affinities between them which suggest the presence of the specular image of the double, as we shall see in the next Chapter.

Atwood creates continuities between the two different worlds, urban Toronto and the rural Caribbean, by means of extensive use of puns. A pervasive image in the text is the insidious growth

of a carcinoma in Rennie's breast. Witnessing the violence perpetrated by the guards in the prison, Rennie notes that they torture prisoners not simply because they are ordered to but because they enjoy it. Their action are, she concludes, 'Malignant' (emphasis in the original, p.289).⁴⁷ Another element of continuity can be noted in Rennie's feeling of alienation, in her estrangement from her own body, a sensation that commenced with the discovery of her illness. This sense of feeling of being 'other' and 'alien' finds a correspondence in the uncanny sensations inspired in her by the unfamiliar and alien environment of the island.

The interrelation between the personal and the political is reaffirmed in *The Handmaid's Tale*.⁴⁸ Here power politics is explored through the tyranny of the Gilead Republic, a futuristic Christian, totalitarian state, where a puritanical religion functions primarily as a means of social control.

47 The cancer the protagonist suffers from in this novel signifies not only a moment of crisis in her life. Atwood uses it to illustrate and criticise the popular mythology that has been in recent years attached to cancer. Atwood's view are in consonance with Susan Sontag's exposition of the metaphors wrongly attributed to the illness. As we read in the novel cancer is not 'a symbol', but merely 'a disease' (p.83). *Illness as Metaphor* (Harmondsworth, 1983).

48 Roberta Rubenstein, 'Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Van Spanckeren ed., pp. 101-112.

The traditional, domestic and subservient role assigned to women in the small Caribbean islands and the brutality with which they are treated, are magnified in the Republic of Gilead, where women's status depends either on their reproductive capacities or their marital relation to men. The patriarchal elite that governs Gilead has confined women, with the pretence of protecting them, to the roles of breeder, wife and warden. As a result of an environmental catastrophe the fertility rate in Gilead has drastically declined. As a result, women with 'viable ovaries', the handmaids, have become a 'national resource'.⁴⁹ They are regarded as 'breeders', 'sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices' (p. 146). Each handmaid is assigned to the family of a Commander. Here it is hoped that frequent rituals of grotesque copulation, ones with Biblical precedents, will produce the yearned-for child.

The novel reflects Atwood's interest in the analysis of totalitarian political systems,⁵⁰ and is in fact a study of the mechanisms of social and political power. As Offred puts it, the novel treats the theme of 'who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it' (p.145). The exposure of the contradictions and entanglements of power politics plays a key role

49 (London, 1987, p.153; p.75). All further reference to this novel appear in the text.

50 Hancock, p.283.

in utopian/dystopian writing in general. The kernel around which such texts are constructed is a *mise-en-scène* of power, of its discourses and contradictions, and of the perverse pleasure that power itself provokes. In *The Handmaid's Tale* these elements appear to the reader mediated by the narrator and the psychological struggle she wages against the obliteration of consciousness and sense of self, which her training as handmaid is intended to produce.⁵¹

The atmosphere that reigns in Offred's household, as in the whole state of Gilead, is pervaded by power politics. The strictly hierarchical structure of the state, which is reflected in the households, makes people behave according to the amount of power according to his/her position in the hierarchical scale. The episode in which the Commander takes his own handmaid to the brothel, under the disguise of a prostitute, an 'evening rental', as he says (p.247), shows how, as Offred

51 One of the merits of the novel is, as Patrick Parrinder points out, its capacity 'to capture the eerily static, minute-by-minute quality of Offred's sensations, in a life reduced to a meagre sequence of small incidents and stifled and impoverished human contacts, and seen through a consciousness heightened by waiting and fear'. ('Making Poison', *London Review of Books*, 8, 5 (20 March 1986)). However, we are not always supposed to endorse Offred's perspective in the novel. Atwood presents her, to a degree, as a naive persona who becomes enlightened by harsh and unpleasant experiences.

reflects, 'he's reached that state of intoxication which power is said to inspire, the state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything, absolutely anything you feel like, anything at all' (p.248).

Offred finds herself involved, or rather contaminated, by this atmosphere, where everybody is entrapped in the hierarchy of roles established by the régime. However even in her completely subordinate position, she rejoices in the minimal, marginal moments of power she experiences, as when she teases one of the guardians, moving her hips as she walks away: 'It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach....I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there' (p.32). 52

The futuristic location of *The Handmaid's Tale* allows the author to give a fresh, critical look at the present period of the 1970s and '80s which, in the novel, has become the past of a fictionally

52 Lucy M. Freibert, 'Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*', in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Judith McCombs (Hall, Boston, 1988), pp.280-292. Offred also enjoys manipulating the Commander. Her relationship with him gives her some kind of power (p.221) although of little consequence, as she herself recognizes 'No doubt about who holds real power' (p.146). Once Offred starts to see secretly the Commander, she also experiences a kind of power over his wife (p.171).

created future. This interaction between two different periods results in a constant dialogue between the world as we know it, and the horrifying future the novel presents. However, no feature of the Gilead regime is entirely new, as the Republic represents a 'synthesis' (p.319) of past and present practices and ideologies. These are all, of course, transfigured into a fictive universe. The transposition has the effect of casting light both on our present existence in the 1980's and 90's and on our possible future.

Atwood's work of dystopic fiction, like other examples of the genre, notably Orwell's *1984*, Zamyatin's *We* and Huxley's, *Brave New World*, suggests that, if this dystopian future comes about, it will involve the total elimination of the idea of freedom especially for women, homosexuals, and religious minorities; the destruction or falsification of history; a pyramidal political structure controlled by an exclusive elite, which maintains power by means of an efficient police system; a veto on privacy, and the obliteration of love and passionate personal relationships.⁵³

The confrontation between the two worlds, of present and future, is achieved by the novel's

53 George Woodcock, 'Utopias in the Negative', *Sewanee Review*, 65 (1956), 81-97.

skilful manipulation of time. This is perhaps what distinguishes *The Handmaid's Tale* from its predecessors in the dystopian tradition. It is Offred's memories of her previous life that make the contrast vivid and also painful. The device allows the reader to enjoy glimpses into the past in its personal, political and social dimension. The conformity and the slavery of the life under the Gilead regime is contrasted with the energy and creativity experienced in a former time.⁵⁴ However, Atwood refuses to idealize the past. Gilead, in fact, has a number of elements characteristic of contemporary society. The continuities that are shown to exist between the past and the present make *The Handmaid's Tale* effectively address the faults of the present world.

History, literature, and the present are in fact the intertext of this feminist version of dystopia. The subservient role assigned to women in Victorian England; American Puritanism; the Inquisition's burning of books (with its ramification in the present) are some of the historical events accumulated in the text. As for the present, Gilead's obsessive desire to increase the country's birth-rate is reminiscent of the horrific compulsive pro-

54 Amin Malak, 'Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition', *Canadian Literature*, 112 (1987), 9-16.

natality program implemented in Ceaucescu's Romania. The Régime itself is a grotesque parody of the extreme attitudes of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, and of the conservative backlash at present taking place in America.

Atwood's portrayal of the handmaids brings together contradictory perceptions of woman in Western society. They are forced to play the role of the 'household nun', a role middle-class women in eighteenth-century England were instructed to perform; that is they were encouraged to be virtuous, silent, submissive, attributes which excluded of course the cultivation of intellectual activities. Offred is portrayed as a 'sister' although 'dipped in blood' (p.19). However, the handmaids are at the same time the embodiment of 'fallen women', since they are recruited on the basis of their supposedly immoral behaviour, and are regarded as such by the wives.⁵⁵ They are portrayed as 'scarlet' women, marked indelibly by their personal history and their reproductive functions.

55 The régime outlaws all second marriages, divorces, single parenthood and homosexual relationships. The women still able to give birth, who were in these situations before the régime achieved power, were forcedly recruited as handmaids. On the dichotomies of Western perception of women through the 1600 to 1800, see Bran Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York, 1986).

Motherhood in this novel retains both the oppressive aspects of a 'patriarchal institution', as well as the pleasurable facets of the experience.⁵⁶ The former highlights how women's reproductive capacities have made them vulnerable to male control. In Gilead the women with 'viable ovaries' as Offred says, live in enslaved conditions. To the regime the handmaids are merely 'two-legged wombs' (p.146). But motherhood for a woman can also be a source of personal pleasure and fulfilment, as is indicated in the novel by the only two mothers the reader encounters: Offred herself, who has been deprived of her daughter, and her own mother. It is significant, I think, that no child is reported to be born sane in Offred's tale. Birth as a positive event and act of love cannot take place in the poisoned state of Gilead. 57

The treatment of different forms of motherhood in *The Handmaid's Tale* has the effect of undermining the dichotomy between nature and culture. What the

56 For an analysis of the pleasure and constraints of motherhood as an 'experience' and as an 'institution', see Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution* (London, 1986), also Margaret Atwood's review of Adrienne Rich's book in *Second Words* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 254-257.

57 In Atwood's previous work of fiction and poetry motherhood retains mainly positive connotations, and often becomes metaphor for artistic creation. This aspect will receive further attention in Chapter Four.

patriarchal oligarchy in Gilead regards as natural, that is woman as 'mother', is in fact shown to be a cultural construct.⁵⁸

The text also discusses contrary positions within the Women's Movement, as for example, the pros and cons of the separatist position. Moira, Offred's oldest and dearest friend represents the lesbian feminist point of view. Her argument in favour of separatism, and Offred's objection to it, are a vehicle for Atwood to introduce the debate.

In Moira's view separatism is necessary for women in order to avoid being absorbed into 'masculine' structures and thinking, as they usually are compelled to, in order to 'survive' in a male-dominated society. In a good-humoured argument with Offred she maintains that to participate, as Offred does, in such a world is equivalent to consorting with the enemy, and it shows a blindness to the necessity of political struggle. According to the separatist stance, change can only be achieved by women ceasing to participate in unequal relationships in order to develop an alternative. Offred's objection to such a way of life is that it is marginal, and will not influence society or advance change.⁵⁹

58 Paulina Palmer, pp.105-107.

59 'I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira had

However, Offred's point of view is not necessarily valid. Separatists write books and poetry, as does Moira who works for the publishing division of a women's collective (p. 187). They influence other women, they provide various forms of help and support for the women who need them. Moira is indeed a touchstone of value in the novel in various ways and a symbol of active resistance to the Gilead regime. She survives intact the programme of conditioning into the acceptance of female guilt and evil imposed on the handmaids at the Centre. Moira is the only one who has the courage to escape. When her first attempts fails she endures physical punishment (p.102) and then escapes by a very daring route (p.143). Moira's resourcefulness, her practicality and courage make Offred and the other women like her look like 'wimps' (234). However, Atwood's characterization of Moira, has been criticized for offering a stereotyped version of the lesbian feminist.⁶⁰

The result of the debate against and in favour of separatism, rather than advocating one or the other position, highlights, I think, the risk of isolation and of lack of involvement, whether it thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them.' (p.120).

60 Paulina Palmer, p.107.

occurs on the separatist side or on the liberal feminist side, such as Offred's. It also points out the divisions in the Women's Movement, and between women. This prevents women from achieving a sense of unity, and enables oppressive regimes like Gilead to subjugate them.

Offred's reflections on the way she and her friends lived in the period prior to the rise of Gilead indicate the necessity for involvement and political awareness. The story of violence, especially that against women, reported in the newspapers were like 'bad dreams dreamt by others...We were the people who were not in the papers ... blank white spaces at the edge of print...We lived... by ignoring ... in the gaps between the stories' (p.67). Atwood highlights the attitude of complacency and lack of interest in politics which typifies the liberal middle class. She underscores the necessity to be politically aware and constantly pay attention to what is happening, since, 'Nothing changes instantaneously' (p. 66).

The effective interaction between the worlds of past and present, achieved by Atwood's utilization of Offred's memory, combined with Atwood's feminist focus and use of irony, is what distinguishes *The Handmaid's Tale* from the works of dystopian fiction mentioned above. Besides, unlike traditional

dystopias, the novel, as its title suggests, is also a 'tale', which recurrently affirms its status as an artefact. This aspect of the novel will be discussed in detail in the following Chapters.

In next section I shall focus on Atwood's unconventional use of fictional modes and genres in *Surfacing*. The features and norms these modes and genres imply echo in the text which, as a result, defies classification. Atwood thus violates that implicit contract between author and reader, dependent on a set of shared expectations, which is the basis of the novel as a genre.⁶¹

1.4 THE 'QUEST' REVISITED: *SURFACING*

Barbara Hill Rigney notes how in *Surfacing* the 'balance between generic worlds is almost perfect', as the text is 'halfway between poem and novel, theological treatise and political manifesto, myth and realism'.⁶² I would add that Atwood's text

61 Jonathan Culler, 'Towards a Theory of Non-Genre Literature', in *Surfiction*, ed. by Raymond Federman (Chicago, 1975), pp.255-262 (p.262).

62 Barbara Hill Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*, p.38. The manipulation and mixture of narrative modes in *Surfacing* - romantic, realistic, ironic, mythic - has been noted. (See Keith Garebian, 'Surfacing: Apocalyptic Ghost Story', *Mosaic*, 9, 3 (1976), 1-10. Charles Berryman, *op. cit.*). These readings however fail to consider that Atwood appropriation of generic modes is very critical and ironical. Charles Berryman maintains that the novel incorporates a range of genres that includes the comic design of *A Midsummer*

brings together the patterns of the mystical quest, the detective novel and the ghost story, the pastoral and the Gothic tale in a way that disconcerts the reader's expectations of these particular genres.

Surfacing has largely been read as a narrative of quest, a journey of self-discovery. Some commentators have stressed the religious element in the novel, developing the idea of 'female mysticism'.⁶³ Others have noted the strong parallelism existing between the heroines' experience of rebirth, and the mythological journey of discovery as described by Joseph Campbell in his *Hero of a Thousand Faces*.⁶⁴ The mythic pattern of the narrative

Night's Dream and the romance design of *The Tempest*. 'The related pattern of comedy and romance share a visit to a natural world, a descent into romantic confusion, interference of the supernatural, and a return to the 'real' world with promises of marriage and a new life' (p.520). As my reading of *Surfacing* in the course of this study illustrates, these themes are present and at the same time problematized to an extreme degree.

63 Carol Christ endorses Erich Neumann's belief that women do not have a strong sense of differentiation between self and other. This results in a weaker sense of individual personal identity which renders them more capable of a mystical union with the whole. 'Margaret Atwood: the Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision', *Signs*, 2, 2 (Spring 1976), 316-330 (p.329).

64 Only a few critics consider the mythic patterns crucial to an understanding of the text. Josie Campbell, for example, reads *Surfacing* as a 'meta-criticism' of Campbell's description of the myth ('The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', *Mosaic*, 11 (Spring 1978) 17-28). Also Francine du Plessix Gray underlines the function of the myth in the text where the protagonist is a 'heroine of the thousand faces, who descends, like Persephone, into the world of the dead; she tests, like Perseus, the

quest involves a temporary exile and withdrawal from civilization, that takes the form of a perilous journey into the darkness. The hero descends into his own 'spiritual labyrinth'⁶⁵ where, faced by a landscape of symbolic figures, he undertakes a shift from the external to the internal world in a pattern of separation, initiation, and return. A purification ritual precedes a transcendental state of acquisition of cosmic power, and an integration in a cosmic harmony.⁶⁶

In the course of this section we shall see how Atwood's use of myth in *Surfacing* also alludes to the quest for the Holy Grail, which here, in defiance of tradition, involves a female protagonist. In the legend, in fact, the mystery of the Grail itself, even if accessible to a privileged minority, is interdicted to women.⁶⁷ From a Christian point of

extreme limits of human endurance', 'Nature as the Nunnery', *New York Times Book Review*, July 17, 1977, p.29.

65 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1956), p.101.

66 According to Joseph Campbell the adventure of hero represents 'that passage to the moment in his life when he achieves the illumination of self-awareness... the hero must leave the everyday world and move into a region of supernatural wonder, where he encounters extraordinary forces... (he) then returns from this mysterious adventure to his fellow men. Frequently the hero's quest involves atonement in some form with his father, and ultimately with his mother, for they are finally the same. Through them the hero discovers the self and is twice born through that moment of illumination' (p.126).

67 Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (New York, 1957). According to the medieval legend, the

view, the quest for the Grail is synonymous with the highest achievement open to Man. It is also crucial for the protagonist in *Surfacing*, although Atwood employs the motif with a 'shift of emphasis', since the novel's vision is not primarily religious. Besides here the emphasis is placed not on the accomplishment itself, but on the starting point it provides in the narrator's life.

Deriving from the central myth of the quest as described by Joseph Campbell, are the myths of Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, and Irony, elaborated by Northrop Frye. *Surfacing* has been interpreted as a variation on the theme of Frye's Romance quest, which is linked with the recovery of the Holy Grail.⁶⁸ Although in its conclusion the novel is 'anti-mythic', it introduces certain features of the Romance pattern. In Frye's formulation the quest is characterized by three moments: 'the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle...and the exaltation

Holy Grail was the chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper. It was brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea, where it became the quest of many knights. Another element in the novel that echoes the quest for the Holy Grail is the name of the narrator's publisher, Percival, who was also one of King Arthur's knights.

68 Arnold Davidson & Cathy N. Davidson, 'The Anatomy of *Surfacing*', *Ariel*, 10, 3 (July 1979), 38-54.

of the hero'.⁶⁹ The last stage is obviously absent from *Surfacing*, where no act of public recognition occurs.

It is at this moment that Atwood's novel distances itself from the archetypal romance pattern described by Frye. The latter, moreover does not include the possibility of a female hero. The female characters occupy a subordinate role, either helping or obstructing the hero in his quest. In these mythopoeic narratives maidens serve mainly as a reward and prize for the hero: 'To be just a bride, of course, is to be defined by someone else. It is to exist for the hero, not as the hero. In both the old myths and the modern society, there is therefore a definite place for Anna, but not for a female mythic hero'.⁷⁰

In the quest-romance the object obtained or brought back after the quest often carries both ritual and psychological significance. The Holy Grail is one example, and receives a reference in *Surfacing*.⁷¹ The knight in order to save a sick society or king undertakes a risky journey; he faces various adventures culminating in the Perilous

69 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1973), p.187.

70 Arnold Davidson & Cathy N. Davidson, 'The Anatomy of *Surfacing*', p.53.

71 Catherine Ross, 'Nancy Drew as Shaman: Atwood's *Surfacing*', *Canadian Literature*, 84 (1980), 5-43.

Chamber, where he usually undergoes a terrifying experience. After this he gains access to the Grail.

The terrifying shapes the narrator sees while diving in the lake is reminiscent of the knight's encounter with a corpse in the Perilous Chamber. 'It was ...a dead thing, it was dead' (p.167). It is after this encounter that she sees her own 'evil grail...suspended in the air....like a chalice' (p.168). The moment has tremendous importance for the narrator who now admits she has fabricated a false account of her previous life, in order to avoid facing reality (p.169).

In the Grail legend the successful quest involves a celebration of power, energy and fertility. Atwood's reappraisal of the myth ends with the exaltation of fertility, represented by the narrator's act of intercourse with Joe in the forest, and the child that she perhaps will bear (p.191). In *Surfacing* the concluding stage of the quest, 'the life enchanting return' to society and the subsequent marriage of the hero, is rendered problematic.

However, this novel challenges and subverts any simple schema based on the religious quest, that some critics have highlighted. The experience which the narrator undergoes is comparable to a degree to the mystical one of dissolution and rebirth of the self in nature: a purification ritual is followed by the

acquiring of a heightened state of consciousness that goes beyond time and language in an immediate perception of reality. Barbara Hill Rigney notes that Atwood uses myths because they are 'artistically useful' but that they do not seem to represent an 'ethos' for the author. Atwood's heroine is 'no religious-hero, no archetypal law-giver'.⁷² Atwood in fact makes symbolic use of religious myths and themes to create a secular version of the mystical quest.⁷³ The narrator's world appears in fact devoid of a belief in God. She had never been a believer,

72 (Margaret Atwood, p.52). Carol Christ, who proposes a religious reading of the novel, finds *Surfacing's* ending rather 'inconclusive' for a mystical quest since Atwood's 'protagonist does not cement her insight in social and communal mysticism' (*Diving Deep and Surfacing* p.120). Frank Davey in his criticism of Annis Pratt's reading of *Surfacing* as a model of 'woman's rebirth fiction', rightly argues that patterns and formulas, like that of the quest, belong to a male dominated culture. The notion of pattern itself is inherently 'male' and conflicts with 'the solid versus liquid, fenced versus unfenced, male-female definitions Atwood develops throughout her work' (*Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*, p.61). I would add to Pratt's contention that at the end of the journey the protagonist achieves 'authentic selfhood and power', that Atwood questions the very notion of authenticity, as will be discussed in the course of this study.

73 Evelyn J. Minz stresses the religious vision of *Surfacing* also in the light of the novel critique of the culture of the Enlightenment represented by the protagonist's father. However, the text's criticism of Rationalism in the novel does not impair its secular vision. Atwood herself has stated her distance from religion in an interview. See Chapter 3.3 of this study. ('The Religious Roots of the Feminine Identity Issue: Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 22, 1 (Spring 1987) 17-31).

although religion, especially Catholicism, permeates her milieu outside the family (her parents were confirmed atheists). Her lack of religious feeling is often mentioned in relation to the scenes she recalls from her childhood: 'I prayed to be made invisible, and when in the morning everyone could still see me I knew they had the wrong God' (p.84).⁷⁴ She frequently states her estrangement from the world of religious belief: 'I believe in them the way other people believe in God. I can't see them but I know they are there' (p.73). She appears to treat her parents as a substitute for the lack of a spiritual deity since it is from her visionary contact with them towards the end of the novel, that she receives her power of vision.

The novel conveys a sense of uncertainty which conflicts with quests for truth which are conventionally religious. Surfacing from her journey, the narrator reaffirms the secular nature of her vision: 'No gods to help me now. They're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus' (p.221). As for the child she has possibly conceived while having

74 'My brother fished by technique...but I fished by prayer, listening. *Out father who art in heaven Please let the fish be caught.* / Later when I knew that wouldn't work, just *Please be caught*, invocation or hypnosis' (p.74). 'I hunted through my brain for any emotion that would coincide with what I'd said. I did want to, but it was like thinking God should exist and not being able to believe' (p.127).

intercourse with Joe in the forest, she thinks it is 'No god and perhaps not real, even that is uncertain' (p.223).

Such indeterminacy is emphasized by Atwood's utilization of a fictional narrator, a character who says 'I'. The first-person novel reflects a degree of uncertainty since the narrative content is subjective and cannot be authenticated.⁷⁵ The reader is unable to refer to any authoritative narrator: as a character, 'I' can lie, as the narrator in *Surfacing* does. As a consequence the elements which constitute the design of the story remain heterogeneous and equivocal.

Only in the last section of the novel does the reader perceive that certain significant episodes of the narrator's past life (her marriage and her son) are a fabrication she has created, and her 'memories fraudulent as passports':

It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album..... but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now (p.169).

The unsettling device of using a narrator who creates a false version of her past is reminiscent of

75 Michael Glawinski, 'On the First-Person Novel', *New Literary History*, 9, 1 (1977), 105-113.

Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where the 'I' who narrates the story is also a murderer, and in whose tradition Atwood claims to be working.⁷⁶ By presenting an unreliable narrator, the text undercuts the sole repository of the readers' trust in first-person narrative, the speaking I.

Although defined by critics as a detective story⁷⁷ or as a 'psychological thriller',⁷⁸ *Surfacing* denies the reader the 'pleasure' associated with the genre on account of its lack of precise denouement. Detective fiction generally provides the assurance of cohesion, of the containment of threat and danger. It offers the security of order restored from chaos in a world where everything is explained, and no loose ends exist.⁷⁹ Although *Surfacing* opens with the heroine setting off to find a 'clue' (p 40) to explain her father's disappearance, this line of narrative is not elaborated. Similarly, *Bodily Harm*

76 As Atwood states in an interview: 'She has been telling horrible lies. The reader ought to be more cautious. We like to trust the person telling the story, especially when the novel is written in the first person'. Interview with Linda Sadler, *The Malahat Review*, 41 (January 1977), 7-27 (p.12). Some critics however consider the marriage real, despite the textual and extratextual evidence to the contrary. Roberta Rubenstein, 'Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the Interior', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22, 3 (1976), 387-399.

77 Barbara Hill Rigney, *op. cit.*; Catherine Ross, *op. cit.*

78 Josie Campbell, *op. cit.*

79 Dorothy Sayers, 'Aristotle on Detective Fiction', *Unpopular Opinions* (London, 1946), pp. 178-190.

starts with a conventional device of the detective genre - the presence of the rope in the bedroom left by the mysterious intruder - but the narrative does not reveal the intruder's identity. *Surfacing* is by no means a narrative of containment, and the frequent reference to detective novels, which crowd the shelves of the narrator's father (p.44), signal both its affinity and its distance from the genre.

The reassuring pleasure which the reading of crime fiction offers is highlighted by the narrator's reflections on it, at the point when she has started her journey into the unknown: 'Anna's detective novel, her last one, cold comfort but comfort, death is logical, there's always a motive. Perhaps that's why she read them, for the theology' (p.200). Such certainty, however, is not granted to the reader of *Surfacing* since the novel concludes on an indeterminate note. Indeed the narrator's journey into the geographical and psychic interior, bordering on madness, contrasts with her father's interests, which exalt rationality and the intellect. It is an experience that defies any logical or rational explanation, and thus creates the epistemological uncertainty that characterizes the text. As the narrator comments once she has escaped from her companions and taken refuge in the forest: 'It is true. I am by myself; this is what I wanted... From

any rational point of view I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view' (p.119).

The narrative solution in *Surfacing* in contrast to the rational and final outcome of the detective story, defies logic and reason: '...But logic is a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror' (p.205). As we have previously seen, *Surfacing* opens as a variation on the formula of the detective story, to then turn into a novel of self-discovery, with the presence of the ghost functioning as the narrator's double. *Surfacing* then becomes to an extent a ghost story and, as it is usually the case in this genre, it derives its power from contravening the reader's expectations of mundane reality. The sense of authenticity which typifies the murder mystery - its precise reference to places, dates, people - is disrupted, and the narrative becomes a recording of the narrator's hallucinatory experience.

The apparition of the ghost of the mother and the father inserts a fantastic, namely Gothic, note into the narrative. Indeed a Gothic atmosphere is also apparent in the sense of menace, in the awareness of death and violent images related to death, as well as in the distrust the narrator comes to feel for her companions.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, 1976).

The ghost differs, however, from the tradition of supernatural creatures in Canadian fiction. As Atwood herself indicates, in Canadian fiction the Monster, described as the 'Other', often represents forces outside or opposed to the human protagonist. These creatures are not human but supernatural forces, part of the environment. They tend to be 'objects rather than subjects, the 'other' against which the human characters measure themselves'.⁸¹ Although their precise significance varies, they often come to represent 'the search for reassurance'.⁸² The elements of terror, present in ghost stories, have been discussed by critics as functioning merely on a superficial level. On a deeper one, ghost stories have been interpreted as responding to a quest for reassurance, which agrees with Atwood's own remarks. In Canadian fiction, as in British fiction of the nineteenth-century, the Ghost story can be seen as a comforting response to a time of rapid scientific advances, of intellectual upheaval caused by the challenges which the culture of Enlightenment poses to Christianity. Man's

81 Margaret Atwood, 'Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction' (1977), *Second Words*, pp.229-253 (p.235). Examples of how the Monster becomes an incarnation of an unfriendly natural universe can be found in Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook* (1959), William Blake, *Brown Waters and Other Sketches* (1915).

82 Margaret Atwood, 'Canadian Monsters', in *op.cit.*, p.231

teleological imagination was satisfied by the assurances about death which Christianity provided, and by promises of a future life, rituals and rules to be observed and the gods of salvation. Somehow they offered the reassuring 'proof that there was something beyond. Man was not, as he had come to fear, alone in an universe infinitely older, larger, wilder and less anthropocentric than he had previously supported'.⁸³

Surfacing does not provide such certainty, and its ghosts are ambiguous and disturbing. Unlike the tradition mentioned above, in Atwood's novel the ghost represents, as the author has remarked, not an object but a subject, 'a fragment of one's self which has split off'.⁸⁴ As in James's 'The Jolly Corner', in whose tradition of ghost stories Atwood locates her novel, in *Surfacing* the episode of the ghost presents a 'direct confrontation of self and other'.⁸⁵ However, *Surfacing* goes beyond the denouement of Henry James' 'The Jolly Corner', which implies a repression of the protagonist's latent double and the restoring of a familiar identity.

83 Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Stories* (London, 1977), p.24. Emphasis in the original.

84 Graeme Gibson, p.30.

85 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London, 1981), p.139.

The final part of the novel not only portrays an encounter of the self with its alienated half, which is characteristic of tales of dualism and *doppelgänger*. It intersects a whole tradition of the literary representation of madness. Unlike the Gothic tradition of the divided self where union between 'self' and 'other' hardly ever takes place, in *Surfacing* there occurs an assimilation of the 'other' self, which is part of a regenerating process that reveals to the protagonist the possibility of a different modality of being, of a different life.

This experience of the dissolution and rebirth of the self in nature echoes in fact a whole body of literature of the 'supernatural', which focuses on extrasensory perceptions, delusions and hallucinations. Its main characteristic is a 'fragility of the limits between matter and mind' which in itself engenders other themes - the multiplication of personality, the collapse of the limit between subject and object, the transformation of time and space.⁸⁶ These themes will be discussed in the following Chapters.

Atwood's interest in popular fiction, such as the detective story or the folk stories mentioned above, include, in *Lady Oracle*, Gothic fiction and,

⁸⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by R. Scholes (New York, 1975), p.120.

in particular, romance fiction produced for women. *Lady Oracle* is a humorous and highly entertaining novel but it is also a serious attempt to investigate the pleasure the reader takes in romantic fiction. The next section will discuss the textual revisitation of popular Romance Gothic, as well as the contribution which Atwood makes to the debate on popular fiction for women.

1.5 A FASCINATION WITH ROMANCE: *LADY ORACLE*

Lady Oracle in a typically postmodernist manner revisits the past ironically, rewriting it, quoting and parodying different kinds of genre and literature, using popular fiction to produce a non-escapist text, a text which problematically inscribes themes belonging to the popular genre of Romance fiction. Although as we shall see, there are significant differences between the two, the exercise in which Atwood engages is similar to Jane Austen's parody of Gothic fiction in *Northanger Abbey*. The metafictional aspect of Austen's novel is well documented: while parodying the popular Gothic and sentimental texts of the time, *Northanger Abbey* offers a criticism of the genre, as well as an analysis of the form of the novel, and discusses the value of reading novels. *Lady Oracle* follows similar

lines, and both texts can be considered as studies of fiction made from within fiction itself. Like *Northanger Abbey*, *Lady Oracle* uses the strategy of humour, focusing on a female protagonist who interprets her life in terms of Gothic adventures. In its reflexive and playful imitation of existing kinds of fiction, parody constitutes itself as a metalanguage, one that re-works literary materials from a critical perspective, often with hilarious effect.

The target texts parodied in *Lady Oracle* announce to the reader various genres, although the novel itself does not belong to any particular one. Genres which are referred to in the novel occupy very different places in the system of literary classification. The literary Gothic is parodied, together with the popular genre of the Harlequin Romance and Costume Gothic, Modern Gothic. Victorian poetry, concrete poetry, the Picaresque, and modern poetry in their parodied forms also appear in the course of the text, either summarized or in quotation. They are the form of writing which the female character, Joan, utilizes in her own literary career. The different modes of writing which create the texture of the novel, besides contributing to its effect of discontinuity and fragmentation, combine seriousness with laughter. The comic effect of the

novel stems mainly from the detached manner in which Joan ironically re-thinks her past since a discrepancy is created between the 'self' who is telling the story, and the various 'selves' that are represented in the narrative.

The interaction between high and low genres which is a feature of the novel subverts the traditional notion of hierarchy in art.⁸⁷ Yet at the same time, the comic effect of the novel depends on the writer's and reader's shared assumption of a hierarchy of genres. Both modes of writing, the popular Gothic and the more sophisticated poetry which Joan writes, are juxtaposed in the novel, and Atwood thus exploits their contrasts by placing one against the other. The question of hierarchy is raised by the theory of genre, to the discussion of which *Lady Oracle*, in a playful way, contributes. Genre implies 'hierarchy of meaning',⁸⁸ something which this novel clearly reacts against and yet also exploits.

In so far as *Lady Oracle* 'examines the perils of gothic thinking', that is, the risk of casting real people in certain roles belonging to the genre as

87 Leslie Fiedler, 'The Death and Rebirths of the Novel'; 'Response: American Fiction', *Salmagundi*, 50-51 (1980), 142-152; 153-171.

88 Francis Sharpshott, 'The Last Word in Criticism', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* (Ottawa, 1982), pp. 117-128.

Joan does, it could be defined as an 'anti-Gothic' novel - as Atwood herself has called it - in the tradition of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, cited above.⁸⁹

A feature which *Lady Oracle* and *Northanger Abbey* have in common, is the critique they present of certain attitudes which the reading of Gothic fiction encourages. Austen and Atwood expose and criticize the heroines' tendency to apply the patterns and roles found in such fiction to external reality; to mistake life for fiction. Indeed Joan, like Jane Austen's heroine, interprets her life as if it were a Gothic text. Joan applies pre-constituted patterns to reality, with the result that her life resembles a tale from romance. When Joan meets Paul, her first lover, he is convinced of her unhappy situation and wants to take her away with him. She interprets his proposal in the manner of the sentimental heroine: 'Was this my lost love, my rescuer?'.⁹⁰ Men are regarded by her in the best Gothic tradition as the embodiment of ambiguity who can assume simultaneously the roles of villain and rescuer. Joan asks herself: 'Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible

⁸⁹ Margaret Atwood, 'Interview with John Struthers', *Essays in Canadian Writing* 6 (Spring 1977), 18-27 (p.19).

⁹⁰ (London, 1986, p.280). All further references to this novel appear in the text.

for a man to be both at once?' (p.64). Following the same pattern, she suspects her father of having murdered his wife, another recurrent motif in Gothic fiction where the cause of death is often left mysteriously obscure. The result is that an aura of suspicion descends on the characters involved; this is a Gothic narrative device which emphasises ambiguity. In *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen parodies such attitudes. Catherine Morland, thinking along Gothic lines, makes a fool of herself by exposing to Henry Tilney her suspicion that his father, Captain Tilney, had locked up and perhaps murdered his wife. Another typical feature of the genre is to be found in Atwood's characterization of Joan as the heroine 'on the run', flying, as she does, across the Atlantic, escaping from one situation to another, until the end of the book.

On the whole however the strategies which Atwood employs to parody the Gothic genre differ from Austen's strategies. *Northanger Abbey's* parasitical treatment of Gothic undermines it from within in such a way that the text creates a mocking parody of the tradition. Austen's treatment of Gothic themes is humorous, as is Atwood's, but Austen's criticism of Gothic writers and readership is much sharper, due perhaps to her wish to educate her readers towards a more critical literary taste. However, Austen does

not deny the pleasure that can be gained from reading Gothic texts, as long as the reader takes them for what they are - imaginary and fictional worlds. Henry Tilney views them from this perspective, in contrast to Catherine Morland, who continuously confuses the two. As Margaret Rose points out, 'in parodies such as *Northanger Abbey* ... the clash between the worlds of fiction and reality is shown in the example of naive readers, who, because they are unable to clearly distinguish the two worlds, cannot cope with either'.⁹¹

One of the fundamental differences between *Northanger Abbey* and *Lady Oracle* lies in the different ways the two novels implement the generic conventions they parody, and the correspondingly different attitude they adopt towards the parodied text. Jane Austen's novel tends to ridicule the texts which constitute its target, and shows a degree of contempt for them. The parody present in Atwood's novel is of a different kind. Here the author is sympathetic as well as critical towards her target text(s), particularly women's popular Romance, and tries to understand and appreciate them. In this case it is the compensatory function of escapist literature which she investigates.

⁹¹ Margaret Rose, *Parody/Metafiction* (London, 1979), p.72

Margaret Atwood's ironic use of the conventions of popular Gothic Romance fiction makes *Lady Oracle* a compelling and unsettling novel in that it slices away the usual reassurance present in the genre.⁹² To achieve this disconcerting effect Atwood writes within and against the limits of the genre, at the same time exploiting and challenging its norms. In so doing, she creates a revised version of Gothic Romance, undermining the conventions of Gothic character, and challenging stereotypes of womanhood.

The revision of Gothic Romance in *Lady Oracle* breaks down the generic representation of female stereotypes in Gothic fiction. Atwood achieves this by deconstructing the stereotypes of 'villainess' and

92 The 'Female Gothic' covers many different levels and forms of literary production, and has, as Julian Fleenor writes, a 'protean' quality. (*The Female Gothic* (Montreal, 1983), p.4). They are, however, all present and parodied in *Lady Oracle*. The so-called 'Modern Gothic', for example, bears little, if any, resemblance to the eighteenth-century literary classics. The genre is more like a 'crossbreed' of *Jane Eyre* and Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*. These plots normally focus on a mystery, usually a murder, implicating the heroine's husband. As a result he appears to both heroine and readers as a menacing, sinister figure, ultimately a stranger. This element is present in *Lady Oracle* when Joan suspects that she is being blackmailed by Arthur, who in fact acquires these stereotypically frightening characteristics: 'Arthur was someone I didn't know at all. And he was right in bed beside me. I was afraid now, almost afraid to move, what if he woke up, eyes glittering, and reached for me...? For the rest of the night I listened to him breathe. He sounded so peaceful.' (p.292). Joanna Russ, 'Somebody Is Trying To Kill Me and I Think Is My Husband: the Modern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 6 (Spring 1973), 666-691.

'heroine' (that is, woman as manipulative 'seductress' and woman as innocent 'virgin'), into which female characters in Gothic fiction tend to be divided. Yet at the same time the novel also constitutes an attempt to comprehend the pleasure the reader takes in romantic fiction, and its therapeutic value.

We are given samples of women's popular romance in the novels which Joan writes. The fiction which she produces resembles the historical romance of Barbara Cartland and the popular gothic romance of Victoria Holt, and shares their generic conventions. Charlotte, the heroine whose adventures we follow, has all the conventional characteristics of the protagonists in such fiction. With her features left sufficiently vague in order to encourage a degree of reader-identification, the heroine is usually presented as being alone in the world. She is portrayed as poor but well bred, naive, simple and pure hearted, yet also able to display determination when necessary. Charlotte's feelings towards Redmond, the hateful but always ambiguous master of the mansion where she lives, combine sexual attraction with moral distaste. The triangle is closed by the figure of the master's wife, Felicia, who, since she is unfaithful, plays here the role of rival and villainess.

One of the variations within the genre which *Stalked by Love*, the novel which Joan Forster is writing, sees the role of rival or villainess as embodied by the wife herself; she is therefore characterized as wicked and lustful. In addition to this, Atwood introduces the typical Gothic location of the mansion described as a place of menace, and the family mystery that surrounds it. Redmond's wife Felicia, who is also the typical villainess, is portrayed as stunningly beautiful. Her elegance, which takes the form of a display of wealth, is accompanied by attributes of arrogance, lasciviousness and sexual infidelity. As befits the conventions, the hero plays a menacing role in relation to the heroine Charlotte, who tries at all costs to defend her virtue. Charlotte is confused and sexually aroused by Redmond, even though she is too young and inexperienced to acknowledge her desire. The more she is intrigued by Redmond, the more threatened she feels by the environment of the mansion. The plot of a popular Gothic novel generally develops with the sudden disappearance of the wicked wife (who, as convention dictates, dies or goes mad) so that the hero can marry the young heroine, enjoy a domestic way of life, and live happily ever after.

When the Gothic Romance which Joan is writing is approaching the supposedly happy conclusion of the

heroine Charlotte's adventures, Joan recognizes she cannot continue in this vein. She refuses to fulfil generic expectations and deliberately disrupts them. It is at this point that *Lady Oracle* both mirrors and a deconstructs the very genre which it is parodying. Joan, tired of the heroine Charlotte's 'perfection', tries to retell the story from the perspective of the evil Felicia. After having composed Felicia's version of events she perceives that the idea is untenable, since 'sympathy for Felicia was out of the question, it was against the rules, it would foul up the plot completely' (p.319). The reader is thus made aware of the significance of literary conventions, including the rigid division of destinies that awaits the wife/villainess and the heroine. At the same time Atwood illustrate the alternative structure such stories could employ. A transgression of the genre, and of the patriarchal perspective on women which it reflects, is implemented at the very moment the novel emphasizes the importance of its norm.

One of the consequences of this defiance of the limits imposed by the genre, is the interrogation and problematization of the traditional representation of woman in literature, which is frequently located around the two polarities of good and evil, angel and monster. *Lady Oracle* undermines and subverts these simplistic stereotypes by both employing Gothic

representations of femininity and working against them.

In *Stalked by Love*, the novel written by Joan Forster, passages of which are reported in the text, the shift from generic conventions occurs slowly and culminates in the author's overt expression of empathy for Felicia. The account of Felicia's sexual escapade is followed by the insertion of an element alien to the Gothic tradition, that is she makes a plea for love from the hero Redmond. The paragraph that follows, written entirely from Felicia's point of view, centres on her sorrow at the recognition of the fact that Redmond no longer loves her. She keeps imagining Redmond with Charlotte,

torturing herself, gnawing on her nether lip, that full sensuous lip Redmond once loved to caress. Tonight he was later than usual... Perhaps she could foresee that life would be arranged for the convenience of Charlotte, after all, and that she herself would have to be disposed of. A tear rolled down her cheek, tiny electric sparks jumped from the ends of her hair... She was afraid of death. All she wanted was happiness with the man she loved. It was this one impossible wish that had ruined her life; she ought to have settled for contentment, for the usual lies (p.319).

The unconventional shift to Felicia's perspective is reminiscent of Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which in turn is a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* narrated mainly from the point of view of Bronte's Bertha Mason, the mad wife locked away in

the attic of Thornfield Hall. At play here, as in *Jane Eyre* and in Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, is the setting up of two contrasting and irreconcilable versions of femininity centred on the polarities of innocence and experience: the naive, virginal, modest girl, who is destined to triumph, as always happens in romance, and the wife, with a strongly assertive character and an aura of intense sensuality. In *Lady Oracle*, however, through the highlighting of these contradictions, Atwood shows how the two versions of femininity are not natural but culturally constructed. Her deconstruction of these stereotypes reveals that a real woman combines attitudes of both 'purity' and 'sensuality'.

Felicia's long wavy red hair, a typical feature of the villainess or the heroine's rival in Romance fiction,⁹³ agrees with her fiery temperament. Everything about her is powerfully sensual. Soon she becomes, in a similar manner to her ancestress, Rebecca De Winter, not only a representative of 'the sexual',⁹⁴ but the embodiment of a sexuality in excess, overflowing, animal-like, which is also a characteristic trait of Bertha Mason.

93 Rachel Anderson, *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-Literature of Love* (London, 1974).

14 Alison Light, 'Returning to Manderley - Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review*, 16 (Summer 1984), 7-25.

In Joan Foster's *Stalked by Love* Redmond responds to Felicia's sensuality with expression of contempt for her sexual desire.

He had become tired of the extravagance of Felicia: of her figure that spread like crabgrass, her hair that spread like fire, her mind that spread like a cancer or pubic lice. 'Contain yourself,' he'd said to her, more than once, but she couldn't contain herself, she raged over him like a plague, leaving him withered. But Charlotte now, with her stays and her particular ways, her white flannelette face, her blanched fingers...her coolness intrigued him'(p.319).

Atwood's comic characterization of Felicia is humorously achieved by exploiting and contrasting different styles of writing. The conventional Gothic phrase, 'her hair that that spread like fire', is humorously undermined by the unconventional definition of her figure 'that spread like crabgrass'. Felicia's portrayal culminates in the unromantic and rather baffling and incongruous image of her mind 'that spread like cancer or pubic lice'. In a similar manner, Charlotte's delicate and virginal appearance, a conventional feature of the genre, is undermined by the incongruous images and use of rhyme in the phrase, 'her white flannellete face, her blanched fingers'.

Felicia, however, rebels against the repression of sexuality and the denial of the body which her

generic destiny seems to entail. She challenges and resists this destiny, becoming, like Rebecca, 'the wife who refuses to go mad' on account of man's failure to recognize her sexual desire.⁹⁵ But this rebellion will be fatal for her. In Joan Forster's *Stalked by Love*, as in Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, the death of the wicked and/or mad wife is a guarantee of male authority and masculinity itself. There is a risk here for Charlotte herself since, as Redmond found the sexuality of Felicia and possibly also that of his previous wives dispensable (Charlotte will be the fourth Lady Redmond), she could therefore, in her turn, easily become the victim of the remorseless logic of this Bluebeard.

In the parody it presents of popular genres such as the historical romance, modern popular Gothic and the Harlequin Romance, *Lady Oracle* contributes to the ongoing debate and evaluation of popular fiction. The controversy takes place between critics who dismiss the reading of the Romance as merely a form of escapism, and critics who see it as enabling women to negotiate the contradictions and problems of the female position in a patriarchal society.

In the early seventies criticism of the popular romance came from authors of acclaimed feminist works, such as Germaine Greer and Shulamith

95 *Ibid.*

Firestone, who condemned the genre totally, showing contempt and mockery for its readers. *Lady Oracle* refuses to label such works as trash, and thus actually looks forward to the defences of the genre produced subsequently. The latter reject the notion of the receiver as 'passive' and 'masochist', and try to distinguish the ideology of the text from its effect on the reader. They analyze, in other words, subjective responses to these texts, and consider the reader in terms of the complexities of historical and social contexts, which they see as crucial in the constitution of meaning. A first step to be taken in defence of romance, something *Lady Oracle* tries to do, is to acknowledge different ways of reading, the different demands readers may make on the text, and as a consequence, the different pleasures gained from the activity.

Joan, as an author of popular romance fiction, shares certain characteristics with her readers. She has loved the element of romance in the films she frequently watched with her aunt, and has always had a special liking for happy endings: 'I was a sucker for ads, especially those that promised happiness' (p.29). She seems to need the escape romance offers as much as her audience: 'Escape literature... should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader' (p.155). She is brought up by her aunt on a

diet of Hollywood Romance films, examples of escape *par excellence*, and this provides her with an understanding of the need for escape into fantasy. Her lover Arthur, on the contrary, takes the point of view of the stereotypical male, Marxist critic. His dismissal of popular literature as merely 'exploiting' and 'corrupting' the masses, offering 'degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted' (p.35), looks simple-minded in the light of Joan's awareness of the compensatory effect of Romance fiction. Commenting on Arthur's ideology and her own writing of romances, Joan observes,

Sometimes his goddamned theories and ideologies made me puke. The truth was that I dealt in hope, I offered a vision of a better world, however preposterous. Was that so terrible? I couldn't see that it was much different from the visions Arthur and his friends offered, and it was just as realistic (p.35).

Arthur's ideological approach fails to recognize that escapist literature has very little to do with role models, and that it 'works at the level of sensibility'.⁹⁶ The escape into fantasy, though unreal and recognised as such by its readers, provides feelings of pleasure which are real, and necessary to those women 'who had got married too

96 Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in *Genre: The Musical A Reader*, R. Altman ed. (London, 1981), pp.175-189 (p.177).

young, who had babies too early, who wanted princes and castles and ended up with cramped apartments and grudging husbands' (p.95); by those women who had seen their expectations crumbling down, and 'had collapsed like scufflés in a high wind' (p.34). The escape into fantasy may also enable them, on a subliminal level, to negotiate the contradictions of their situations, as feminist critics suggest.

Feminist defences of Romance and Gothic agree that it is hardly possible to displace the pleasures of romance by appeals to reason. Their theoretical perspective tends to represent the genre as a therapeutic and defensive strategy, a kind of survival manual, whose necessity stems from the contradictory positions in which women are placed, particularly as regards their sexuality. The ideology of romance is seen by these critics as reflecting rather than creating the contradictions of women's experience.

Joan's female acquaintances, like the female readers of romance, identify with the heroine as an object of need; they require the love and desire of a strong and masculine man who is at the same time also capable of being kind, sensitive and showing concern for her pleasure. Reading the romance reflects a desire for energy, intensity, transparency on the part of female readership, as well as for sincere,

open, unambivalent relationships. As Joan Foster puts it:

The other wives, too, wanted their husbands to live up to their own fantasy lives (...) They wanted their men to be strong, lustful, passionate and exciting, with hard rapacious mouths, but also tender and worshipful. They wanted men in mysterious cloaks who would rescue them from balconies, but also they wanted meaningful in-depth relationships and total openness (...) They wanted multiple orgasms, they wanted the earth to move, but they also wanted help with the dishes (p.216).

Lady Oracle presents an attempt to understand how women, constantly bombarded with promises of 'ideals', can cope with the fact that those ideals do not actually exist, and negotiate the contradictions of their position. Romance as a form of 'wish fulfilment' for women, tries to compensate for the pleasures of romantic love that, despite being frequently offered to women by the media and the advertising industry, are constantly denied to them. As Rosalind Coward points out, 'Female dissatisfaction is constantly recast as desire, as desire for something more, as the perfect reworking of what had already gone before - dissatisfaction displaced into desire for the ideal'.⁹⁷ Despite the fact that women readers know that the promises of romance are deceptively fragile, 'many women return to romance for its promises. Promises of love,

97 Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire*, p.13

security and power'.⁹⁸ In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood briefly touches on the deceptive, but nonetheless alluring, nature of such 'promises' for the women readers. Reflecting on women's magazines, the narrator of this novel observes,

What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after the another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality (p.165).

98 Janet Batsler, 'Pulk in the Pink', *Spare Rib*, 109 (1981), p.53.

CHAPTER TWO

A PROLIFERATION OF IDENTITIES: DOUBLING AND INTERTEXTUALITY

2.1 CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SELF

She won't even sleep with him again, not on purpose anyway. But he is other, he is another. She too could be other. But which other? 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 words, for herself.¹

This extract from *Bluebeard's Egg* provides an appropriate starting point for the present discussion of the theme of identity and selfhood, since it indicates a number of concerns relevant to the topic. The passage, brief as it is, touches on several ideas that recur throughout Atwood's work. These include the problematization of the dialectic between Self and Other, the existence of relativistic versions of reality, and the precariousness of human subjectivity presented as heterogeneous, unfixed and unpredictable.

In the course of this Chapter I shall illustrate how the undermining of the notions of unity that occurs at the level of genre (discussed in Chapter One) finds a correspondence in the treatment of character and 'subjectivity'. The novels in fact show

1 'Loulou or the domestic use of language', *Bluebeard's Egg* (London, 1987), p.80.

a marked tendency to challenge orthodox notions of authorship and selfhood in which the subject is seen as a synthesizing unity, fully present to him/herself and capable of self-expression through language. Atwood's fiction renders these concepts problematic as identity often becomes an unstable, multiple or shifting construct.²

The presence of doubles, encounters between the self and other, bodily transformations of the self, and metamorphosis, posit the question of identity as a recurring concern. These themes and issues recur in the majority of Atwood's novels. Certain inconsistencies in the narrative of *The Edible Woman*, the emphasis on the transformation and metamorphosis of character, and the organization of the narrative material itself in novels such as *Lady Oracle*, *Bodily Harm*, *Life Before Man*, *The Handmaid's Tale* undermine the concept of a coherent, unified and rational self. The texts provide a portrayal of a subjectivity as the product of the unconscious, emphasizing the fact that it is continuously in process. This agrees with recent psychoanalytic theories in which the inner

2 Linda Hutcheon briefly comments on this aspect of Atwood's work, otherwise not underlined by critical reading on her work which for the most part tend to attribute to Atwood a rather humanistic notions of self and identity. ('Process, Product, and Politics: The Postmodernism of Margaret Atwood', *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto, 1988)).

dimension of the psyche is accorded positive, liberating qualities.³

Images suggestive of the unconscious recur at crucial moments in the development of the character's in Atwood's fiction. Examples includes Marian's anorexic symptoms in *The Edible Woman*; the descent into the maze of the Gothic mansion in *Lady Oracle*, modelled on the journey into Hades undertaken by Virgil's Aeneas;⁴ and the diving into the lake in *Surfacing* which metaphorically renders the plunge of the narrator into the unconscious.

3 It is Freud's theoretical work that marks the death of the 'I' as a unitary ordering principle in social life. The subject - no longer secured by rationality - is irremediably split between the conscious and the unconscious level of the psyche. However, it is Lacan's re-reading of Freud that sees the unconscious as a constant source of potential disruption of the symbolic order and is therefore attributed positive, liberating qualities. Instead the Freudian approach sees the patient in danger of losing control and a sense of a real, true self or identity and works to help the patient to regain them. Lacan's theory refutes the idea of a humanist self-centered subject for the most part in control of his action and choices. Lacan's subject does not have an identity; decentered and fractured though a division that takes place in and through language, s/he has no possibility of reunification into a coherent entity.

4 As in the *Aeneid*, the circumstances of the descent are ambiguous. The dream quality of the scene suggests a vision, a totally mental experience, though the episode also include physical sensations. However the relevant analogy here lies in the fact that for both characters the scene represents a turning point from which they emerge deeply altered. Atwood's gives an indication of this source in an interview. Linda Sandler, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', *The Malahat Review* (January 1977)pp.7-27 (p.16).

The emergence of the unconscious is also indicated by the number of reference to doubles present in Atwood's fiction. The Double in literary iconography has been linked with the Romantic idea that character is mutable rather than fixed. The *doppelgänger* figure first emerges in *The Edible Woman*, taking the form of the protagonist's angry, rebellious self. The motif of the split subject is indicated in *Surfacing* by the appearance of ghosts and shadow selves. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan feels the overweight adolescent Joan to be a shadow figure of herself. Rennie and Lora in *Bodily Harm*, as Offred and Ofglen in *The Handmaid's Tale*, are also at time portrayed as the mirroring reflections of one another.

The notion of a subject perpetually in the process of construction can be seen in the emphasis on change which Atwood achieves in her fiction. Characters undergo transformations, either bodily or psychical or both, becoming markedly different from what they were. In *Surfacing* and in *Lady Oracle* in particular the transformations experienced by the narrators interrogate the category of 'character'. These fantastic dual and multiple selves undermine the definition of character associated with realism, - that is of a coherent, indivisible and continuous whole.

The emphasis on the alteration and fragmentation of character posits a concept of subjectivity that rejects any notion of human essence as pre-given. Always in process, subjectivity is at times shown to be the site of contradictions; the multiplicity of codes and narrative forms existing within a single text signal the presence of the different world-views and systems of belief present in the text. In *Lady Oracle*, for example, this medley takes the form of a patchwork of contrasting styles.

Atwood's first novel, however, is more concerned with defining female subjectivity than with questioning it. Unlike the novel's published subsequently, *The Edible Woman* expresses the need to clearly mark the boundaries between self and other, since the theme of the assertion of selfhood by the female character, Marian, achieves priority in the text. The "other" is represented here as a threat that has the power to transform self into object. The conflictual relation between self and other can be understood if one considers two aspects of the novel. One is the Existentialist philosophical framework in which the text was conceived: for Sartre the look of the other takes the form of an appropriation and thus entails an extinction of

identity.⁵ The second is related to gender, since in the novel Atwood emphasizes the necessity for the female protagonist to establish independence, both psychologically and financially. The presence of a male character functioning as *alter ego*, which is crucial to Marian's process of rebellion against a conventional feminine role, is a further indication that in this novel the symmetry of the alter ego is preferred to the alterity of the other. The way subjectivity is portrayed in Atwood's subsequent novels can in fact be analysed in the light of psychoanalysis emphasis on the fact that the subject bears otherness within itself. As Lacan writes: 'the unconscious is the discourse of the other'.⁶

In *Surfacing* Atwood provides an entirely different evaluation of the dialectic between self and other. The merging of self and other is depicted, in fact, as having liberating qualities. The narrator's identification with nature - though a quasi-mystical experience of transcendence over time and language - blurs the barriers between self and other. Such an experience is shown to provoke a breakdown of rational unity and the surfacing of a

5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, introduced by Mary Warnock (London, 1969).

6 Quoted in Malcom Bowie, 'Jacques Lacan', in *Structuralism and Since*, ed. by John Sturrock, (Oxford, 1979), pp. 116-153 (p.136).

non-repressed plural subject. My reading of the novel analyses the eruption of the Semiotic, of what in adult language as been repressed, into the Symbolic and the healing effects that its surfacing produces in the subject.⁷

The plurality and juxtaposition of different styles in *Lady Oracle* - discussed in Chapter One - find a correspondence in the scattered identifications of its protagonist. Here the self is represented as an unstable entity: it doubles and multiplies through the different identities assumed simultaneously by Joan Forster and or Louisa K Delacourt, as well as though the spectrum of her projected personae which range from film stars to heroine of fairy tales. The intertextual frame of reference functions largely to this purpose. It appears in fact as an effective means of conveying a notion of the self that is dispersed and plural. This results in a portrayal of the self as a locus of contradictions, as the protagonist occupies a plurality of sometimes conflicting subject positions, in an heterogeneity of representations.

In *Life Before Man* intertextual references, the shifting of roles, and images of segmented bodies convey a sense of fragmentation of the self. These

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution of Poetic Language*, translated by Margaret Waller, introduced by Leon Roudiez (New York, 1984).

images of the fragmented body, which return in *The Handmaid's Tale*, appear to pose a threat to the unity of the ego, according to recent psychoanalytic theories of language and subjectivity.⁸ The narrator in Atwood's dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, at the end of the novel is revealed to be merely a disembodied voice who would project her identity into a series of fairy-tales figures. However, the emphasis placed on the text being a 'tale' puts into question its representational function. It is this problematization of the mimetic function of the text that suggests a parallel loss or ambivalence of the sense of selfhood.

The challenge to the notion of the homogeneous ego, discussed above, yields in Atwood's fictional world a specifically gendered vision wherein woman is more inclined than man to assume a multiplicity of roles and positions.⁹ This notion of female subjectivity has been theorized by French feminist theorists. Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous in particular posit multiplicity at the basis of the feminine. On account of their psychic plurality,

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution of Poetic Language*. Allan White, *L'éclatement du sujet: the work of Julia Kristeva* (Birmingham, 1977).

⁹ The connection between gender and subjectivity present in Atwood's texts is also touched on by Linda Hutcheon in her essay on Atwood, but largely not discussed by other critics. *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.145.

women reveal a capacity to allow for difference and alterity, to accept otherness within the self. It is therefore easier for a woman to be traversed by the 'other'. This is a vision that emerges in particular in Atwood's *Surfacing* and, to a greater extent, in *Lady Oracle*. In the latter otherness, rather than being transcended, is incorporated within the self. It is depicted as a way of being, thinking, speaking that allows for openness and plurality, and function in the text a crucial element in coping with reality.

Multiplicity - in the different forms in which it is present in the texts - denotes resistance to organization and structural hierarchy; it signifies a challenge to the values and concepts of masculine discourse from a position marginal to that discourse and distanced from it. While the basic drive of the 'masculine' is to unify, to rationalize, and to stabilize, the feminine appears in marked resistance to this: it is multiple and diffuse, more inclined to changes. The male persona in the poems is portrayed as a 'memorizer of names'. By naming the world he hopes to 'hold/these places/in their proper places'.¹⁰ However, his wish for control sometimes meets with a stubborn aversion: 'Things,/refused to name themselves; refused/ to let him name them'.¹¹

10 *The Circle Game* (Toronto, 1978), p.49.

11 'Progressive insanities of a pioneer', *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto, 1968) p.39.

2.2 THEMES OF THE DOUBLE: THE EDIBLE WOMAN AND BODILY HARM

Who are you? said the Caterpillar. ...
....'I hardly know, sir, just at present- at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Confusion about one's identity crops up in *Alice in Wonderland*, and is the theme around which Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*, revolves.¹² This is also underscored by the novel's use of the double, which indicates conflictual tendencies existing within the subject. The novel invites interpretation in the light of Lewis Carroll's text, since it makes direct reference to it. Atwood also creates implicit parallels between her heroine Marian and Carroll's heroine Alice.

One of the graduate students whom Marian meets during a marketing survey she does at the beginning of the novel is focussing on *Alice in Wonderland* in his research project. It is on this occasion that she will meet Duncan, who will have, as I shall illustrate in this section, a crucial role in Marian's process of self-understanding, since he functions as her *alter ego*.

¹² Barbara Hill Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*. Barbara Godard.

As regards Alice, Duncan's friend notes how,

..everybody knows Alice is a sexual-identity-crisis book.... What we have here ...is the little girl...trying to find her role...her role as a Woman...One sexual role after another is presented to her but she seems unable to accept any of them, I mean she is really blocked. She rejects maternity...nor does she respond positively to the dominating female role of the Queen... So anyway she makes a lot of attempts but she refuses to commit herself, you can't say that by the end of the book she has reached anything that can be definitely called maturity.¹³

Like Alice, Marian faces the problem of becoming an adult, of having to decide about her future.¹⁴

Like Alice she 'knows several reasons why she should object to growing up'.¹⁵ As Atwood comments, the choices available to Marian, as to any other 'young woman, even a young educated woman, in Canada in the

13 *The Edible Woman* (London, 1985, p.193-4; all further references to this novel appear in the text). These reflections on Alice are in consonance with Atwood's interpretative notes on the novel. 'The tone in *The Edible Woman* is light-hearted, but in the end it's more pessimistic than *Surfacing*. The difference between them is that *The Edible Woman* is a circle and *Surfacing* is a spiral... the heroine of *Surfacing* does not end where she began'. (Interview with Linda Sadler). However, critical readings disagree with Atwood's comment, in the light of the fact that Marian, at the end of the book, has at least achieved a clearer perspective of herself and her uncertainties.

14 'I found myself envying Ainsley her job. Though mine was better paying and more interesting, her was more temporary: she had an idea of what she wanted to do next'(p.17). See also p.20.

15 William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1979), p.261.

early sixties', were highly unsatisfactory, 'a career going nowhere, or a marriage as an exit from it'.¹⁶

Some of the options available to the protagonist are embodied by the other female characters in the novel. The examples that surround Marian are far from optimistic. Her colleagues at work, nicknamed by Marian's friend Ainsley the 'office virgins', provide a representation of frustrated femininity. This implies that they are victims of puritanical middle class attitudes to sexual relationships. Their derogatory representation reflects the negative view of unmarried women in the sixties. A contrary example is offered in Clara, Marian's old friend from college, who married before finishing her degree and is exhausted by her three pregnancies. Marian's flat-mate Ainsley, does not offer a more positive alternative. Her unconventional choice of single parenthood, with which Marian disagrees, finally ends with an orthodox marriage. Marian is paralysed by her perception of these alternatives, and lapses into the anorexic adolescent refusal to grow up.¹⁷

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, Introduction to the novel (1979).

¹⁷ 'Looking at her sitting in there with the baby chewing the buttons of her blouse, Marian found herself being envious of Clara for the first time in three years. Whatever was going to happen to Clara had already happened: she had turned into what she was going to be. It wasn't that she wanted to change place with Clara: she only wanted to know what she was becoming, what direction she was taking, so she could be prepared. It was waking up in the morning

The portrayal of these characters, however, chiefly takes the form of caricature. *The Edible Woman* works mainly in terms of humorous characterization and social satire. However, the absurd comic situations it creates are played against an authentic representation of Toronto in the 1960's. The comic scenes can suddenly become serious and sinister, and the light-hearted comedy turn into bitter criticism of the life and values of the sixties. ¹⁸

Like many feminist writers and theorists Atwood is very critical of the attitudes of the sixties. *The Edible Woman* questions the atmosphere of permissiveness and supposed liberation of the sixties' 'sexual revolution'. It shows how 'female liberation' is male-defined, existing for the benefit of men. It also illustrates how the relaxation of sexual codes did not bring about significant changes in power relations between the sexes. Marian, unlike her colleagues at work or her friend Clara, has adopted a more liberated attitude towards sex. However, the quality of her relation with Peter, especially in the turn it takes after their engagement, which sees Marian turning into a passive

one day and finding she had already changed without being aware of it that she dreaded.' (p.206).

¹⁸ William Keith, *A Sense of Style: Studies in the Art of Fiction in English-Speaking Canada* (Toronto, 1989).

role, shows how sexual fulfilment is not sufficient to alter the basic power relationship between the sexes. The novel's critique of the 1960's implies that Women's Liberation cannot be defined exclusively in sexual terms, since this will not free women from psychological and financial dependence from men.¹⁹

Marian's reluctance to become an adult involves a struggle to keep her own identity secure from the predatory attacks of the Other. As I shall argue later in the course of this study, Marian's anorexic symptoms represent a strategy to preserve a sense of autonomy of the self.

Unlike later texts, *The Edible Woman* expresses the need to mark clearly the boundaries between 'self' and 'other'. This is one of the concerns this novel shares with the Existentialist philosophical framework in which it was conceived. Existentialism establishes an antagonism between Self and Other,

19 Lynne Segal, "Smash the Family?" Recalling the 1960's", in *What is to Be Done About the Family?*, ed. by Lynne Segal (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp.25-64; Rosalind Brunt, "An Immense Verbosity": Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970s", in *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, ed. by Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan (London, 1982), pp.143-170; Lucy Bland, 'Purity, Motherhood, Pleasure or Threat? Definition of Female Sexuality 1900-1970s', in *Sex and Love*, ed. by Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (London, 1983), pp.8-29; Dana Desmore, 'Independence from the Sexual Revolution', in *Radical Feminism*, ed. by Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, Anita Rapone (New York, 1973), pp.107-110.

one that *The Edible Woman* appropriates. According to Sartre, in order to achieve self-consciousness, the subject has to negate the other. The look of the other, like Medusa's gaze, is a fixating look, it turns the subject into object, it denies freedom, it causes an extinction of self. However, the mediation of the other is recognized by Sartre as necessary to the subject's attainment of self-understanding, as it will be for Marian.²⁰

The resistance to the objectifying masculine gaze addresses both the mastering tendency of the other and the (woman) subject's resistance to it, as will be discussed in Chapter Four

The Edible Woman is in fact a 'psychodrama about autonomy' centred on 'the difficulty of attaining it and the dire consequences of not assuming it'.²¹ As a consequence, the quest for independence is given priority in the text. The Other is felt as a threat by the subject in its struggle for self-affirmation. However, its function is ambivalent. On one level, the other is personified by Marian's boyfriend and later her fiancé. The relationship between the two is presented with the aim of illustrating Marian's

20 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

21 Elspeth Cameron, 'Famininity, or Parody of Autonomy: Anorexia Nervosa and *The Edible Woman*', *Journal of Canadian Studies* 20 (2 1985), 45-69 (p.67).

desire for love and affection. Yet at the same time it signifies a loss of subjectivity for her, which is reflected in the feeling of being reduced to a mere object. It also underscores the expectations, still strong in the 1960's, that a woman would have a boyfriend and marry.

The presence of the 'other', that is the other sex, in this novel is shown to leave no space for autonomy. It gives rise to objectification and unresolved conflicts for the woman. In her solipsistic craving for self-assertion Marion rejects also a merging with the feminine other. As she describes the moment,

For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave...she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh...she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity. She drew a deep breath, clenching her body and her mind back into her self like some tactile sea-creature withdrawing its tentacles; she wanted something solid, clear: a man;... Lucy had a golden bangle on one arm. Marian focussed her eyes on it, concentrating on it...drawing its hard gold circle around herself, a fixed barrier between herself and that liquid amorphous other (p. 167).²²

22 These and other negative connotations are attributed to man and to woman's body in particular in this novel. This is especially so with reference to pregnancy. Marian's perception of her pregnant friend is denigratory, and the novel gives on the whole negative attributions to Clara's experience as a mother. This may be explained by the fact that *The Edible Woman* was conceived within the framework of Existentialist thought and also of the Existentialist feminism of Simone De Beauvoir. *The Second Sex* underlines in fact the burden of motherhood. Maternity for the woman's body signifies the

In *The Edible Woman* the mediation of the other, however, comes to acquire crucial significance in the resolution of the protagonist's crisis, a denouement that will re-appear in *Bodily Harm*. On a different level in fact the novel exploits the narrative device of the second self, or double. In this respect Duncan will play a salient role in Marian's process of self-assertion. Clues are scattered throughout the text that the young graduate is not 'real' (p.54). This suggests Duncan functions as Marian's projection, her alter ego. Repeatedly he is seen to blur 'almost noiselessly into the blue darkness' (p.203) or located in the 'darker shadow of some evergreen trees' (p.171). As Marian reflects, on the evening she meets him accidentally in a cinema, 'But she was also afraid, now that she was not looking at him anymore, that if she did reach across, her hand would encounter only darkness and emptiness or the plush surfaces of movie-theatre upholstery (p.125).²³

'enslavement of the organism to reproduction' (translated and edited by H.M. Parshley (London, 1960, p.59).

23 'From somewhere the thought drifted into her mind that if she were to reach out and touch him at the moment he would begin to crumble' (p.187). For a discussion of the second self as shadow or sosia, see Otto Rank, *The Double*, translated by H. Tucker (Chaper Hill, 1971).

Duncan's first appearance in the novel locates him in a different order of reality to that in which the other characters move. This is illustrated also by Marian's anxious feelings of alarm on their first meeting by Duncan's doorstep: 'We stared at each other....The questionnaires I was carrying had suddenly become unrelated to anything at all, and at the same time obscurely threatening....Time seemed to have shifted into a slow motion...Then after what seemed hours...' (p.49). A further indication of the specular relation existing between the two is that at times they appear to be sharing a wordless power of communication with each other.²⁴

Psychoanalytic explanations of the second self see it as a defence mechanism of projection which activates a separation from the part of the self from which one wishes to escape.²⁵ This splitting of the ego acts both as a protection and as a resistance to the annihilation of self envisaged by the protagonist, however unconsciously. Similarly, Marian oscillates between the passive role she has adopted since her engagement in her relationship with Peter,

²⁴ (p.126). Marian, for example, will remember 'perfectly' well the way to Duncan's flat although she did not know the area and hadn't been there since her interview. See also the episode in the laundromat (p. 93) and in the park (p.171-2).

²⁵ Robert Rogers, *The Double in Literature* (Detroit, 1970), p.64.

and a desire to rebel against that role which her double Duncan embodies. The protagonist's subjectivity is then divided into two - Marian, as Peter's fiancé, and Duncan as her projected double. The one represents a socially acceptable or conventional femininity, and the other the angry, rebellious self.²⁶

However, the narrative resolution in *The Edible Woman* differs from traditional stories of the double which present the destruction of one, or sometimes both, of the selves involved. As the title-metaphor of this novel suggests, the cake in the shape of a woman which Marian bakes in the concluding section of the text, provides a symbolic narrative solution in consonance with the novel's attention to 'the forms and dangers of consumerism and consuming'²⁷ and its atmosphere of 'emotional cannibalism'.²⁸ This dénouement will not cause an annihilation of the characters involved. It is the cake, functioning on a

26 Claire Rosenfeld, 'The Shadow Within: the Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double', in *Stories of the Double*, ed. by A.J. Guerard (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 311-331.

27 Linda Hutcheon, 'From Poetic to Narrative Structures: The Novels of Margaret Atwood', in Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir eds., *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System* (Vancouver 1983), pp.17-32.

28 George Woodcock, 'Margaret Atwood: Poet as Novelist', *The Canadian Novel in The Twentieth Century*, ed. by George Woodcock (Toronto, 1975), pp.312-27, . reprinted in Judith McCombs ed., *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* (Boston, Massachusetts, 1988), pp.90-103 (p. 93).

symbolic level as Marian's double, a 'substitute of herself',²⁹ that will be 'destroyed'. By means of this 'resolving trick',³⁰ Marian delegates to food, the object of violence and possession *par excellence*, her female destiny of being devoured, assimilated. It is Peter's attempts to assimilate her that Marian reacts against. In this novel, as in later texts, Atwood portrays a male subjectivity that, in order to assert itself, establishes a destructive relation to his female other. The necessity of attaining a sense of himself through contrast to the other is accompanied by an incapacity to accept the difference of the other. Hence the constant risk, experienced by many other female characters in Atwood's fiction, as well as Marian, of being assimilated, or 'destroyed' in their singularity as subjects.

However, although *The Edible Woman* is more concerned with affirming identity rather than questioning it, the novel does include a problematization of the notion of self. The use of the double conveys a concept of being as a contradiction, a paradox of simultaneous contrasting tendencies existing within the self. This is a theme

29 Graeme Gibson, p.25.

30 Jane Rule, 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy. The Novels of Margaret Atwood', *The Malahat Review*, 41 (January 1977), 43-49 (p.46).

that will receive further development in Atwood's subsequent fiction, as will be discussed in the course of this study. The portrayal of the self as a locus of contradictions and conflicts and the consequent impossibility of defining a unified, coherent identity are themes which characterize Atwood's later novels. However, *The Edible Woman* contains in embryo a number of themes that will be explored in her later fiction. Such themes include a problematization of identity, as I shall illustrate in this Chapter, and the nature of female subjectivity and sexual politics, to be discussed in Chapter Four.³¹

The opposition between appearance and essence, surface and depths, which will recur in later texts, are already introduced in Atwood's first novel. An investigation into the nature of self problematizes the notion of essence in relation to identity. Marian reflects on the supposed existence of a kernel

31 As Atwood notes, 'It is a critical fallacy of our time, derived perhaps from psychology or optimistic self-help books, that a writer should 'grow', 'change', or 'develop'. This fallacy causes us to demand the same kind of behaviour from writers that we expect from children or radishes: 'grow', or there's something wrong with you. But writers are not radishes. If you look at what most writers actually do, it resembles a theme with variations - more than it does the popular notion of growth. Writers' universes become more elaborate, but they do not necessarily become essentially different' Margaret Atwood, 'Valgardsonland', in *Second Words*, pp. 320-324 (p.321).

underneath the scattered fragments of the self: 'What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?' (p.229). Nevertheless, despite the fact that the presence of the double connotes inner conflicts, the second self in this novel still indicates a desire to reconcile the severed halves. Later texts instead, such as *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*, propose a vision that allows the coexistence of conflictual elements within the self. In *Surfacing* the resolution of a crisis is achieved by a radical transformation of the self. In *Lady Oracle* otherness is incorporated within, and the self becomes a locus of contradictory tendencies.

References to doppelgänger figures recur in *Bodily Harm*. However, the treatment of doubleness in *Bodily Harm* is more complex than in Atwood's earlier novel, *The Edible Woman*. In the latter the protagonist experiences confusion about her identity. Her sense of autonomy is threatened by Peter as well as by society's experiences on her. Marian's projected persona, Duncan, signifies then a rebellion against a passive role she refuses to accept.

In *Bodily Harm* the sense of threat, the psychological confusion and the division within the self return in a more powerful and disturbing manner. Here external threats represented by the fact of

violence and horror that occur in the island are paralleled by threats inside the self, that is the protagonist's breast cancer.³²

However, this novel displays a tension in Atwood's notion of self and identity. To an extent *Bodily Harm* presents identity as a shifting construct. Characters in this novel assume various roles, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. But the specular relation between Rennie and the fellow-Canadian Lora she meets on the Caribbean island, portrays a longed-for union between self and its alienated part, which is in contrast to Atwood's presentation of the self in other texts.

Bodily Harm in certain respects reiterates a pattern that appeared already in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* where the 'discovery of self and of place are synonymous'.³³ Rennie's journey to the Caribbean, as has been mentioned in Chapter One, is also a journey into the self.

When, at the end of the novel, Rennie supposedly returns to Toronto, she senses that an alteration in her sense of self has occurred: 'She feels as if she's returning after a space trip, a trip into the future; it's her that has been changed but it will seem as if everyone else has' (p.300).

³² Coral Ann Howells.

³³ Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal, 1980), p.34.

However, the text suggests that the discovery of self can only occur under uncanny circumstances, where normal historical and social co-ordinates which contribute to reinforce a the sense of identity, are gradually lost.³⁴ The experience Rennie undergoes in prison with Lora is extremely significant in this process.

The text provides a clue that elucidates the relation of identity between Rennie and Lora quite early in the narrative. When Rennie is for the first time approached by Lora, she senses a 'shadow' coming over her. This image symbolises, as we have seen in *The Edible Woman*, the emerging of an alter ego or double;³⁵ 'Rennie feels a darker shadow fall over her. "Hi there" says a flat nasal voice, mildly familiar. It's the woman who passed her in the hotel last night' (p.85).

The novel however establishes a complex interplay of identity and difference between the two characters. Rennie's middle class upbringing contrasts sharply with Lora's poverty-stricken, violent background. The interrelation between the two characters has been interpreted as a device to emphasize their difference. Lora's experiences of

³⁴ I shall show how this is conveyed in the text in Chapter Three.

³⁵ Otto Rank, *The Double*, translated by H.Tuker (Chaper Hill, 1971).

poverty, violence and abuse function as a paradigm of female oppression and suffering, and create a sharp contrast with the sheltered life that Rennie has led.³⁶

But Lora plays a much more significant part in the novel, and could be considered as Rennie's *doppelgänger*. The stories of Rennie's and Lora's childhood are given (both in the first person) alternately (p.109-115) without any spatial or temporal introduction, and always with an identical pattern of enunciation.³⁷ As a result the sequences present elements in common as well as differences.³⁸ This parallelism, combined with the alternation between one story line and another, suggests a relation of identity between the two characters.³⁹ In addition, the alternation of these story-lines suggest that they are incomplete in themselves.

Rennie's relation *vis-à-vis* Lora is anticipated through the discourse of the novel. In the first place peripheral to the narrative, Lora will

36 Elaine Tuttle Hansen, 'Fiction and (Post) Feminism in Atwood's *Bodily Harm*', *Novel*, 1, 19 (1985), 5-21.

37 Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Categories of Literary Narrative', translated by J.Kester, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 16, 1 (1980).

38 Such a pattern is composed by the first 'supposed' utterance of the characters: 'says Rennie' or accordingly 'says Lora' (p.53;101;109). As I shall argue in Chapter Three, it is not clear who the characters are talking to or in what context.

39 There are again recollections of a more recent past presented alternately (pp.163-172).

subsequently take a significant place in the narration, and her role becomes progressively crucial as the novel comes to an end. Rennie's and Lora's backgrounds can be seen, I think, as two sides of the same coin. Grinswold with its excessive puritanical attitudes, can be just as dangerous and oppressive as the atmosphere of domestic violence Lora is brought up in.

Rennie's middle-class childhood and upbringing illustrate a different version of female oppression that takes the form of a 'repression' of feelings and emotions. Lora's cynical, violent and finally sexually aggressive stepfather can be contrasted to and compared with the severity and lack of warmth of Rennie's self-righteous mother. The parallelism is more evident when one considers that for both women, these parental figures were crucial, and painfully so, in their development as children and adolescents. Both Rennie and Lora have subsequently denied their origin and left them behind without any regret. Origins, thinks Rennie, are equivalent to roots 'something that can't be seen but it is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones, nothing you want to get into. Those who's lately been clamouring for roots had never seen a root up close, Rennie used to say. She had, and she'd rather be some other part of the plant' (p.18).

The events that occur in prison and their psychological significance will gradually alter the relation between the two women. It is thanks to Lora that, in the end, Rennie feels 'rescued' (p.300). The specular relation between the two characters becomes even more evident. As Barbara Hill Rigney suggests, they 'have no mirror in the prison cell and this requires that they depend upon each other for reflection. They literally must see themselves through each other's eyes in order to reassure themselves that they exist'.⁴⁰ The perception of one's reflected self is an indispensable phase in the constitution of the subject. As Atwood has written elsewhere: 'To live in prison is to live without mirrors./ To live without mirrors is to live without the self'.⁴¹

However, the events on the island and Rennie's imprisonment operate on different levels. On one level, the violence and abuse perpetrated in the islands emphasise the immorality of non-involvement and of an attitude of non-commitment towards what is 'there' (p.290). It is possible to read Dr Minnow's explanation of his political involvement, as Atwood's self-reflexive comment on the responsibility of the writer: 'You do it because everyone tells you it is

40 Margaret Atwood, p.117.

41 Margaret Atwood, *Two Headed-Poems* (Toronto, 1978), p.49.

not possible. They cannot imagine things being different. It is my duty to imagine, and they know that for even one person to imagine is very dangerous to them...' (p.229).

Yet, on the other hand, in *Bodily Harm* the coming together of the two worlds, in the persons of Rennie and Lora, act as an attempt to bridge the gap between 'self' and 'otherness'.

As will be discussed in Chapter Three, Rennie finds people and events on the archipelago difficult to interpret (p. 139). The islands progressively came to assume the characteristic of the 'Uncanny', the strange in other words, otherness. Rennie taking the battered Lora in her arms is also an encounter of self with self, or rather with the alienated part of herself. The acceptance and recognition through touch of the other can be seen as the condition of becoming a subject.⁴² For Rennie, this could be seen as another movement towards a reunion with her body and herself, already started with Paul. It is also an acceptance of the otherness within the self 'She can feel the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that's gone out. It will always be there now' (p.300).

42 Walter Ver Eecke, 'The Look, the Body, and the Other', in *Dialogues in Phenomenology*, ed. by Don Ihde & Richard Zaner (The Hague, Netherlands, 1975), pp. 224-246.

2.3 DESTRUCTURING THE SUBJECT: *SURFACING*

...the substance of the repressed being on the side of the feminine.

Sigmund Freud, letter to W. Fliess

Images of victimization permeate *Surfacing*. The world of nature that surrounds the narrator and her companions is violated by technology, pollution and human lust. The protagonist, confronted by such evidence of victimization, is convinced that she herself is a victim. As a woman she feels handicapped in a man's world; as a commercial artist she has learnt to compromise before accepting a commission; as a Canadian she feels exploited in a country that she regards as a sell-out. As a human being, she is pervaded by guilt.

These themes are skilfully interwoven in the novel and presented through the interaction between the various characters. However in this section I shall focus on construction of subjectivity in order to examine how the dissolution of the self experienced by the narrator functions as both a protest and act of resistance, and eventually enables her to transcend the role of victim.

In Chapter One we have seen how in *Surfacing* the recurring references to the narrator's fractured

identity insert in the narrative features of the divided selves that are typical of ghost stories. However, the confrontation of self and other in the tradition of *doppelgänger* does not lead in *Surfacing* to the denouement typical of the genre, where the rejection or destruction of the other occurs. In the novel the apparitions of ghost-like figures as second selves coexist with an hallucinatory experience of dissolution of the self in nature. This foregrounds in an extreme manner the question of identity as it signifies a breakthrough of the limiting definitions of individuality.

Critics have read *Surfacing* as a novel of self-discovery and a quest for unity, defined as a basic human need.⁴³ They read it as a reunion of self with its alienated part, which, by the end of the novel, is restored to sanity.⁴⁴ However, as I mentioned briefly in the previous Chapter, the novel goes

43 Karla Smart Kadramas, 'Owen Barfield Reads Margaret Atwood, or The Concepts of Participatory and Nonparticipatory Consciousness as Present in *Surfacing*, in *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, ed. by Beatrice Mendez-Eagle (Edinburg, Texas, 1987), pp.71-87; Roberta Rubenstein, 'Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the Interior', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22,3(1976), 387-399; Annis Pratt; Frank Davely, *Margaret Atwood*.

44 Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel* (Madison, 1978). A different reading is provided by Sherrill Grace, who sees Atwood portrayal of self as a locus of interaction of experiences (*Violent Duality*).

beyond fantasies of dualism to find in multiplicity and metamorphosis the possibility of regeneration.

In order to discuss the question of identity in this novel it is useful to stress the interplay between myth and realism which Atwood achieves, and the movement that occurs in the text from a realistic to a fantastic mode of writing. The seemingly realistic setting of the first half of the novel is replaced by a narrative of distorted perceptions, of double and multiple selves, characteristic of the fantastic as a genre.⁴⁵ The 'linear' and 'rational' narrative gives way to an 'impressionistic' and 'surreal' one in a crescendo that culminates in the closing section. This shift in the narrative style is accompanied by a change in the protagonist's subjectivity.

The realistic structures of containment employed in the first part of the novel suggest a structured but repressed subject. Towards the end of the novel the transformations undergone by the protagonist may be seen as signs of the eruption of repressed desire which produce a destructured subject. We can define this movement as one from order to disorder, from

45 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*.

repression to the eruption of desire, from the 'Symbolic' to the 'Semiotic'.⁴⁶

'Language - we are told - is everything you do' (p.30). In *Surfacing*, in fact, language reveals a great deal about its narrator. The detached, impersonal voice in the first half of the novel conveys the narrator's cerebral approach to life, her inability to feel, as well as her attempt to control the rising disorder she perceives mounting within her. As she says, 'I wanted to keep busy, preserve at least the signs of order' (p.93).

The false order she has imposed on her life is slowly shattered by her visit to the place of her childhood, an island in one of the lakes in Northern Quebec, where she has gone to search for her missing father. The protagonist's return sets up continuities between her past and her present. But it also contributes to upsetting the coherent memories, the formulations she has imposed over her past, and starts to pose a question of identity. As in *Bodily Harm* and in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, the exploration of place becomes in *Surfacing* a metaphor for the disclosure of self.⁴⁷

46 Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution of Poetic Language*.

47 As Atwood writes in *Survival*, 'Part of where you are is where you have been. If you aren't too sure where you are, or if you are sure but you don't like it, there is a tendency, both in psychoanalysis and

The beginning of this 'quest' is characterised by the narrator's inability to feel or express emotions of suffering. The 'absence of feeling', a sense of extreme isolation and psychological dislocation which is conveyed also, but not exclusively, by the detached impersonal voice, is a characteristic trait of the narrator. The first chapter delineates her self-division as well as the difficulty she has in accepting her parents' death.

48

Unlike *The Edible Woman*, where the double indicates the existence of conflicts within the self, in *Surfacing* the protagonist's self-division signals the narrator's adoption of a defensive strategy. As a defensive mechanism to avoid pain, she has allowed her self to be severed into two, in a kind of emotional suicide. ⁴⁹ She identifies with

in literature to retrace your history to see how you got there' (p.112).

48 As the narrator reflects on her inability to feel: 'I didn't feel awful; I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time. Perhaps I'd been like that all my life, just as some babies are born deaf or without a sense of touch; but if that was true I wouldn't have noticed the absence' (p.126). Indicative of her psychological state is the superficial quality of the narrator's friendship with Anna, the other woman in the group, 'She is my best friend, my best woman friend; I've known her two months' (p.12), and the detached attitude she assumes in her her relation with Joe, her partner (p.49; p.88).

49 'It is from the very beginning of the novel that we apprehend the existence of the protagonist's divided self. One of her friends, while reading her hand, discerns a sign of doubleness in it: "Do you

the 'detached', 'terminal' part of herself. 'Like a severed thumb', she has made herself insensible, 'numb' (p.10). Exemption from pain means, of course, exemption from feeling, as the narrator herself is well aware: 'In a way it was a relief, to be exempt from feeling' (p.133). The narrator's self-division has been read in the light of Ronald Laing's exposition of the schizophrenic splitting of the self. The schizophrenic creates a barrier between the inner self and the self for others in order to protect what is felt to be the real true self. The isolation of the true self is however fatal, as it causes a progressive impoverishment of the emotional, inner life.⁵⁰ The narrator in *Surfacing*, has in fact created a spurious, false self which relates to the outside world. Her hurt and suffering self is instead left untouchable and on the defensive. This results in the petrification of her inner life and a falsehood in her relation to the outside world.⁵¹

As the reader is allowed to recognize only at a later stage in the narrative, the narrator's

have a twin?' I said No. 'Are you positive,' she said, 'because some of your lines are double'" (p.10).

50 Ronald Laing, *The Divided Self* (London, 1959); Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*; Catherine McLay, 'The Divided Self: Themes and Pattern in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4, 1 (1975), 82-95.

51 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, translated by Leon Roudiez (New York, 1982), p.53.

personal past has become bearer of intolerable memories, and she has reacted by creating a fictive past. Her unsuccessful love affair with a married man, her attempted suicide, the abortion she was compelled to suffer, are replaced by the fake story she constructs of a marriage, a divorce, a son. The protagonist's failure to experience an emotional life is also indicated by her inability to accept the fact of her parents' death. She tries in fact to erase the memory of her parents, to the extent that she thinks of them as if they were somebody else's. However, as she is approaching the island of her childhood, she makes this first important recognition. 'That won't work, I can't call them "they" as if they were somebody else's family; I have to keep myself from telling that story' (p.18). She has not accepted their death and the eternal separation from them which it involves.

They have no right to get old. I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember, they stay unchanged. I was sure mine would anyway, I could leave them and return much later and everything would be the same. I thought of them as living in some other time, going about their own concerns closed safe behind a wall as translucent as Jell-O, mammoths frozen in a glacier (p.11).

The return she makes to her place of origin initiates a slow process of recognition and

acceptance of the loss. It also enable her to come to terms with her painful memories of her past.

These crucial events indicate that the narrator is suffering from a severe case of psychic repression. However, her situation differs from the classic Freudian concept of repression. The theory of the unconscious presupposes a repression of contents that do not have access to consciousness but effect within the subject modifications, either of speech, or of the body or both. In the case of the narrator in *Surfacing* the 'unconscious' contents remain excluded from consciousness but in a strange way. Their exclusion is not radical, yet it is enough to allow the establishment of a defensive position. This position, as well as implying refusal, is also a sublimating elaboration.⁵²

The fabrication by the narrator of her 'paper house' is enacted on the subliminal level. In the narrative these episodes have the consistency of other memories, such as her memories of her brothers or of her parents, but towards the end they prove to be the result of a sublimating elaboration. The disorder and pain of her experiences is contained and repressed by means of the structured stories which she has devised about herself. A repressed subjectivity is theorized as the result of a process

52 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.7.

of sublimation of fears and desires which produce a structured subject. The psychological structures of containment of desire are in fact responsible for the creation of a coherent, structured self.⁵³ The fabrications created by the narrator over her past and the concealment of her real one, could be seen as a further sign of repressed, disguised and sublimated desire. The formulations she has invented, as well as her self-division display a notion of the ego as being the result of a structured process which operates through repression.⁵⁴

The disappearance of the narrator's father, which is a central feature of the novel, becomes a pretext for her own quest: 'It was no longer his death by my own that concerned me' (p.127). She sublimally chooses her parents as a guide in her journey of re-birth, as she looks for the legacies they might have left her. In this secular version of the mystical quest the parents act as a substitute for a spiritual deity since it is from them that she will receive her power of vision.⁵⁵

53 Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston & Toronto, 1976).

54 'There is no fixed subject unless there is repression' Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London, 1984) p.26, quoted in Leo Bersani, p.25.

55 Atwood has said that the only good kind of religion she finds acceptable is one that produces a god who comes 'out of the place where you are, the reality of your life', Graeme Gibson, p. 30-31.

The rock paintings produced by her father, which she finds in the cabin, lead her to the lake. The lake mirrors her own repressed unconscious self. It is there that she at last finds what she has come to find: the power of the gods, which resides with the dead, and the power which resides in the unconscious. The process starts with a recognition of the severed part of herself, the 'one that could live' (p. 129), her other self, not her 'reflection', but her her 'shadow' (p.165). While under water the narrator has a vision of the lost child she was forced to abort by her lover. This exorcizes the presence of death within her, 'Since then I'd carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumor, black pearl' (p.170), and acts as an initial breakthrough in her emotional impasse. She realizes that 'feeling was beginning to seep back into me' (p.146).

She comes to recognize that the fiction she had constructed for herself enabled her to survive. Now she has to learn to live again. She has to leave her 'paper house' and listen to the silence. In order to do so she retreats into the wilderness. When her companions leave for the city she hides. In fact the discoveries she makes while diving, crucial though they are, do not constitute the climax of her inner

journey, but rather the starting point for another more extraordinary descent.

The narrator's diving into the lake symbolically renders her descent into the irrational, timeless and speechless dimension of the unconscious. This is indicated by her being released from both time and language. Like the luggage she leaves behind, language is described as a 'caseful of alien words and failed pictures... nothing I need' (p.193). There are no words in the unconscious: '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' (p.215). She is now enveloped in an experience of timelessness since the unconscious bears no correlation to historical time. She is literally left without the possibility to measure objective time which stands for her freedom from it: 'When I wake up the diffused light outside is further west, it feels late, it must be almost six, dinner hour; David had the only watch' (p.201). And later, the entry into objective time states her integration: 'I dress, clumsily, unfamiliar with buttons; I reenter my own time' (p. 223).

The two dimensions that are rejected here - those of time and language - are, according to Julia Kristeva strictly related:

The symbolic order - the order of verbal communication, the personal order of descent - is a temporal order. For the speaking subject, it is the clock of objective time: it provides the reference point and consequently, all possibilities of measurement by defining a past, a present, and a future.⁵⁶

However, as Kristeva continues to explain, there are no temporal distinctions in the unconscious, where we find all that has been repressed by 'whatever is legislating, restrictive, paternal ... There is no time without speech. Therefore no time without the father. That's what the father means: sign and time'.⁵⁷

The transcendence which the narrator achieves over time and language, and the subsequent shift in the narrative in which it results, can be analyzed in terms of Kristeva's distinction between the Symbolic and the Semiotic. Kristeva regards these as the two modalities that constitute the process of signification. The concluding section of *Surfacing* can be read, in fact, in the context of what Kristeva calls the feminine aspect of language, the Semiotic.

56 Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, translated by A. Barrows (New York, 1986), p.34.

57 *Ibid*, p.35.

Kristeva's notion of the Symbolic is Lacanian. All human activities and life in society are dominated by the Symbolic order. In order for the subject to live in human society he has to enter the Symbolic order and accept its rules, which are linguistic as well as cultural. However, according to Kristeva, the speaking subject is constituted also by another dimension, the Semiotic. The Semiotic designates that which precedes the imposition of the Symbolic and the 'self' at the mirror stage. It is anterior to signification, denotation, syntax, the word, and is considered as the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language.

The overcoming of time and language is followed in *Surfacing* by an attempt to give shape to this pre-verbal dimension. This is exemplified by the fact that the narrator refuses or destroys everything related to human civilization, including food and shelter. This is followed by the dissolution and transcendence of her own past, by means of a 'purification ritual': 'Everything from history must be eliminated the circles and the arrogant square pages' (p.207) of didactic and indoctrinating history books.

In *Surfacing*, the shift that occurs from a 'rational' and 'linear' narrative at the start of the novel, to the 'impressionistic' and 'surreal'

language of the concluding section, suggests a movement from the modality of the Symbolic to that of the Semiotic.

The movement from the Symbolic into the Semiotic operates in the text on a variety of different levels. At the level of fiction it is represented by the interruption of linear narrative, by the introduction of the thematics of laughter, death and nonsense. At the linguistic level this heterogeneity manifests itself through deviations from the grammatical rules of the language, and through the production of metaphors. An example of the former is the lack of punctuation that characterizes the fragmented section of the narrative where the narrator describes her re-newed perceptions:

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 (p.212-213).

At the level of subjectivity the emergence of the Semiotic brings about the absence of any sense of consciousness of the self, as the distinction between the 'I' and the 'not-I' is blurred. This is further illustrated in the text by the deletion of

the possessive pronoun. As the narrator says, once she has started her descent into the unconscious, that is, just after diving into the lake, 'My hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm. Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole' (p.172). The erasure of the possessive pronoun as indicative of a loss of any sense of identity can be explained by recent theories on language and subjectivity. Linguistic theory and psychoanalysis both conceive of subjectivity as linguistically constructed. According to Benveniste, it is language that provides the possibility of subjectivity because it enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as 'I', as the subject of the sentence. Consciousness of self is achieved only through contrast and differentiation between 'I' and 'not-I'. 58

As a result of the erasure of the limits of self produced by the Semiotic in the concluding section, the socially conditioned sense of 'me' is shattered, and with it the notion of personality and identity that the possession of a name implies. As the narrator reflects, once she has run away from her companions: 'Joe comes up the steps, shouting ...my name. It's too late, I no longer have a name' (p.198).

58 Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistic*, translated by Mary Meek, (Miami, 1971).

In the place of a unitary identity one finds the appearance of a desiring, unstructured subject. In Kristeva's formulation the Symbolic constitutes itself at the cost of repression though the acquisition of language. Before its occurrence the infant perceives himself in total unity with the mother. The entry into the Symbolic Order entails an acceptance of the role of the father and the separation from the maternal body. The desire for the lost unity with the mother will be from this moment repressed and constitute the unconscious.

In *Surfacing* the psychological structures of the containment of desire that controlled the narrator operated through repression. The creation of a mendacious past, for example, occurred at the subliminal level and created a rigidly structured, repressed self. Similarly, the narrator is now faced with the experience of lack, one which originates in her the ultimate separation from her parents. In particular the break-through of the Semiotic brings about a reenactment of the experience of separation from the mother. As the narrator reflects, while standing in proximity to her mother's jacket, 'Leather smell, the smell of loss; irrecoverable' (p.204). The eruption of desire that this lack causes - desire is an activity within lack - breaks the structures of containment and repression that had

imprisoned the subject and produces a 'destructured' and plural subjectivity.⁵⁹

The language of detachment and alienation which is employed in the first part of the novel, gives place to a language that becomes the bearer of violent passion and emotions: no longer the word, but the scream.

But I'm not mourning, I'm accusing them, *Why did you?* They chose it, they had control over their death, they decided it was time to leave and they left, they set up this barrier. They didn't consider how I would feel, who would take care of me. I'm furious because they let it happen' (p.202).⁶⁰

The narrator's reverence for her deceased parents is at odds with the sixties cult of negligence towards the family which is adopted by her three companions. The ghost-like apparitions of the narrator's parents, which occur towards the end of the novel, have the effect of delivering her from the anguish of the loss and make her recognize that the world exists

59 Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*.

60 However, this desperate demand for love is not exempt from conflict. The family creates a confusion about the boundaries of the self. It acts simultaneously as a reflecting structure, providing a reassuring mirror image, and at the same time it functions as a constraining force on the self striving for its definition and psychological autonomy. However, initially the illusion of oneness with the mother postpones the problem of individuality (p.60). But the recognition that the world exists beyond the mother, and that her existence is a separate one, forces the subject to face the terrifying question of identity.

beyond them. This is an important recognition. By accepting her parents' death, she is able to accept life. As she reflects after the confrontation with her parents, 'to prefer life, I owe them that' (p.220).⁶¹ Once she has met the 'spirits' of her parents she will presumably go back to the rational social world of urban life. A sign that a channel of contact with her inner life has been restored is the fact that she has started dreaming again.

The narrators' experience of psychological rebirth occurs as a result of the experience of radical alteration of the self which takes place through metamorphosis and finds a linguistic correspondance, as is indicated by the change of narrative style in the novel.

According to Kristeva, in fact, any modifications in language, particularly infractions of syntactic laws, reflect a modification of the status of the subject. As a consequence, Kristeva suggests that a radical new poetic discourse may produce a radical new status for the subject.

61 As Atwood notes in an interview, 'Surfacing is a ghost story which follows a certain formula. The ...heroine is obsessed with finding the ghost, but once she's found it she's released from that obsession. The point is, my character can see the ghosts but they can't see her. This is important in ghostlore, because it means that she can't enter the world of the dead. She realizes, OK, I've learned something. Now I have to make my own life', Linda Sandler, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', *Malahat Review*, p.11.

The focus on motifs of metamorphosis in *Surfacing* conveys ideas of the profound changes occurring within the subject, and indicate that the self has gone beyond the limiting definitions of individuality.⁶² The narrator's identification with the elements of the natural world blur the barrier between self and other. As a result, the single self is transformed into multiple 'selves'.

As I mentioned earlier, the experience of multiplicity is crucial to the narrator's process of regeneration. In the novel this experience takes different forms and at times is represented and described literally, rather than metaphorically. The narrator observes that 'My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I

62 Michael Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by Caryl Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, London, Texas, 1981), p.115. This theme recurs in Atwood's poetry, where containment into one shape are limiting. As John Foster notes the poetry reveals a fascination with skin 'that membranous edge between the inside and the outside'. The fighting bull in 'Bull Song' thinks it is a mistake 'to have shut myself/ in this cast skin' *You Are Happy*, p.30 ('The Poetry of Margaret Atwood', *Canadian Literature*, 74 (Autumn 1977), 5-20 (p.12)). Atwood's poetic vision is of 'perpetual mutation': 'Which of these forms/have you taken;/hill, tree clawed/to the rock, fallen rock/ worn and rounded by the wind' ('A Soul, Geologically', *Procedures from the Underground* (Toronto, 1970, p.58). Also *You Are Happy* (Toronto 1974), p.48, p.96; *The Circle Game* (Toronto, 1978) p.40; *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto, 1970), p.36. (Gillian Ladousse, 'Some Aspects of the Theme of Metamorphosis in Margaret Atwood's Poetry', *Etudes Canadiennes*, 2 (1976) 71-77).

multiply' (p.197). It is multiplicity then that involves possibilities of liberation. It is due to this experience that the narrator rejects the role of a victim. As Cixous points out, 'Being several and insubordinable, the subject can resist subjugation'.⁶³

The interior psychological voyage which the narrator experiences produces a different sense of self, rather than resulting in merely self-discovery.⁶⁴ Her determination to cease being a victim is highlighted by the vocabulary used in the last two pages. They provide, in fact, a further indication of the profound changes that have taken place.: 'I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless (p.222); 'the winning and losing games are finished'. Others 'will have to be invented' (p.223).

2.4 A DISPERSED SELF: LADY ORACLE

63 Hélène Cixous, 'The Character of Characters', translated by K. Cohen, *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 383-402 (p.387).

64 The narrator's journey does not cause simply a repossession and acceptance of self, as some critics have stressed. (Marie-Françoise Guedon, 'Surfacing: Amerindian Themes and Shamanism' in *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System*, ed. by Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir (Vancouver, 1983) pp.91-112). In this respect it is quite similar to the shamanic experience of radical transformation of self.

Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The parodic revisitation of Romance fiction which occurs in *Lady Oracle* explores the 'limitations' and the 'pleasures' of the genre. It points out its norms at the very moment in which it subverts them in a parodic distortion that exposes the constraints of the generic rules of Romance fiction.

Parody, however, does not constitute the only significant element of the novel. *Lady Oracle* is permeated by an element of sharp satire. The satire is directed at radical militant politics, especially the Canadian nationalism of the 1960's and early 1970's, and the cult of 'sincerity', especially in relation to sex and feeling. The novel also presents a vivid description of the anxieties and terror of female childhood and adolescence.

Lady Oracle draws largely on the Gothic tradition of dualism and divided selves, which are frequently alluded to the representation of Joan's double life and double identities. In nineteenth century Gothic fiction 'the double signifies a desire to be re-united with a lost centre of

personality'.⁶⁵ The Gothic fascination for otherness, however, represents the unity of self and other as impossible. In *Lady Oracle* instead there is an acceptance of the various different selves which constitute a single identity.

Joan Forster keeps her identity as Louisa K Delacourt, author of *Costume Gothics*, secret from the young revolutionary Arthur whom she eventually marries. She is ashamed to admit that she makes a living from writing popular fiction, and until the very end of the novel nothing breaks this silence, this deception. Represented as strategic device for survival, deception is an element recurrently present in women's popular narrative, where it usually acts as a strategy to conquer/keep the hero's love. In *Lady Oracle* it reinforces Joan's self division and highlights her duplicity, thus helping to create the character's double voice. Joan's narrative juxtaposes in fact a public voice, one that is cheerfully accepting and accommodating, and a silent one, which is double-edged, critical, enquiring, discontented and desiring.

It is Joan Forster's writing that allows her to explore a plural subjectivity, and it is her writing that enables her to live though this division, this split. In *Stalked by Love*, the work of Romance

65 Rosemary Jackson, p.108.

fiction Joan is writing, the maze in the castle, a typically gothic location, is a narrative device for the development of the plot of costume Gothic. The descent into the maze also signifies a 'descent into the underworld',⁶⁶ as the author herself indicates, and the image of the maze is suggestive of the labyrinth of the psyche. The scene provides a confrontation in which the self alters and is altered by aspects of itself which it confronts for the first time. The women Felicia encounters in the labyrinth are her husband's previous wives, who resemble aspects of Joan's past selves, besides representing conventional stereotypes of femininity which in the past have been assigned to Joan:

A stone bench ran along one side, and on it were seated four women. Two of them looked a lot like her, with red hair and green eyes and small white teeth. The third was middle aged, dressed in a strange garment that ended half way up her calves, with a ratty piece of fur around her neck. The last was enormously fat. She was wearing a pair of pink tights and a short skirt covered with spangles. From her head sprouted two antennae, like a butterfly's, and a pair of obviously false wings was pinned to her back (p.341).

Confronting the images of her past and present selves, Joan comes to terms with her own self-division, with the 'otherness' within herself. This time she does not suppress one self in favour of

⁶⁶ Linda Sandler, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', p.16.

another. Instead, she realizes that she has to accept her multiple, numerous selves. Art on this occasion transforms life, enabling Joan to face reality.

The different stylistic levels of the text, especially in the fictional narratives which Joan creates, become a sign of the contradictory tendencies that co-exist within the character. They show two contrasting world-views and systems of belief, thereby proposing the self as a site of antithetical positions and conflicts. Popular art, in fact, does not merely reproduce ways and means belonging to the dominant discourse. On the contrary, it acts as the locus of conflict, where a double movement between acceptance and dissent can be continually discerned.⁶⁷ Subjectivity is the locus where this oscillation takes place, and the double movement is embodied by Joan herself, who appears to have within her two opposing models of being. Her humanist self, in constant search for a reassuring certitude and unity, resents 'this other place where everything changed and shifted' (p.284) It doesn't accept being 'closed out from that impossible white paradise where love was final as death' (p.284). Her drive to write romance fiction responds to this

67 Stuart Hall, 'Notes on deconstructiong the popular', *People's History and Socialist Theory*, R.Samuel ed. (London, 1981), pp.227-240.

longing for certitude and unity, and mirrors Joan's need for that 'feeling of release when everything turned out right and I could scatter joy like rice all over my characters and dismiss them into bliss' (p.320). The fiction she writes represents her need to conceal the existence of the conflicts which appear in her collection of poetry, 'Lady Oracle'. Advertised as a struggle between the sexes, the poems focus on the cryptic story of the unhappy queen and her knight, and are presented in a format in which Gothic ambiguity is stretched to the extreme. The conflicts at work in this poetry and the lack of true and final love they convey, represents Joan's 'need to explore', her antihumanist self, who seems aware of the endless process of transformation.

In *Lady Oracle* the notion of a coherent, unified self is rejected, along with the concept of life as fixed and static. It is through Joan's numerous crises and subsequent rebirths that she becomes other than she was. Her extraordinary bodily transformation, from overweight girl to the slim attractive woman she later becomes, brings about a notion of 'being' as mainly becoming. Such a concept of body opens up the possibility of another order, of a completely different world that Joan, in actual fact, pursues. 'I wanted to have more than one life' (p.141). Images of death coincides with ones of

transformation and rebirth. Joan 'dies' as Joan Forster in the Toronto harbour, only to be born anew in Italy where she 'celebrate(s) the birth of (her) new personality' (p.184) after having cut and dyed her red waist-length hair. As a consequence, death also loses its tragic overtones (see the way it is present at the *incipit* of the novel), to suggest instead metamorphosis, an idea that has always fascinated Atwood. ⁶⁸ These concepts of self and body challenge all notions of stability and permanence. Self and body are thus positioned outside hierarchies, since, as Bakhtin writes, 'a hierarchy can determine only that which represents stable, immovable, and unchangeable being, not free becoming'. ⁶⁹

I mentioned earlier the novel's affinities with the Gothic tradition of the divided self and also its difference from it. Nevertheless *Lady Oracle* shares with the genre some of its basic

68 Concepts of transformation and metamorphosis inform Atwood's poetic vision, and are a recurrent concern in her poetry, where life appears a 'constant process of re-formation (...) Nothing is destroyed in Atwood's universe: it simply assumes another space, another form'. John Foster, 'The Poetry of Margaret Atwood' *Canadian Literature*, 74 (Autumn 1977), 5-20 (p.6/p.8).

69 Michael Bakhtin, *Rabelias and his World*, translated by M. Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984).

assumptions.⁷⁰ The vision that informs the Gothic is one which does not attempt to solve any of the contradictions and conflicts of this world, one that does not offer absolute truth, one that lacks 'faith in organic notion of wholeness'.⁷¹ Subjective, relativistic positions are emphasised, especially through the multiplicity of narrative lines. The use of suspense and doubt renders it difficult to draw a rigid line between fantasy and reality. Gothic fables, as David Punter points out, are developed round 'those points of vision and obsession where the individual blurs into his own fantasies'. As a result, they 'questioned the boundaries on which individual identity depends'.⁷²

These elements are indeed present in *Lady Oracle's* denial of the classical unities of space, time and character which are challenged both on the

70 One of them is the suspension of the reader's moral judgment on the central character. In Gothic fiction suspension of moral judgment is achieved through the characters' dislocation from everyday norms. The extremely trying and demanding situations they have to face in remote places like convents, sinister mansions and castles, tend to provoke the reader's empathy. In the novel the difficult situations and turmoil experienced by the heroine, despite her lies, evoke a sympathetic response from the reader. Suspension of moral judgment is achieved in *Lady Oracle* also by means of a device generally absent in the tradition of gothic tales, that of humour.

71 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London, 1981), p. 198.

72 David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London, 1980), p.73.

levels of story and discourse. The novel contains a structure comprising a 'plot within a plot' which disrupts the chronology of the main narrative, creating different temporal levels. The novel's web of intertextual references proposes a further temporal dimension. In order to decode parody the reader has to transcend the boundaries of the text and explore her/his knowledge of the corpus of writing that is its target, as if following a zig-zag movement across three levels of time. During this operation, that requires a time measurable in fractions, the reader engages in a dialogue, as he/she participates in this game of intertextual quotation, where the reader's time becomes the time of his/her 'encyclopaedic competence'.⁷³

Unity of character is undermined by the novel's polyhedric protagonist. The self is represented as being an unstable entity: it doubles and multiplies through the different identities assumed simultaneously by Joan Forster and/or Louisa K. Delacourt, as well as through the spectrum of her projected personae. Atwood also emphasizes this aspect when, at the very beginning of the novel, she describes the identity of her character as one that appears indistinct in outline. Joan's life 'meandered along from one thing to another... had a tendency to

73 Michael Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror' (p.7)

Joan's dual, multiple selves undermine the most cherished of human unities: that of character. Unity of character coincides with a particular concept of literary 'realism', a mode of writing which erases the fact that the text is a construct. Expressive realism implies an 'I' (whole, coherent, indivisible) that can express itself just as the world is represented in the text. Atwood's use of collage, as in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, clearly challenges this assumption since in collage meaning is exposed as a construct. Moreover, collage rejects an organic model of growth, linearity and unity.

The self becomes - as Atwood herself states - 'a place where things happen',⁷⁴ or where experience intersects. Relevant to this is Joan Forster's comment, "You must learn to control yourself" she said kindly ... She didn't know what a lot of territory this covered' (p.58) Joan's own identity is in fact not simply divided between Joan Forster and Louisa Delacourt but is dispersed in a multitude of projected personae ranging from film stars to heroines of fairy tales.

⁷⁴ Quoted by Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality*, p.76.

Atwood introduces into the text 'voices' and 'characters' from a vast corpus of writing of all kinds, and these intertextual references relate also to the theme of sexual politics explored in the novel. The paratactic presence of various genres in the novel creates a net of intertextual references on which the main actual plot, and the ones embedded within it, are built. Joan's own poem entitled 'Lady Oracle' is an example of such a pastiche. The characterization of this 'dark lady', and of her unhappy power, resembles that of the queen of the fantastic kingdom in Rider Haggard's *She*, 'she who must be obeyed' as the texts of both writers read. 'Lady Oracle' does not burn to death in the flame of the fire of life, as happens in Haggard's romance; she drowns instead in the river, like Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott'.

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 (p.226).

Haggard's and Tennyson's female characters became emblematic figures in the nineteenth century iconography of women. If *She*, or *Ayesha*, embodies the

myth of ruling womanhood that pervades the century, the Lady of Shalott signifies an image of the Victorian ideal of female self-renunciation. For them life appears an amalgam of imprisonment and power, and both die tragically. Elsewhere Atwood suggests that the ideology which permeates Hoggard's texts is one where 'the only good woman is a dead woman',⁷⁵ and in *Lady Oracle* Joan's survival qualities, her fake deaths and rebirths are set against such tragic fates. Atwood highlights also the double nature of Ayesha. The polarities attributed to her in *She* oscillate between positive and sinister qualities. This dualism of the female character as it is portrayed in literature is presented and rendered problematic in *Lady Oracle*.

These intertextual references show Atwood's interest in the way cinema and fairy tales, for example, construct female subjectivity and female desire, and how they function for the female spectator. Behind Joan Delacourt, the adolescent overweight girl, there appears the shadow of Joan Crawford - the Hollywood actress she was named after.

As a girl, Joan feels an intense empathy with the unhappy heroine of the Hollywood film, *The Red Shoes*, acted by Moira Shearer. Joan identifies

⁷⁵ Margaret Atwood, 'Superwoman Drawn and Quartered: The early Form of *She*' (1965), *Second Words* (Toronto, 1982), pp.35-54 (p.54).

strongly with the dilemma of this professional red-haired dancer, with her lovely costume and red satin shoes, who face a drastic choice between career and marriage and consequently commits suicide.⁷⁶

Dancing as a language of the body becomes a sign of sexual desire, or of a repressed sexuality which in these texts manifest itself in female sacrifice. The liberating and subversive significance of dancing is also emphasised by Atwood's reference to Hans Andersen's fairy tale, 'The Red Shoes' and 'The Little Mermaid'. Andersen's stories present images of mutilation and death which caught Atwood's poetic imagination. It is death above all that outwaits Andersen's heroine as soon as she attempts to rebel against her prescribed role as passive, selfless giver.

In 'The Red Shoes' the heroine's desire to dance, which the story presents as a manifestation of selfishness, becomes a means of both enjoyment and punishment.⁷⁷ It is Andersen's Little Mermaid -

76 Atwood's comment on the film in *Second Words* shows how she regards it as a cultural precept for a generation of young girls, who 'were taken to see it as a special treat for their birthday parties (...). The message was clear. You could not have both your artistic career and the love of a good man as well, and if you tried, you would end up committing suicide', p.224.

77 After the little girl has been to the ball and enjoyed the dances (thus neglecting her stepmother who is very ill), her red shoes will force her to carry on dancing in the forest, until she repents and

another of Joan's projected personae - who finally manages to dance beautifully in front of her beloved Prince. But in order to become human, to have legs and feet, the Little Mermaid had to sacrifice her voice. Once she is deprived of it, she fails to conquer the Prince's love, which for her means the acquisition of an immortal soul. Failure for her means death, and her dancing is therefore her last tribute to an impossible dream. Later in life Joan, in an attempt to dance for no one but herself, figuratively becomes the dancer with the red shoes. She discovers her feet red with her own blood from having danced on cut glass. They become 'The real red shoes, the feet punished for dancing' (p.335).⁷⁸

The text creates a close interaction between Joan's own life and circumstances and her re-working and subversion of the Gothic characters who appear in the novels she writes.⁷⁹

Joan projects herself onto the heroines she creates in the fiction she writes. There is more than

begs to have the shoes cut off her feet, but only to die soon afterwards.

⁷⁸ Atwood touches on this theme also in her poetry which polemically illustrates the role traditionally attributed to young women:.. 'A girl should be/ a veil, a white shadow, bloodless/ as a moon on water; not/dangerous; she should/ keep silent and avoid/ red shoes, red stockings, dancing./ Dancing in red shoes will kill you' *You Are Happy*, p. 101.

⁷⁹ I shall discuss more fully the specular relation between art and life in this novel in Chapter Three.

one correspondence between Joan and Felicia.⁸⁰ Affinities, as well as differences, exist between her and Charlotte. Joan's persecuted heroines, eternally 'on the run' are yet another version of Joan's own persecution (by her mother and by men) and her attempt at flight. Joan however is not merely a 'victim'. She is also a 'survivor' who, by shifting roles and positions, manages to survive physically and psychically. This may explain the symbolic meaning of Joan's identification with the trapeze artist and the contortionist. These identifications appear to carry a liberating significance since they signify flexibility and adaptability, along with a multiplicity of roles and 'positions'. Another example of Joan's identifications is to be found in her close resemblance not only to Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott', but also to the various Pre-Raphaelite paintings that the Lady inspired from contemporary artist. One identification occurs after Joan has been reading the news report on her death and evokes one of the paintings by John William Waterhouse which shows the Lady casting off in the barge for Camelot:

80 Beside Felicia's glamorous red hair, the identification is stretched to an extreme point when in one of the final scenes of *Stalked by love* (one among Joan's various attempt to conclude the novel) Felicia emerges from the water invoking Joan's husband name, Arthur (p.323) Also when Felicia enters the maze, the villain appears for a moment to resemble Arthur (p.343).

'There I was, on the bottom of the death barge where I'd once longed to be, my name on the prow, winding my way down the river' (p.313). Although Joan the narrator encompasses all these identities within herself, it is not possible to limit her to anyone of them. Like the trapeze artist of her daydream, she oscillates between them, she 'floats', as Joan herself calls her strategy of coping with her plurality. 'if there's one thing I knew how to do it was float' (p.303). She has a strange sense of being carried away 'like the Little Mermaid in the Andersen fairy tale ... Perhaps ... I had no soul, I just drifted around, singing vaguely' (p.216). The plurality and juxtaposition of different styles in the novel appears then to find a correspondence in the scattered identifications which the narrator assumes.

'It is always best to be oneself' reads a fortune cookie message, which Joan interprets as a warning and rebuke. However her impatient question, 'But which one, which one?' (p.231) is left unresolved. In Atwood's collection of poetry *The Circle Game* which, with its recurring images of entrapment and duality, is haunted by Gothic imagery, the question of identity is posed in a similar way. In the poem 'A Place: Fragments', identity becomes

synonymous with 'largeness' and 'confusion', an entity which appears unpredictable and diffuse:

something not lost or hidden/
but just not found yet/
that informs, holds together/
this confusion, this largeness/
and dissolving:/

not above or behind/
or within it, but one/
with it: an/

identity:/
something too huge and simple/
for us to see (p.90-91).

This notion of identity resembles Atwood's characterization of Joan as having a contradictory and plural subjectivity. It also parallels some developments in recent psychoanalytic theory, which conceive of the subject as a product of the unconscious and therefore always in process, always unanalysable, uncharacterizable ('something too huge and simple/ for us to see').⁸¹

81 Lacan's theory emphasizes the precariousness of conscious subjectivity, which is related to the Lacanian notion of the constitution of the subject. The mirror phase, according to his theory, precipitate the first division within the subject. The infant sees his mirror image as other, thus experiencing a split between the perceived I and the I that perceives. A second split occurs with the entry of the subject into language. This happens because the subject is never fully present in his discourse, but irremediably divided in the I, subject of the enunciation, and the I subject of the enounce, the self who speaks. In is in the space of this discrepancy that the unconscious is to be found, in the gap between the said and the unsaid.

2.5 A BODY IN FRAGMENTS: *LIFE BEFORE MAN* AND *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

The reading of *Life Before Man* produced by critics regard it as Atwood's worst achievement, describing it as a failed 'attempt at social and domestic realism'.⁸² They see it as text dominated by a dark, pessimistic mood, where a static imagery convey a sense of lack of change.⁸³ This vision is reinforced by the essential 'sameness'⁸⁴, or 'similarities'⁸⁵ of the characters involved. To my mind, however, the interest of the novel does not lie in the development of plot, as the narrative focuses on the inner life of the characters. In *Life Before Man* the modernist contrast between objective and subjective time and the absence of plot, posit an emphasis on changes in the characters' development, in line with Atwood's presentation of character and subjectivity I have been discussing in this Chapter. In this respect, in fact, the novel's vision is not static. Change does occur. However imperceptibly, it

82 *Violent Duality*, p. 135.

83 Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood*, pp.81-85.

84 Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality*, p.136; "Time present and time past": *Life Before Man*, *Essays on Canadian Writing* 20 (Winter 1980-81), pp.165-70.

85 Ildiko de Papp Carrinton, 'Demons, Doubles, and Dinosaurs: *Life Before Man*, *The Origin of Consciousness*, and 'The Icicle', in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Judith Mc Combs (Boston, Mass, 1988), pp.229-245 (p.223).

is, as a critic has noted, 'constant and profound'.

86

In this section I shall analyse and contrast *Life Before Man* with *The Handmaid's Tale* as the former presents *in embryo* concerns that will receive further development and elaboration in Atwood's work of dystopic fiction.

The two novels in fact have a number of themes in common - the emphasis on self-knowledge as never definite; the treacherous aspects of memory; the problematization of language as a medium which represents an objective knowable reality. Both texts present images of the fragmented body which are consistent with the novels' portrayal of the self as a locus of change and contradictions. Images of segmented bodies are in fact regarded by

86 Gayle Greene, 'Life Before Man "Can Anything Be Saved?"', in Katryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Castro eds., pp.65-84, (p.67). However I agree that to an extent that the novel's vision is rather pessimistic. This is perhaps due to the fact that *Life Before Man* does not seem to convey any sense of belief in change through political action. There appears to be no remedy for the social injustice that Nate and his mother contemplate. As a critic has suggested, the novel seems to indicate that 'the most we can hope for is a ... private salvation, some connection to another human being, some shelter from the void. Build houses, cultivate our gardens, raise families to stem the tide...harness our imaginations to creative rather than destructive uses - and perhaps do some political work in the hope of making a better world, knowing that our efforts will be futile', Gayle Greene, p.67.

psychoanalytic theory as a sign of a threat to the rational unity of the subject.

These topics are treated in a more complex way in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was written four years later. Here the question of identity is closely related to metafictional reflections on the nature of this 'tale'. *The Handmaid's Tale*, in fact, simultaneously encodes the narratives of autobiography or confessional writing and that of history. At the same time it addresses the fictionality of these forms, of biography, autobiography and history. The fragmented and iterative structure of the novel undermines the traditional realist narrative conventions of the inscription of the subject as continuous and coherent. This may suggest that fragmentation and replication are also conditions of subjectivity.

The segmented narrative in *Life Before Man*, the plurality of narrative voices it contains, emphasize subjective interpretation of reality and problematizes the notion of the subject as unified and coherent.

Life Before Man is structured around three distinct narrative voices: those of Elisabeth Schloendorf, her husband Nate, and his lover Lesje. The novel starts at one specific point in time, Friday 29 October 1976 and ends at a later

point in time, Friday, 18 August 1978. The narrative is arranged in a series of short sections, describing at times an event or experience from three different points of view, that of Elisabeth, of Nate and of Lesje. The sections proceed chronologically. There are only two flashbacks, and these are narrated in the third person, with the exception of the one concerning Elisabeth, which moves from third person to first.

From the point of view of action and narrative plot, very little happens in this novel. The only 'event' that marks the narrative is the suicide of Chris, Elisabeth's lover, which occurs before the novel starts. Marriage, which Lesje considers an 'event' (p.293), does not take place, nor does divorce.⁸⁷ Instead there is a dissolving and re-forming of relationships around the three members of the triangle. Elisabeth and Nate, we understand, have been living together for some time for the sake of the children. They both have had a number of extramarital relationships. But the suicide of Chris, who demanded that Elisabeth leave her children and marry him, disrupts the precarious balance of their

87 'Marriage is an event, a fact, it can be discussed at the dinner table. So is divorce. They create a framework, a beginning and an ending. Without them everything is amorphous, an endless middleground, stretching like a prairie on either side of each day' (p.192).

life together. Half-way through the novel Lesja leaves her partner William and becomes involved with Nate, who earlier in the narrative had terminated his relation with Martha.

However, this summary does not do justice to the complexity of the novel, since it makes it sound like a 'soap opera'.⁸⁸ For the narrative mode of *Life Before Man* is reflective, and focuses on the characters' 'emotional states' and 'moments of being' in a manner that is very close to a modernist treatment of character and time. Objective time is marked at the beginning of each section, but it is of little importance. The reader instead is confronted with the exploration of subjective, arbitrary inner time as experienced by the characters. The segmentation of the narrative into overlapping 'chunks of time' (p. 308) serves the purpose of providing contrasting subjective perspectives on each event.⁸⁹ This is only one of the interests that novel shares with modernist literature. As Gayle Greene notes, in *Life Before Man* 'the structure problematizes time and reality; events are filtered through three consciousnesses in a way that draws attention to problems of interpretation; and Atwood's

88 Jeremy Rosenberg, *Margaret Atwood* (Boston, 1984).

89 This is of course not a novelty in modern literature, as the development of character's point of view, from Robert Browning to Henry James, shows.

lyrically and imagistically textured style draws attention to itself rather than offering a transparent medium of a knowable reality'.⁹⁰

In a typically modernist manner the slow horizontal progression in time which occurs in the novel is accompanied by a vertical movement into the characters' inner life. The reader becomes acquainted with the tragedies of Elisabeth's childhood and adolescence, the memory of which still continues to haunt her. We follow the subtle changes that Lesje undergoes as she becomes slowly aware of her involvement in Nate and Nate's personal anxieties and uncertainties.

This narrative structure results, on occasion, in abrupt shifts of focus in the narrative as the text attempts to register the characters' emotional reactions. One example is constituted by Nate, shortly after he has received a most amazing revelation from his mother. He is told that she has turned to political action not from hope but despair, as an alternative to suicide after the death of his father. The presence of his young daughters in the house provokes another bitter 'revelation'; he recognizes that one day they will leave him to 'live with surly, scrofulous young men' (p.287). The narrative register at this point changes quite

90 Gayle Greene, p.66.

abruptly to convey Nate's sense of lack and loss. The image that is created as a result is reminiscent of Joyce's Leopold Bloom. 'Motherless, childless, he sits at the kitchen table, the solitary wanderer, under the cold red stars' (p. 287). The echo of the modernist text, *Ulysses*, reinforces the modernist focus in *Life Before Man* on the characters' inner lives and emotions.

The apparent lack of action in the novel at the level of plot is countered by the characters' changed perception of themselves and of their relations with one another. However, of the three protagonists, Lesje is the one most affected by change.

As her involvement with Nate progresses she starts to question her previous attitude to life, and the nature of her feelings for her ex-partner, William: 'She must have thought she could live with William for a million years and nothing in her would really be changed' (p.222). Lesje begins to examine what 'she means by being in love' (p.126). She used to think she was in love with William 'since it upset her that he did not ask her to marry him' (p.126). By contrast, her feelings for Nate make her discover the composite and 'painful' (p.222) nature of love. At first the 'simplicity', even the 'bareness', of her life with William was something Lesje welcomed. But, now, as she reflects, 'Nate has

changed things, he has changed William. What was once a wholesome absence of complications is now an embarrassing lack of complexity' (p. 126).

When she sees William after she has left him, the question that she is prompted to ask is whether he has changed: 'What she wants to ask him is: Have you changed? Have you learnt anything? She herself feels she has learnt more than she ever intended to, more than she wants' (p. 295).

As for Elisabeth, despite her active resistance to Nate's plan to leave her and move in with Lesje, she eventually recognizes that she welcomes the event. She realizes it will mean 'freedom' from the set of unspoken rules, established for the most part by herself, that life with Nate had come to represent (p.206). She feels strong enough now, 'she does not have to depend' (p.140) on him. 'Despite the wreckage' (p.302) Elisabeth has a sense that she has salvaged something. 'She is still alive, she holds down a job even. She has two children ... she managed to accomplish a house...She's built a dwelling over the abyss, but where else was there to build? So far, it stands' (p.302).

These changes convey a notion of the self in a constant process of discovery. Nate, for example, strives to avoid what he perceives as the constraints imposed by other people's fixed definitions of

himself, 'he has spent so much effort to avoid becoming : his mother's son. Which may be he is./ But not only, not only. He refuses to be defined. He is not shut, time carries him on, other things may happen' (pp.305-6).

In the last section of the novel Elisabeth's imagination, prompted by the Chinese art exhibition which she has organized, is released by a fantasy of a better life. Her first reaction to the exhibition's catalogue was one of pronounced lack of interest. At the end, however, she surprises herself by noticing that she is moved by those pictures of happy peasants. She is aware that it is 'foolish. This is propaganda ...China is no paradise; paradise does not exist' (p.316).

However, she is also forced to realize how alone she has been for the past years, and she has a sudden vision of a connection with other people. She knows that 'China does not exist. Nevertheless she longs to be there' (p.317).

This dream of displacement constantly haunts the protagonist of Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*. Like many of Atwood's characters Offred is 'aware of finding herself trapped in the wrong place and with the wrong people'.⁹¹ However the world of personal relations explored in *Life Before Man* is painfully

91 Patrick Parrinder, 'Making Poison', p.20.

part of the narrator's past in Atwood's dystopia. The novel stresses the deprivation of personal relationship imposed by the patriarchal oligarchy of the Gilead regime and the suffering it causes to the protagonist.

Like other examples of historiographic metafiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a narrative 'that is intensely self-reflective art, but is also grounded in historical, social and political realities'.⁹²

In a manner which is predominantly ironic, *The Handmaid's Tale* recalls both fairy tales and more canonical texts.⁹³ As mentioned in Chapter One, the use of intertextuality in Atwood's dystopia involves a wide range of reference. It underscores the many themes that are so skilfully interwoven in the text. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, and Zamyatin's dystopia *We*, are to different extents, parodically echoed and revisited in terms of setting, theme and narrative frame.⁹⁴ Hawthorne's depiction of the destructive aspects of Puritanism in nineteenth-century New England is revised in *The*

92 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.13.

93 Atwood shares Northrop Frye's contention that ironic modes are the most appropriate ones for serious fiction. 'Northrop Frye Observed', in *Second Words*, p.406. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), p.134.

94 Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.139

Handmaid's Tale. In the State of Gilead, which appears to represent a magnified version of the extreme tendencies of contemporary American society, a Fundamentalist conformity imposes a life of emotional repression, duty, and self-sacrifice on the handmaids. Analogies between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Scarlet Letter* are also found in the characterization of their protagonists, Hester and Offred.

Zamyatin's dystopic fiction *We* relates to *The Handmaid's Tale* in the emphasis on the precariousness of the self, and in the relation between happiness and freedom in totalitarian régimes that both novels investigate. *We* is written in the form of a diary, and this registers the protagonist's movement from conformity to rebellion and final psychological destruction operated by the régime. Here, as in Orwell's *1984*, writing is depicted as a subversive act of rebellion against the repression and conformity imposed by the dictatorships. In *The Handmaid's Tale* writing likewise signifies a form of resistance and a creative act. However, there is a significant difference between these examples of dystopic fiction and *The Handmaid's Tale*, one which adds to the complexities of Atwood's text. Offred's first person narrative takes the form of a 'reconstruction', produced after she has escaped

from Gilead. In the epilogue to the novel, a Symposium on Gileadian Studies set in the year 2195, the reader perceives that Offred's story has been constructed from a transcription of recordings produced by an unidentified narrator without any sequential ordering. This subsequent 'reconstruction' carried out by the historians posits the question of how history is constructed and produced. I shall discuss this question subsequently in this study.

Offred's tale, which is initially related verbally, displays characteristic traits of oral narrative as it acquires a particular significance in its relation to life. A parodic version of Scheherazade,⁹⁵ Offred is, in fact, the 'obsessive' teller of this tale (p. 239) recurrently engaged in re-writing (re-telling) herself, in an endless embroidering of herself as a character.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, as in oral narratives, the act of telling conveys 'both the superiority and the inferiority of art to living'.⁹⁶ In Atwood's dystopia Offred's fictional fabrications brings an

95 The lack of synchronicity between the time of the narrative and the time of narration excludes, I think, an identification with the protagonist's of *The Thousand's and One Nights*, as a critic has suggested. (Lucy M. Freibert, *Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, in Judith Ms Combs ed., pp. 280-291).

96 Robert Kellogg, 'Oral Narrative, Written Books', *Genre*, X, 4 (1977) 655-665, (p.656).

alternative world into existence and creates a refuge from the painful reality of her own life. As she remarks, 'I'm too tired to go on with this story. I'm too tired to think about where I am. Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira' (p.138).

Stories appear to provide a way out, an escape, a salvation. Offred remarks, 'I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. / If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it (p.49).

On other occasions however the act of telling is very painful. Offred observes, 'Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again' (p.279)...I don't want to be telling this story' (p.238;p.285). Of course she does tell her story. The quality of Offred's narrative establishes a close interrelation between her life and her 'story', by presenting her life as a story. In the text's frequent paradoxes, this tale becomes both a story and a form of witness to Offred's painful experience as a handmaid. 'It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling in my head, as I go along' (p.49).

Her narrative is repeatedly defined as a 'reconstruction' (p.144, p.114). In the fictive reality of the text Offred's tale appears as a kind of unconventional autobiography, recorded on tape rather than composed in writing. Offred's personal narrative illustrates the inescapably fictive nature of the autobiographical text. The quality, the richness of the lived experience, she observes, escape the written page.⁹⁷ The text shows how the act of 'writing the self' is closely linked to a process of invention, and that the invention becomes a constitutive part of the truth.⁹⁸ The self is shown to be unable to produce a faithful narrative of itself and identity becomes an 'elusive' construct.

The use of intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale* underscores this concern. It denotes an idea of the

97 '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. 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, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half colours, too many' (p.144).

98 On this topic see, Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp.67-83; P.J. Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton, 1985); Atwood herself has elsewhere aligned autobiography and interviews to the realm of fiction (Geoffrey Hancock).

self as dispersed and plural, in a manner similar to that employed in *Lady Oracle*. Offred's identity is scattered in a series of projected fairy-tale figures, which convey a notion of a splintered subjectivity. Offred muses, that, like Cinderella, 'I must be back at the house before midnight; otherwise I'll turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?' (p.266). Like the protagonist in *Lady Oracle*, Offred identifies with victimized Rapunzel-like figures, with whose experiences she contrasts her own struggle for survival.⁹⁹ And it is precisely her survival that highlights her difference from these doomed characters.

Portrayed as a parodic version of 'Little Red Riding Hood', Offred is forbidden to stray from the prescribed path during her daily walk. However, as in the fairy story, she takes the risk of diverging from it and encounters danger. As Offred remarks perceiving her image in the mirror, 'If I turn my head I can see... myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure

99 In *Survival* Atwood writes that the Rapunzel syndrome, derivative of the Grimm brothers' fairy tale is a recurring pattern in realistic fiction. The Grimm tale provides the basic story line. The witch who wants the heroine in prison, the tower in which she is imprisoned and the Rescuer, a 'handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape' (p.52). As Patrick Parrinder notes this pattern is dominant in this novel, and was, however, present in Atwood's earlier fiction.

in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger' (p.19). She agrees to the plan of Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, to engage in sexual intercourse with the chauffeur Nick, in the hope of conceiving a baby. This is already dangerous and illegal for her. She will go further, however, and will see Nick secretly, 'time after time', without Serena knowing (p.280). Unlike the protagonist in the fairy tale, Offred finds in risking that danger, as we shall see, a reason for existence.

I mentioned earlier that the 'scarlet' dress of the handmaids in this novel and the forced seclusion imposed on them by the Puritanical régime is reminiscent of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Like Hester, Offred is barred from forming spontaneous relations with people. In Atwood's novel the handmaid's red dress reveals, as we read in *The Scarlet Letter*, 'a mystic sisterhood' of fallen women¹⁰⁰, since it is a symbol of 'woman's frailty and sinful passion'.¹⁰¹ Once Offred has become a handmaid, her face is sadly altered in a manner that is reminiscent of Hester. As Atwood's narrator observes, 'There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is permitted for the

100 *The Scarlet Letter* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p.192.

101 *Ivi*, p.104.

flowering of secret lusts....there are to be no thresholds for love' (p.146).¹⁰²

However Offred's dress and what it denotes do not signify a complete change in character. Atwood's treatment of this theme is quite complex. As in Zamyatin's *We*, the author touches on the relation between happiness and freedom. In *We* 'The United State' has tried to induce in its subject the belief that loss of freedom is the only way to happiness. In *The Handmaid's Tale* despite the fact that Offred struggles against the brainwashing operated by the regime, she suffers during these unspecified years as handmaid (perhaps three) a weakening in her sense of autonomy, in her desire for freedom. As she observes, 'Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure' (p.143). And later, when she has started to see Nick regularly, 'The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are few compensations' (p.283).¹⁰³

102 As we read in *The Scarlet Letter*, there is 'no longer anything in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon' and nothing in her that 'passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace'. Ivi, p. 182.

103 Similarly Offred is terrified by the possibility of change in her situation ushered in the doctor's offer to help her conceive a child. 'Why am I frightened? I've crossed no boundaries, I've given

This is one of the contradictions that characterizes Offred. As I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, the narrator in *The Handmaid's Tale* has produced a text of her own, a text which, by presenting paradoxes and contradictions, problematizes the possibility of locating truth.

The emphasis that the text places on its status as 'fiction', has also the effect of undermining the trust in the speaking I. As we have seen in Chapter One Atwood had already employed this device in *Surfacing*. In the latter however the reader towards the end recognizes the fictive nature of protagonist's fabrications. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the device has a more unsettling effect as the reader cannot verify Offred's different, contrasting versions of events.

Like Rennie in *Bodily Harm* who fictionalizes the reality of her cancer, Offred frequently transforms her life into 'fictions'. Characteristic of Offred's narrative and her fabrications is a resistance to and at times a rejection of definite meanings, or versions of reality (p.150; 273). The presence of these contradictory episodes suggests not the

no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation' (p.71).

permanence of an 'identical' self but the energies of a 'prospective' one.

'Text' and 'self' appear here in close conjunction, as the close relation between Offred's life and her story discussed earlier suggests. Both 'text' and 'self' are presented as essentially incomplete. The work itself is discontinuous and fragmented in its very materiality. As a result *The Handmaid's Tale* lacks a conclusive ending. The absence of closure is however also attributable to Atwood's choice of futuristic genre dystopia. A narrative projected into the future, as *The Handmaid's Tale* is, cannot know any definite ending, although its novelistic form demands some such ending.¹⁰⁴ The novel's self reflexive epilogue does not supply any answers in relation to the protagonist of the novel, but both points at and undermines the conventionality of novelistic closure.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, both the 'self' and the 'text' are shown to be in constant construction and contradiction.¹⁰⁵ However, the narrator's interrogation of the nature of her tale explores the processes and contradictions of its own

104 Fredric Jameson, 'Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can we Imagine the Future?', *Science-Fiction Studies*, 27 (July 1982), 147-59.

105 As Coral Howells notes, 'Contradictions define the condition of possibility for this narrative, providing the space through which alternative may be glimpsed', p.68.

production. The gaps and ambiguities in the novel and its emphasis on being a 'story' suggest the impossibility of full representation and thus problematize the mimetic function of the text.

The close interrelation between self and text that is present in this novel invites a further consideration. A loss or an ambivalence towards representation has been interpreted as indicating a parallel ambivalence or loss in the sense of selfhood.¹⁰⁶ Reference to the fragmented nature of this story punctuate the discontinuous narrative: 'I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in a crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it' (p.279).

As a critic has noted, the narrative provides a plethora of images of fragmented bodies.¹⁰⁷ The handmaid's are, in the perception of the Regime, 'two-legged wombs'. During her medical inspection Offred is aware that the doctor 'deals with a torso only' (p.70). The images of the bodies hanging from the Berlin Wall-like structure are portrayed in fragments. The ceiling ornament in Offred's room is like 'the place in a face where the eye has been

106 Paul De Man, 'Lyric and Modernity', *Blindness and Insight* (London, 1983), pp.166-186.

107 Roberta Rubenstein, in VanSpankeren and Castro eds.

taken out' (p.17). When Offred is fired from her job and deprived of political and legal rights, she feels as if someone had 'cut off [her] feet (p.188), an image that brings to mind another form of social control of women, Chinese footbinding. These disturbing representations of mutilated bodies highlight not only the fact that in Gilead the female body is considered exclusively as a tool for reproduction; they underscore the violent and cruel objectification of bodies and people carried out by the Regime.

However, as I mentioned earlier, the texts also referes to the narrative in terms of fragments and compares it with a mutilated body.

Psychoanalytic theory draws a linkage between perception of the body and notions of self. The connection existing between self/text/body is indicated by the fact that the story itself is described in anthropomorphic terms: 'But I keep on with this...limping and mutilated story' which has no 'shape' (p.279). These representations of corporeal disintegration that recur in the text can be seen as a threat to the unity of the self.¹⁰⁸ Psychoanalytic theory corroborates the connection between bodily fragments and the dissolving ego. The total image of

108 Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution of Poetic Language*.

the body is seen as the moment of production and structuration of identity through the mediation of the body image. According to Jacques Lacan, for example, 'the image of the total body is necessary to the creation of a rational unity'.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, representation of bodily fragmentation indicates that the unified and transcendent ego is threatened with dissolution.

Images of segmented bodies are also present in *Life Before Man*, Atwood's earlier novel. Nate feels his body has become 'stiff fragments held together by his spine and his screwtop head. Segmented manBut what if she discovers the truth? What he suspects is the truth. That he's patchwork, a tin man, his heart stuffed with sawdust' (p.244; p.246) .

In Elisabeth's recollections the image of her suicidal lover Chris has become only a set of discrete parts: 'Scraps. All that's left of Chris, whom she can no longer remember whole' (p.151). Similarly, as she tries to negotiate the stairs to meet her children, Elisabeth is turned into a 'Nude Descending the staircase, in cunning fragments. Stewed, descending the staircase' (p.248). The extratextual reference here is, of course, Marcel Duchamp's painting 'Nude Descending a

¹⁰⁹ Allan White, *L'éclatement du sujet: the work of Julia Kristeva*, p.10.

Staircase' (1911), where in a 'static representation of movement' the human form is fragmented in the multitude of its parts.¹¹⁰

In *The Handmaid's Tale* fragmentation, discontinuity and contradictions characterize the narrative. This conveys a sense of a lack of a rationalizing and unifying entity at work in the text. Although in a more tentative and simple manner these themes appear in *Life Before Man*. In the latter the split point of view between an 'I' and a 'She' present in the section focusing on Elisabeth, denotes the lack of the identification of consciousness with a synthetic unity of mental action. This produces at times a narrative of split perceptions which conveys a sense of cleavage between body and mind, an erosion of the ego and a loss of body image boundaries.

She is not in. She's somewhere between her body...lying sedately on the bed,...and the ceiling with its airline cracks. She can see herself there, a thickening in the air, like albumin....

She can't move her fingers. She thinks about her hands, lying at her sides, rubber gloves; she thinks about forcing the bones and flesh down into those shapes of hands, one finger at a time, like dough (p.12).¹¹¹

110 Marcel Duchamp, 'Painting .. at the service of the mind' (1946) in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. by H.Chipp (Berkeley, 1968).

111 The theme of the blurring or erosion of the borders of identity, according to a critic, is underscored by the novel's epigraph from Andrei Sinyavsky's fantastic short story, 'The Icicle',

In *The Handmaid's Tale* this vision is reinforced by the fact that the text's fictive reality creates a 'tale' without an author. As a norm, the presence of the proper name acts as a guardian of identity. But here, as for the protagonist of *Surfacing*, there is no name to guarantee identity.

To an extent also memory contributes to give a sense of unity and coherence to the self. In Atwood's *Life Before Man* memory occasionally fades or proves to be unreliable (p.276; p.313). *The Handmaid's Tale* explores to a further degree of complexity the treacherous and fallible nature of memory.

Atwood's use of conventions belonging to confessional writing questions the unity and authenticity of the narration compared to the 'real life' that it aims to reconstruct. The way Offred's narrative describes her experience as handmaid and aspects of her former life shows the tortuous ways

where the self undergoes a series of transformations and literally blurs and merges into other selves. According to this reading, characters often identify or take each other's roles. As a result of this interplay between the characters identity becomes a shifting construct. The novel 'is not about the discovery of identity as a permanently defined construct, but about the characters' daily, existential experiencing of identity as a constantly shifting pattern of alteration, attrition, and inevitable loss'. Ildiko de Papp Carrington, p.242.

with which the act of remembering operates. It foregrounds the deceptive nature of memories, and exposes the need of the individual to elaborate the past with imagination (p.113, p.281).

Offred's writing is punctuated by doubts, re-thinking, and re-writing of what has already been presented as true. This appears to suggest that for a subject re-tracing his past, who can say which is more real, the actual event itself, or its imaginative transformations?

Memory and identity have in this text vague outlines. The former includes imagination and desire; the latter is elusive, and like the image in the mirror, cannot be grasped.

2.6 THE GENDERED VISION: *SURFACING* AND *LADY ORACLE*

If man fails to discover that secret essence of femininity, it is simply because it does not exist. Kept on the fringe of the world, woman cannot be objectively defined through this world, and her mystery conceals nothing but emptiness.

Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

But she can't scream; her voice has been stolen. The only power she has left is negative.

Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man*

The contradictory, multiple representations of the self which I have discussed in the course of this Chapter relate in Atwood's fiction to a gendered vision, as it is woman in particular who is more inclined to simultaneously live in different dimensions and to adopt a series of contradictory roles and positions.

Atwood's work constantly tries to represent the specificity of woman's experience. In her novels woman's difference is marked by her marginality, by the fact that she is at the same time inside and outside the dominant culture. Deprived of the status of a full subject, relegated at 'the fringe of the world', the female characters inhabit its periphery, its borders. As Atwood's poetic persona

says: 'I move/ and live on the edges .../ I live/ on all the edges there are'.¹¹²

Feminist critics have theorized the implication of the exclusion of the feminine in phallogentric culture. They have pointed out how, in the binary system of oppositions that structures Western thought, woman has been identified with the negative, powerless instance of these oppositions. As Cixous writes, 'Either woman is passive or she doesn't exist'. However to the question, 'Where is woman?' Cixous argues that it is hardly possible to locate her. Between Nature and Culture, Body and Mind, she is like a blank space at the margins, that resist

112 Margaret Atwood, 'Evening Trainstation Before Departure', *The Circle Game*, p.24. Atwood's female characters, however, differ in their degrees of marginality, and their exclusion takes in fact different forms. Anna in *Surfacing* adopts 'masculine' point of view and interest. However, she remains, in the perception of her husband, excluded from the Male world of the intellect and is defined in relation to her body, a 'dumb' talking doll, a 'pair of boobs' (p.163). Rennie in *Bodily Harm* reveals a number of affinities with the Gothic heroine on the run, victimized by men. (Paulina Palmer, p. 91). The world of political struggles, but also of violence and horror is portrayed in this novel as a male world. Rennie's experience, especially during her stay in the Caribbean island brings to focus women's value in a man's world as an object of exchange. At one point in the narrative the identification is made clear: 'Rennie can see what she is now: she's an object of negotiation. The truth about knights comes suddenly clear: the maiden were only an excuse. The dragon was the real thing' (p.258). Like Joan in *Lady Oracle*, Elisabeth in *Life Before Man* shows no interest in a man's world: 'She's no more interested in elections that she is in football games. Contests between men, both of them, in which she's expected to be at best a cheerleader' (p.59).

definitions and interpretations. She belongs, in an oblique way to different domains; her essence can only be one of contradictions, or duplicity. It is in fact because of the marginality of her position that woman can simultaneously exist in different domains.¹¹³

Woman's position on the margin of the symbolic order means that she may be regarded by patriarchy as the borderline or limit of that order.

From a phallogocentric point of view women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos; but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other worlds share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known or unknown.¹¹⁴

As insider-outsider, woman therefore inhabits two dimensions, as does the speaker in one of Atwood's poems: 'I exist in two places, / here and where you are'.¹¹⁵ Having a 'double consciousness' could imply, as Du Plessis suggests, a 'double understanding'. We find therefore a predilection for simultaneity and coexistence, which according to Dorothy Richardson's happy intuition, seems to be a

113 *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by B. Wing (Manchester, 1986), p.64.

114 Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London, 1985), p.167.

115 *You Are Happy*, p.43.

'unique gift of the feminine psyche': 'Its power to do what the shapely mentalities of men appear incapable of doing for themselves, to act as a focus for divergent points of view.... The characteristic.... of being all over the place and in all camps at once...'.¹¹⁶ Women writers have privileged coexistence to the either/or dualism and the hierarchy which it implies. Rachel Du Plessis defines this strategy as one of 'both/and': 'A both/and vision born of shifts, contraries, negation, contradictions.... Structurally such a writing might say different things, not settle on one, which is final. This is a condition of 'not choosing', since the choice exist always in what to represent and in the rhythms of presentation'.¹¹⁷

Simultaneity as a typical property of woman has also been emphasized by the French theorist Luce Irigaray, for whom woman belongs to an altogether different economy, which does not rely on an either/or model.¹¹⁸ Another economy which 'diverts

116 Quoted in R.B. Du Plessis, 'For The Etruscans', in *The New French Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London, 1985), pp.271-291 (p.276).

117 Ivi, p. 276.

118 The starting point in Irigaray's argument is an equation between women's psychology and women's 'morphology' (Gr. *morphe*, 'form'). Contrary to male sexuality, which is monolithical and unified, female sex is not one since in itself it is 'composed of two lips... Thus within herself she is already two - but not divisible into ones'. Beside it is woman's *Jouissance* which is in itself different, diffuse since she does not have to chose between different

the linearity of a project ...explodes the polarization of desire on only one pleasure ... disconcerts fidelity to only one discourse'.¹¹⁹

Marginality engenders a subjectivity that is more 'shapeless and flexible', less dogmatic than that of the male.¹²⁰ Atwood's female characters are often characterized by a 'vagueness', a 'lack of focus', 'an absence of edges', that gives them a 'nebulous shimmer'.¹²¹ They are represented as 'peculiar creatures', constantly crossing over the boundaries of self and body in a 'continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out'.¹²²

In this section I want to consider the female characters' capacity to simultaneously move between dimensions which are traditionally kept separate, and the implications which this carries. I shall focus my analysis on *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*. Although the two novels differ in themes and narrative structures, they reveal a continuity of concerns. *Surfacing* is a psychological novel and has the typical modernist pleasures, her sexuality is inclusive, multiple, always plural. (*This Sex which is not One*, translated by C.Porter, New York, 1985, p.20)

119 Luce Irigaray, *Ibid*, p.22.

120 *The Edible Woman*, p.201.

121 *Life Before Man*, p.34.

122 'chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears and garbage' (*The Edible Woman*, p.166).

theme of introspection, of contrast between essence and appearance. *Lady Oracle*, instead, in a typically postmodernist manner, presents the self as exuberantly scattered in the spectrum of its disguises. However, both novels display, to my mind, a preoccupation with discarding mutually exclusive alternatives, as they address and at the same time undermine a number of dichotomies.

Surfacing renders problematic the either/or relation traditionally attributed to nature/culture, conscious/unconscious, male/female, in a way that refutes the rigid distinction usually attributed to them. It is the female character in this novel who disturbs the binary logic of dichotomic oppositions.

The coexistence of fantasy and reality, art and life, is a striking feature of *Lady Oracle* where the protagonist's contradictory roles and 'masquerades' do not solve the tension between romance and reality, life and art, essence and appearance.

These dimensions are not seen as mutually exclusive, as both texts emphasise the importance of their coexistence. Simultaneity implies a rejection of the either/or dualism, a resistance to mutually

exclusive oppositions and their hierarchical structure.¹²³

In Atwood's fiction woman is at times represented, like Persephone, as the intermediary between two worlds. She can inhabit darkness and silence and render them familiar to men who can travel 'forward as if along a leaf, into them, avid for vision. To achieve vision this way, this journey into darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see into darkness while he himself strains blindly forward'.¹²⁴ *Surfacing* suggests it is through woman that man can experience his vision. As the narrator's reflects, 'Perhaps for him I am the entrance, as the lake was for me' (p.172).

The contrast Atwood creates between Nature and Culture has led critics to discuss *Surfacing* in terms of these dichotomies. In this novel, woman has been seen to have a privileged position in relation to Nature. This results in the creation of what critics

123 We have seen already how the rejection of hierarchy works in Atwood's fiction in terms of literary genres, as generic worlds which are traditionally associated with 'high' and 'low' forms of fiction are made to coexist. In Chapter Three I shall discuss how Atwood's fiction challenges a number of traditional oppositions that structured Western thought - subject/object, mind/body, fact/fiction, reason/madness. I shall look at how these dichotomies, and the hierarchy with which they have been traditionally conceived, are simultaneously pointed at and undermined in the text.

124 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.9.

have called a 'male' and a 'female' principle.¹²⁵ However, the dichotomy between 'male' and 'female' that critics have pointed out is not so straightforward.

It would perhaps be more appropriate to define the antithesis as one between 'feminine' and 'masculine' principles. The opposition is then seen in terms of gender constructs without the essentialist implication suggested by that 'male' and 'female'. Besides in this novel women are described as complicitous with the world of cruelty and destruction, identified as the 'male' principle. I shall return to this differentiation in Chapter Four, where I illustrate that the problematization of sexual difference in Atwood's fiction is not solved in terms of biological determinism but regarded as a gender construction.

In *Surfacing* one of the elements that contributes to the establishing of the 'male'/'female' dichotomy which critics have noted is that the narrator expects a 'legacy' from both

125 The first is characterized by rationality but often also cruelty and destruction. The female principle instead is seen as a kind of realm beyond reason, where 'there are connections between life and death, suffering and joy, madness and true sanity, where opposites are resolved into wholes', Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*, p.93; Sue Spall, 'Gynocriticism', in *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading*, ed. by Sara Mills et al. (Hemel Hempstead, 1989), pp.83-120.

parents, while recognizing that their gifts will differ. She has in fact in the course of the narrative portrayed them as if they belonged to two different worlds. The father, who prizes rationality, embodies the belief in language as an instrument of communication while the mother constantly evades language: 'My father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell' (p.86).

Ultimately the distinction between the two figures is one that contrasts paternal language with maternal silence. However, the concluding section of the novel indicates a rejection of such a clear-cut distinction. As I shall illustrate in Chapter Four, Atwood in her novels indicates the dangers of a total rejection of language, despite its failure to express the female experience, and indicates the necessity to mediate between a total rejection and a critical appropriation of language.

I agree with Barbara Hill Rigney when she maintains that the protagonist in her return to the city at the end of the novel takes within herself what the critic has called the 'male' and the 'female' principle, which we could rename as the worlds of Culture and Nature. What I want to emphasise here is Atwood's portrayal of the protagonist's ability to move through different

dimensions. It is this capacity that gives her the possibility of overcoming victimization and find a new modality of being.

The narrator's identification with nature may be prompted by her regression in the final section of the novel to the animal level. She waits for her 'fur' to grow, scrapes a 'carrot from the earth' with her fingers; leaves her 'dung, dropping on the ground' and 'kicks earth over'. She sleeps 'in relays like a cat' and is afraid of contact with human beings (pp. 208-209). This is characteristic of the representations of madness in literature, a state which is usually associated with extraordinary insights that challenge fundamental assumptions.¹²⁶ The prototype of the mad character in literature is the 'wild man', an image that expresses symbolically the impulses of reckless physical self-assertion. In *Surfacing* the narrator's madness can be seen as a rebellion against codified norms of behaviour: 'I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending' (p.198).

However, Atwood adds a further dimension to the theme of madness. In *Surfacing* she portrays the specificity of woman's experience and of woman's unconscious. The narrator's retreat into the forest,

126 Lilian Feder, *Madness in Literature* (Princeton, 1980).

for example, disturbs the masculine values of dominance/submission which are features of contemporary culture.

As I have mentioned in my previous discussion of this novel, the narrator is here described as a prisoner of power politics. I have in particular pointed out the more insidious and more destructive repression of the unconscious that the text presents. Transformation, the novel signals, can only take place when the existence of the unconscious is taken into account.

In my discussion of *Surfacing* earlier in this Chapter we have seen how Kristeva associates the Semiotic with the unconscious since it is anterior to signs and verbal communication. For Kristeva, woman's peculiarity lies precisely in her marginality, a marginality that is integral to the system. It is her oblique position vis-a-vis the Symbolic order that allows for a subversion and a disruption of the Symbolic.

The Symbolic is posited as a condition of the Semiotic, and founded on its repression. 'The Name of the Father', in order to establish itself, depends on the repression of the mother. In this novel the subversion of the Symbolic occurs from the interior, by means of a struggle against the repression of the

maternal body, which permits it to re-emerge to break and shatter the structuring forms of law.

The novel shows how woman inscribes herself naturally within the semiotic, and occupies a privileged position within the dialectic that unites and opposes the semiotic and the symbolic. Kristeva sees the female subject as possessing a 'spasmodic force' which allows her to renew the bounds with what is repressed. It is this force that provides for the renewal of ties to the origin by means of a revalorization of the maternal function. In *Surfacing* the return to the mother, the desire for the mother and to be a mother, is also a search for the origin: the origin of the subject as woman, the origin of the woman in her first relation to her mother.

The novel addresses and perhaps celebrates female difference but does it not propose the equation woman/ nature. The important point for the narrator is *surfacing* from her interior journey. A recent reading of the novel in the light of Kristeva's theory highlights the faults of the text in expressing a critique of the limitations of language that the novel so effectively addresses. The narrator's return to civilization is interpreted as a failure to carry through to a complete conclusion the novel's critique of language. It is seen as an abdication to let female desire speak and indicate a

return to unity.¹²⁷ As my discussion in Chapter Four will illustrate, Atwood's novels question the adequacy of language for the representation of women's experience; yet they also indicate the necessity for woman to speak, to borrow the structures of established discourse in order to subvert them and go beyond them. It is the experience of metamorphosis and the transformations of the self that is important in the novel. The emphasis is on the narrator's capacity to experience multiplicity, to let the disruptive power of the unconscious speak, accept otherness and return to the outside world and to a consciousness which is totally transformed.

As in *Lady Oracle* there is no sense of inner and outer self, the experience of multiplicity is not portrayed through the journey to interior. I have previously argued that Joan's multiple identities are reflected in the unresolved tensions that exists between the different dimensions of her life. The approach of her husband Arthur, on the contrary, is still anchored to a structure of thought that does not conceive of such a mingling. For him as for Nate in *Life Before Man* 'reality is one or the other' (p.283).

127 Sally Robinson, 'The "Anti-Logos Weapon": Multiplicity in Women's Texts', *Contemporary Literature*, 29 (1988) 105-124.

A contrast between two opposing realities was already present in *The Edible Woman*. Here the protagonist's boyfriend, Peter, the 'one who embodies the restrictive forces of society'¹²⁸ and the socially atypical graduate student Duncan, are made to coexist by Marian, who finds herself 'drifting' between the two (p.184). When with Peter, Marian feels as if she is 'in a period of waiting...an endurance of time marked by no real event; waiting for an event in the future that had been determined by an event in the past; whereas when she was with Duncan she was caught in an eddy of present time: they had virtually no past and certainly no future' (p. 184). She needs to have these two worlds temporarily side by side, while she tries to overcome her crisis. Once she has achieved the self-determination for which she was unconsciously striving, they will have exhausted their function and will be discarded.

Marian shows a capacity to balance between these two worlds and to profit from it. This is a crucial theme in *Lady Oracle*.¹²⁹ Here the image of the

128 Graeme Gibson, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', *Eleven Canadian Writers* (Toronto, 1973).

129 However, as often in Atwood's narrative, such exclusions are not confined to a biological sex, since mutually exclusive alternatives belongs also to the Aunt's in *The Handmaid's Tale*. 'Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or' (p.18).

trapeze signifies an effective strategy for coping with reality. The trapeze artist of Joan's daydream manages to balance between her art and her life, unlike 'The Lady of Shalott', another of Joan's projections, who meets a tragic fate. The intertextual reference to Tennyson's poem is relevant to the novel investigation of the tension between art and life.

It is shortly after Joan's marriage that she ceases to regard her writing as chiefly a 'profession' and starts to see it as an activity necessary for her own psychological survival:

The really important thing was not the books themselves, which continued to be much the same. It was the fact that I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed. I was Joan Foster, there was no doubt about that; people called me by that name and I had authentic documents to prove it. But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt (p.213).

Her writing gives her, in fact, the space for releasing the 'other' within herself, the 'other' who longs for happy endings, adventurous romance and true love. This 'other' is very different from the person who, while living with Arthur, sincerely believes in his political causes and ideals.

Joan subsequently has a romantic affair with an exponent of concrete poetry, or more precisely, with an individual who represents a parodied version of

it. The 'con-create' poet, who has renamed himself rather extravagantly, but in character, the 'Royal Porcupine'. Joan recognizes, to her own astonishment, that she is leading a double life, simultaneously living in two different dimensions:

The difficulty was that I found each of my lives perfectly normal and appropriate, but only at the time. When I was with Arthur, the Royal Porcupine seemed like a daydream from one of my less credible romances, with an absurdity about him, that I tried to exclude from my fictions. But when I was with the Royal Porcupine he seemed plausible and solid, everything he did and said made sense in his own terms, whereas it was Arthur who became unreal (p.259).

Her life with Arthur and his radical nationalist group coexists with her affair with the 'con-create' poet (p.121) who 'thought politics were boring, especially Canadian nationalism. "Art is universal", he'd say. "They are just trying to get attention"' (p.260). Arthur, with his faith in the idea of progress, his totalizing ideological systems and, in other words, his modernity, is a total contrast to the postmodern sensibility of the Royal Porcupine who has transformed being into appearance; 'Everything for him was style, nothing was content' (p.255) Joan nonetheless, like the trapeze artist of her daydreams, manages to balance her different lives and roles. 'When I was with Arthur, I believed in the justice of his cause, his causes, everyone of them;

how could I live with him otherwise? But the Royal Porcupine took the edge off causes' (p.260).

Although Arthur's black and white ideological judgments, his rigid demarcation between what is acceptable and what is not, is presented as being far from satisfying, there are no answers as to what alternative mode of values could replace it. In the same way the author deliberately leaves the reader unable to attribute either an exclusively positive or negative role to Joan's writing of *Costume Gothic*. Joan decides at the end of the novel that it has had a bad effect. Yet it is through her writing that she achieves economic and psychological survival and the acceptance of her plurality. 130

130 Atwood touches on this theme in her poem 'Gothic Letter on a Hot Night', where the ambiguity lies in the value of the stories for the storyteller. It is not clear whether they are bad (she should not live her life in stories) or good (if she does not write all the events in the stories will remain undone). But as Eli Mandel suggests, in the poem there is also an implication that the stories 'will in fact, or could, in fact, write the lives of the storyteller'. ('Atwood Gothic', *The Malahat Review*, 41 (January, 1977), 165-174 (p.171)). 'It was the addiction/ to stories, every/ story about herself or anyone/ led to sabotage of each address/ and all those kidnappings/ Stories that could be told/ on nights like these to account for the losses/ litanies of escapes, bad novels, thrillers/ deficient in villains;/ Now there is nothing to write/ she would have given almost anything/ to have them back,/ those destroyed houses, smashed plates, calendars.' *You are Happy* (Toronto, 1974), p.15. It is on this particular topic that *Lady Oracle* distances itself from novels like Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, which impart a moral lesson or message that warns the reader against the danger of not clearly distinguishing between the world of fantasy and that

If Joan does reveal a quixotic and capricious aspect, her inclination to live partly in a fantasy romance world acquires the positive significance of a strategic defensive and survival device. An overt, direct confrontation with reality, though necessary, can be very dangerous, as is illustrated by the fate of Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*. The various references to the poem in *Lady Oracle* emphasize this fact, since 'The Lady of Shalott' investigates conflictual attitudes toward art and life. Confined in her tower where she weaves and sings, the Lady can look at reality only through a mirror, and she copies in her web the reflections of the outside world. Metaphors of the perceiving mind and the creative consciousness, the mirror and the web signify the underlying problem of the relation between art and life, testing and challenging the solipsistic tendencies of the individual imagination. The Lady's bower represents safety, and the mirror also acts as a protection from life. But it cracks when she looks down to Camelot and leaves her place in the tower to reach out for the knight, only to drown in the river.

of reality. *Lady Oracle*, instead of taking such clear-cut position, opts for a rather more disjunctive one, that is, one that contains the oppositions and contrasts between different ideas.

'The Lady of Shalott' thus effectively creates a tension between the subject desire to confront reality and her desire to shun it. But it does so without providing an answer to the questions which it poses. The ambiguity with which it is permeated and its mood of ironic distance prevent the articulation of judgment. These contradictions are also found in the characterisation of Joan, although *Lady Oracle* seems to imply a more gloomy conclusion about the possibility of coping with reality: 'You could stay in the tower for years, - weaving away, looking in the mirror, but one glance out the window at real life and that was that. The curse, the doom' (p.313).

Joan's stories represent for her a way of enjoying fantasy and reality in close conjunction, something which Arthur could not possibly have accepted. For Joan, however, it is not an *either/or* it is an *and*. As she herself observes,

As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right, I was patient and forbearing, warm, a sympathetic listener. But if I was cut off, if I couldn't work on my current Costume Gothic, I would become mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry (p. 213).

She needs both dimensions, and later realises, that she could not possibly live with the 'Royal Porcupine', since she would be prevented from enjoying the coexistence of fantasy and reality that

she needs: 'For him reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality. But for me it would mean there was no fantasy and therefore no escape' (p.270). The same could be said of some of Joan's daydream fantasies. The shift from them to her real life often occurs without any significant discontinuity. There is no temporal break, no change in the narrative register, and this makes the two planes appear to exist on the same level of importance. The effect of continuity is also reinforced by the fact that the dreamlike scenes are described in vivid detail, and this is evidently because they are felt as such by Joan (p.320-21 or p.273-4).

While Lesje in *Life Before Man*. 'drifts' along the streets with the drifting snow (p. 167), Joan drifts around, singing vaguely, like Andersen's Little Mermaid. Lesje, like Joan, has a sense of floating away: 'She realizes now that her life with William, haphazard as it seemed, had at least its daily routines. Routines hold you in place. Without them she floats, weightless' (p.209). These images convey a notion of a female subjectivity that is intricate, more embroidered and convoluted, less straightforward than that of its male counterpart. As Nate mentally observes, Elisabeth's 'own concepts of

winning and loosing are grayer and more snarled. Is this because she is female?' (p.41).

Nate reflects on the 'hopelessly divided nature' of the 'desires' of the women in his life. As for Elisabeth, 'Half of her wants a sensitive, impoverished artist, the other half demands a forceful, aggressive lawyer' (p.41). Their contradictory demands on him, like those we have seen at work in the readers of romantic fiction in *Lady Oracle*, make it impossible for him to satisfy them. 'He fails not because of any intrinsic weakness or lack of will, but because their own desires are hopelessly divided. And there's more than one of them, these women. They abound, they swarm' (p.41).

In *Lady Oracle* a multiple, plural subjectivity is embodied in the female character. As Joan Foster muses: 'Every man has more than one wife. Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at the time, sometimes ones he doesn't even know about' (p. 341). In this novel male characterization is attributed a divided subjectivity, typical of Gothic and modern sensibility, which is a locus, a dwelling of polarities.¹³¹ If not entirely coherent and unified,

131 'Every man I'd ever been involved with, I realized, had had two selves: my father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who I'd always believed had a sinister other life I couldn't

it appears nonetheless less radically open to change and far more inflexible and dogmatic. Arthur in his attempt to try 'new paths' in his life, his going through different phases, undergoes certain changes. These changes, however, occur less dramatically than those in Joan's life.¹³² Moreover, in Atwood's characterization of the male figure in the novel there is the presence of a key self in contrast to the splintered identity of Joan. Joan's partners remain two dimensional, in contrast to her own many sided identity. Joan comments on this feature of difference between them: '...for Arthur there were true paths, several of them perhaps, but only one at a time. For me there were no paths at all. Thickets, ditches, pond, labyrinths, morasses, but no paths' (p.169).

Despite the fact that the psychic multiplicity which Joan possesses originates as a kind of strategy for survival, it finds receptive soil within her since she subsequently welcomes all the possible

penetrate. Why should Arthur be the only exception?' (p. 292).

132 'Once I'd thought of Arthur as single-minded, single-hearted, single-bodied; I, by contrast, was a sorry assemblage of lies and alibis, each complete in itself but rendering the others worthless. But I soon discovered there were as many of Arthur as there were of me. The difference was that I was simultaneous, whereas Arthur was a sequence' (p.211).

opportunities that such a subjectivity opens up for her.

But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many. The Royal Porcupine had opened a time-space door to the fifth dimension, cleverly disguised as a freight elevator, and one of my selves plunged recklessly through (p.246).

CHAPTER THREE COGNITIVE QUESTIONS

I close my own eyes so I can see
better where we are going.

Margaret Atwood, 'Hand', *Murder in the Dark*

3.1 INTRODUCTION: 'SEEING' AND 'KNOWING'

What's the difference between vision and a vision?
The former relates to some thing it's assumed you
have seen, the latter to something it's assumed you
haven't. Language is not always dependable either.¹

Critics have underlined how in Atwood's poetry
vision appears 'untrustworthy; perceptions...relative
and partial'.² Recurringly an image is followed by
its distorted mirror reflection, thus probing the
authenticity and reliability of our senses. The
emphasis on sense receptivity and the activity of
understanding reality, casts a doubt on the existence
of the thing perceived. The distinction between
reality and illusion becomes problematic: 'Whose
dream is this, I would like to know:/ is this a
manufactured/hallucination, a cynical fiction, a
lure/ for export only?'.³

Categories like 'seen' and 'known' are often
questioned, as a consequence of the introduction of a

1 "Instruction for the Third Eye", *Murder in the Dark*, p.61.

2 Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal, 1980), p.8.

3 "At the Tourist Office in Boston", *The Animals in that Country*, p.18

'fantastic' mode into the narrative. The privileging of visual perception in the subject's access to certainty and truth is disputed, together with an attitude of visual detachment, traditionally considered a guarantor of its superiority.⁴ As Grace writes commenting on Atwood's poetry, 'Nothing is certain except the challenge in Atwood's hall of mirrors'. The poems in fact investigate the perception of one's self and others, that of the perceiver and the place perceived, and the stereotypical view we have of 'reality'.⁵ Such themes however, also inform the fictional works. Both narrative and poetry in fact tend to display parallel concerns, as I propose to show in this Chapter. I shall discuss how Atwood's poetic vision undermines the sense of security and the certitude of divisions and dichotomies which are generally regarded as the foundation of Western rationality.

Through reference to the central character's hallucinations and her plunge into the unconscious, *Surfacing* renders visible the unseen and articulates the unsaid, thus challenging the equation of 'the real' with 'the visible'. By representing an

4 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The literature of Subversion* (London, 1981); Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of others: Feminism and Postmodernism', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (London, 1985), pp.57-82

5 Sherrill Grace, *op.cit.* pp.18-26.

experience that goes beyond the limits of our usual perception, the novel questions our sense of certainty as to the nature of 'the real'. In addition, the dissatisfaction with the limits of the symbolic order of communication creates moments in which 'language is transformed'.⁶

In *Bodily Harm* deceptive surfaces render dubious the reliability of visual perception, with the result that the assumption 'seeing is believing' is shown to be a fallacy. By displacing the action into the 'alien' environment of a Caribbean island, and taking as its protagonist a travel correspondent, the novel problematizes the subject's relation to the objective world, posing epistemological questions about our apprehension and interpretation of reality. Similarly *Cat's Eye* stresses the limitations of our 'sensory equipment' (p.219).

Commentators on *Bodily Harm* highlight Rennie's attitude of non-commitment, her preference for a surface simplicity which conceals depths;⁷ her tendency to be misled by appearances, and her avoidance of political involvement.⁸ However, the question is not so straightforward, and should be

6 Interview with Karla Hammond, *The American Poetry Review*, 8, 5 (Sep/Oct 1979), 27-30 (p.28).

7 Sharon Wilson, 'Turning Life into Popular Art: *Bodily Harm's* Life Tourist', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 10, 1-2 (1985), 136-145.

8 Barbara Rigney Hill, *Margaret Atwood* (London, 1987).

considered within the text's portrayal and critical exposé of contradictions, limitations and fascinating aspects of contemporary urban culture. In this respect the novel appears to be both complicitous with and critical of the postmodern world of depthlessness.

The opposition between surfaces and depths, reality and appearance, is represented but not solved in *Bodily Harm*. The deceptive surfaces of the island contravene the notion of a single certain reality; their elusiveness and their occasionally incomprehensible aspects prevent interpretation. The novel's sense of indeterminacy, created chiefly by the cryptic signals on the island, is reinforced by its narrative form. Dramatic presentation, that is the extensive use of reported speech, signals a withdrawal of the author as a controlling presence in the text, leaving the world represented open to conflicting interpretations.

The problematization of the relation between appearance and a supposedly 'true' reality is one example of the way Atwood's texts examine the concept of irreducible oppositions. Atwood achieves this effect in her novels by an interweaving of realistic and anti-realistic modes of writing. The journalistic tone of factual reporting in *Bodily Harm* is accompanied by narrative devices that cast doubts on

the text's seemingly realistic frame.⁹ In this novel, for example, the juxtaposition of two different worlds, that of the rural Caribbean and of urban Toronto, questions their true existence and challenges the distinction between reality and fantasy.¹⁰

The paratactic, non-hierarchical presence of genres in Atwood's fiction is accompanied by a logic that opposes mutually exclusive alternatives and the implied hierarchy present in them. Dichotomies such as reality/fantasy, fact/fiction, art/life are scrutinized and discarded. As a result of this, the narratives appear to privilege their coexistence.

The dismantling of oppositions in the texts, in particular that between subject and object, fact and fiction, art and life, conscious and unconscious, functions in various ways. *Surfacing* critically addresses and questions dualities such as body and mind, subject and object, conscious and unconscious. The novel produces a critique of Rationalist attitudes, and questions the rationalist assumption

9 In *The Edible Woman* Atwood uses the insertion of the fantastic for a different purpose, that is, to represent Marian's dreary future with Peter.

10 Elsewhere Atwood defines realism as 'a technique of exclusion': 'I don't believe that anybody inhabits strictly what we call the real world'. Our worlds, she adds, has many things in it, superstitious, nightmares, intuitions, dreams, personal symbolism, besides object and other people'. Atwood in interview, BBC 3, January 1989.

of the attainment of truth through the senses. It challenges paradigms of the Enlightenment such as the priority of the mind over the body, the containment of the irrational, the firm demarcation line dividing subject and object, and the belief in language as an instrument of communication.

At times especially in *Lady Oracle* and *Bodily Harm* the blurring of the boundaries between reality and illusion is rendered by the dreamlike quality of certain scenes. Similarly in *Bodily Harm* Rennie's habit of fictionalizing reality problematizes the boundary between fact and fiction. A further rejection of the line severing subject and object is carried out by *Surfacing* and *Bodily Harm* investigations into alternative modalities of seeing that undermine the notion of a detached observer.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* contrary versions of the same event in the form of the character's fabrications challenge the opposition between 'true' and 'false'. Given that Offred's tale is an 'object of study' for historians, the novel also poses an epistemological question about the nature of historical knowledge. The text highlights the process by which the act of narrating past events 'makes the

"given" into the "constructed", thus aligning history with fiction.¹¹

3.2 NARRATIVES OF PERCEPTION: *SURFACING*, *BODILY HARM*, *CAT'S EYE*

he has not yet learned to see
in the dark

Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*

Through the introduction of a fantastic mode of writing *Surfacing* questions assumptions belonging to a culture that values reason and science, observation and objectivity. The novel challenges the space/time limitation, corporeal limitation and physical confinement to one body, issues that once found in realism their true literary embodiment.¹² As a result, the relation between perception, vision and knowledge is problematized. Similarly in Atwood's *Bodily Harm* senses prove to be deceptive, vision cannot be trusted - a theme that returns in *Cat's Eye*.

In *Surfacing* the need to investigate alternative modes of perception and of being, becomes the major concern of the protagonist, once she has recognized her own psychological and emotional stasis. As she

11 Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York and London, 1989), p.146.

12 Kathryn Hume, *Fantasia and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London, 1984), p.164.

puts it, 'Not only how to see but how to act' (p.179). The heightened state of consciousness she reaches through an apparently drug-induced hallucinatory experience, gives rise to enlightened perceptions. The visionary quality of her experience renders our knowledge of 'reality' problematic.

The apparitions of the ghosts of the narrator's mother and father, the quality of her visual and sensory perceptions, indicate that the narrator has overcome ordinary sense receptivity. As she notes, 'something has happened to my eyes' (p.212), with the result that things appear 'different' (p. 173) from what they were before. In other words, the narrator has gone beyond the 'sensory repression' to which we are usually subjected.¹³ Studies on perception highlight the fact that our senses are blinded in many ways. Anthropologists, for example, call this process 'selective screening of sensory data', arguing that different cultures have different sensory worlds. 'Experience as it is perceived through one set of culturally patterned sensory screens is quite different from the experience perceived through another'.¹⁴ This lays stress on the

13 John White ed., *The Highest State of Consciousness* (New York, 1972).

14 Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, in John White ed., *The Highest States of Consciousness*, (New York, 1972), p.X.

fact 'that our world is also a cultural construction'.¹⁵

The narrator, in fact, enters a world other than one's own, where the human is not differentiated from the non-human, and space and time lose the coordinates which they are normally attributed. The narrator describes her freedom from the confines of the usual categories of space and time: 'Around me the space rustle; owl sound, across the lake or inside me, distance contracts. A light wind, the small waves talking against the shore, multilingual water' (p. 209).

Initially *Surfacing* establishes a mimetic relation to reality. As the narrative progresses, however, its mode becomes 'unrealistic' in its representation of apparent impossibilities, such as, for example, the transformations undergone by the narrator and by the forest, or the ambiguous presence of ghosts, which appear neither dead or alive. This has the effect of disorienting the reader's categorization of the real, and questions the capacity of language to represent it. Through the metamorphosis that the central character undergoes the 'usual ego boundaries break down and

15 Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, in John White, p.XI.

the ego passes beyond the limits of the body'.¹⁶ This results in an erasure of the limits of subject and object, matter and mind, since 'things slide into one another, in a metonymical action of replacement', which suggests the fragile nature of the distinction between the non-human and human.¹⁷ As the narrator conveys her experience,

I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green web of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark' (p.200).

Distinctions between animal, vegetable and mineral are blurred, a device that undermines realistic ways of seeing.¹⁸ The narrator describes her experience commenting, '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' (p.213).

The narrator's complete identification with space ('move') and time ('grow') has also a further significance, since, as I have discussed in the previous Chapter, it reveals the Protean aspects of the self.¹⁹

16 John White, 'Introduction', *The Highest States of Consciousness*, VIII.

17 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (London, 1981), p.50.

18 Ivi, p.50.

19 Gillian Ladousse, 'Some Aspect of the Theme of Metamorphosis in Margaret Atwood's Poetry', *Etudes Canadiennes*, 2 (1976), p.74.

References to the inadequacy of language are scattered throughout the narrative, presenting it as a construct through which self-expression or self-discovery cannot be attained.²⁰ Language appears in *Surfacing* 'not as an instrument for saying all that can be said, but as a structure imposed on the subject and based on the fact that not everything can be said'.²¹ The text in fact emphasises the constraints laid on the subject by the symbolic order of communication and by rational thought.²² Language is in certain respects founded on the impossibility of saying everything; on the other hand 'there is nothing that cannot be said ... provided one is prepared...to break the rules'.²³ It is by saying the unsayable, by trying to describe an essentially ineffable experience, that the novel points to the limitations of language. It is by breaking the rules,

20 "Do you love me, that's all", he said. "That's the only thing that matters"./ It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He must have known what he meant, but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love' (p.127).

21 Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy through the Locking-Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire* (London, 1985), p.51.

22 This is a topic than keeps recurring in Atwood's poetry collections. 'Our other dream: to be mute' ('Two-Headed Poems' in *Two-Headed Poems*, p.65.). This cry to be free from the tyranny of language returns in *The Animals in that Country* ('Notes from Various Past' p.11), in *The Circle Game* ('Journey to the Interior' p. 70). See also Geoffrey Hancock, *op.cit.*

23 Jean-Jacques Lecercle, p.65.

by crossing the frontier, that the unseen and the unsaid are inserted in the text.

The experience of the dissolution of the self in nature undergone by the narrator in *Surfacing* involves a direct apprehension of reality which transcends the filter of reason. As the narrator registers her renewed perceptions she notes, 'Sight flowing ahead of me over the ground, eyes filtering the shapes, the names of things fading but their forms and use remaining, the animals learned what to eat without nouns' (p.175). As a consequence, the novel underscores the limits and relativity of intellectual knowledge and its expression through language.

Atwood has elsewhere addressed the epistemological question of the perception of reality in relation to language:

The question is, how do we know 'reality'? How do we encounter the piece of granite? How do we know it directly? Is there such a thing as knowing it directly without language? Small babies know the world without language. How do they know it? Cats know the world without ... what we would call language? How are they experiencing the world? Language is a very odd thing. We take it very much for granted.²⁴

The text also articulates the distinction, one which is usually overlooked, between our mental notion of

24 Geoffrey Hancock, p.277.

reality and the outside world. Since the former is easier to grasp than reality itself, there is a tendency to confuse the two and to equate concepts and symbols with reality. The narrator, on the contrary, due to the heightened state of consciousness she has now achieved, is able to discern the difference between the object and the mental representation of it. 'From the lake a fish jumps. An idea of a fish jump' (p.219). This also implies an understanding that objects are always viewed subjectively.²⁵ The object is never absolute. Each version of it is formulated on the basis of innumerable perspectives. It is only this plurality of perspectives that constitutes its reality.²⁶

The challenge to the idea of absolute realities, objects, places and of our interpretation of them, is carried further in Atwood's *Bodily Harm*. The novel in fact problematizes the notion of an objective, and therefore definitive, ultimate reality that exists independently of our perceptions of it. Here the

25 Susan Schaeffer, "It is Time that Separates Us": Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, *Centennial Review*, 18, 4 (Fall 1974), 319-37.

26 These concerns are also present in Atwood's late poetry which questions the Modernist belief in absolutes, beyond language, beyond contingency, where objective reality exist instead only through language 'As for the sun there are as many/ suns as there are words for sun; false or true?' *Two-Headed Poems*, (p.65-66). Cheryl Walker, 'Turning to Margaret Atwood: From Anguish to Language', in Beatrice Mendez-Egle, ed., pp.154-170.

critique of Reason pursued in *Surfacing* is developed as the text interrogates the reliability of sight. Reason in fact evolved on a sensualist basis, which has granted vision, because of its detachment from the objects, a privileged means of access to certainty and truth.²⁷

Rennie's role as a reporter, however frivolous, gives her the licence to observe and decipher her surroundings. In representing this role Atwood suggests a preoccupation with ways of seeing and interpreting reality. This is presented in a way which casts a doubt on the veracity of judgements achieved through sight.

Controversial, unreliable and deceptive versions of the external world face the protagonist of the novel, the 'lifestyle' and travel journalist Rennie, from the moment she arrives in the Caribbean island. Even the colour of the airport terminal appears different, at first sight, from what it actually is. Once inside the terminal Rennie mistakes the police, who are selling tickets for a ball, for soldiers, who are looking for drug smugglers. She also mistakes the grandmother of a local party leader for a 'religious maniac' (p.37). Outside the airport she notices a sign showing a rooster, advertising an alcoholic drink:¹

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York, 1977).

access to certainty and truth is questioned. Vision is shown to be neither objective or innocent.

Atwood's work highlights the fact that there is always more than one truth, more than one version of reality. In the poem that gives the title to the collection *True Stories*, the 'true story' is defined as 'vicious' 'multiple' and 'untrue'.²⁸ Often these versions are in fact constructions. In *Lady Oracle*, for example, Joan notices how 'other people's versions of reality', including those relating to her own life, become 'very influential', to the point that she is tempted to accept them (p.160). Atwood touches in a more direct manner on this theme in her short story 'Instruction for the Third Eye', where she writes: 'Try not to resist the third eye...leave it alone and it will show you that this truth is not the only truth'.²⁹

In *Bodily Harm* it is Rennie's role as an observer, an outsider looking in, that underscores the question of the perception and apprehension of reality which the text raises. When she is on the island 'Rennie looks, which is her function' (p.88). The way with which Rennie explores the islands, her obstinate refusal to acknowledge other aspects of the realities of St Antoine shows how relative these

28 (London 1982), p.11.

29 *Murder in the Dark* (London, 1984), p.62.

concepts are. Again in 'Instruction for the Third Eye' Atwood exposes a similar concern: 'What you see depends partly on what you want to look at and partly on how'.³⁰ As John Berger notes 'We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice'.³¹ Similarly *Bodily Harm* indicates that one should learn how to see without resisting the unpleasant and often disturbing images that this new awareness may produce since 'the third eye can be merciless'.³²

Rennie herself and most of the other characters in the novel believe in what they see. At the same time their way of seeing objects and people is affected by what they believe. So for Rennie it is not conceivable that the elderly American couple, with a passion for parrots, could be CIA agents. However, as she is subsequently informed, this is precisely what they are. She herself regards Paul as a spy, which possibly he is not. This posits a problematic relation between what we see and what we know, and about our assumptions on reality and people. Occasionally the text highlights a discrepancy between our sight and our knowledge of the object perceived, or between the way we perceive ourselves being perceived and the way we feel. 'Rennie thinks she recognizes the two German women from the

30 'Instruction for the Third Eye', p.61.

31 *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.8.

32 *Ibid.*, p.62.

hotel, the old couple from the reef boat, binoculars pointed. That's what she herself must look like: a tourist. A spectator, a voyeur'. (p.125)

The investigation of her new surroundings which Rennie undertakes in her role of travel journalist, shows how, in the process of observing the object, what, in actual fact, is observed 'it is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning'.³³ The perception of a given event occurs with reference to a certain frame. When the system of coordinates changes, as it does for the protagonist while she is on the island, the 'same' events are not the same. Rennie finds herself overreacting when confronted by the locals. Paul defines her behaviour as ' " Alien reaction paranoia" ... "Because you don't know what's dangerous and what isn't, everything seems dangerous" ' (p.76).

Rennie's way of looking seems to reinforce and reinstate the distance between subject and object. *Bodily Harm* simultaneously, however, highlights and criticizes the distancing, non-committal attitude that accompanies the act of seeing, or of taking pictures. Photographs, Atwood observes, 'stop time':³⁴ the snapshot freezes an ever-moving, ever

33 Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York, 1962), p.58, quoted in Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus, Ohio, 1987) p. 57.

34 'Unearthing Suite', *Blubeard's Egg*, p.265.

changing reality into an 'organized instant'.³⁵ She further remarks, using the device of punning, 'As soon as you take a picture of something it's a picture. Picturesque' (p.134). However, the novel hints at other possibilities, other 'ways of seeing'. As Rennie muses, observing the tourists on the island: 'They are people like her, transient; like her they can look all they want to, they're under no obligation to see, they can take pictures of anything they wish' (p.185)

On her way back from the Caribbean Islands Rennie feels she has gained a new sense of perception, one which can only be expressed by contradictions: 'What she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it. "It's all exactly the same. Nothing is the same"' (p.300). Rennie has learnt not to take visual perceptions for granted but to defer judgment. The paradoxical statement 'She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued.' (p.301) indicates the symbolic quality of this journey and the nature of the revelation that it brings Rennie. This implies a vision, one which is beyond words, achieved not through sight, but touch.

In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* Atwood emphasises the fact that visual perception is often inadequate because it limits and it prevents vision:

35 'Camera', *The Circle Game*, p.56.

I take this picture of myself /
and with my sewing scissors /
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate://

Where my eyes were, /
every-
thing appears.³⁶

Touch is, in fact, the sensory modality privileged in *Bodily Harm*, as the recurring images of hands illustrates. Rennie's inner vision, the overcoming of her feeling of estrangement, is achieved through the touch of a hand. As in Atwood's collection *Two-Headed Poems*,³⁷ this is the most important anatomical image in the novel. Sometimes, as in the case of Lora's grandmother, hands are depicted as possessing a kind of magic healing power. Rennie, despite her initial attitude of detachment at one point, longs for their caress: 'At the moment she believed in it, the touch of the hand that could transform you, change everything, magic' (p.195). The faculty of touch is celebrated both as a response to a basic emotional need, and as an alternative mode of apprehending reality. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood emphasises the narrator's emotional and sensory deprivation by referring to her 'hunger to touch',

³⁶ (Toronto, 1970).

³⁷ George Bowering, 'Margaret Atwood's Hands', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 6, 1 (1981), 39-52.

her 'hunger to commit the act of touch' (HT p.21). This theme returns in *Two-Headed Poems*, where hands are depicted as constantly trying to reach a world the eyes often fail to see. 38

The limitations of our sensory equipment are also touched on in *Cat's Eye*. Here reflections on the unreliability of sight are contextualized within the framework of the theory of relativity, and its rejection of absolute time, space and objects. The novel questions the dualism of subjective and objective time, as it shows how the structure of chronological time is inadequate for our conceptualization of the past.³⁹ The middle-aged painter Elaine Risley returns from Vancouver to Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her work. Toronto is the city of her school days until the period of college and her first marriage. It is the city from which she escaped to find another life for herself and her child in Vancouver. Her return to

38 In the poem 'You Begin', where the voice introduces the world to a daughter, the hands are the prominent images. It is with them that the daughter can start her exploration of the world. 'This is your hand, these are my hands, this is the world, / which is round but not flat and has more colours / that we can see. / - It begins, it has an end, this is what you will / come back to, this is your hand' (p.110).

39 Kate Pullinger, 'An Archeology of Sisterhood', *The Independent*, 2 January 1989, 24. Another reviewer suggests that the reference to astrophysics 'it serves as a metaphor for the way in which she superimposes the present on memories', Stephen Fender, 'Eyeful of Feminism' (Review of *Cat's Eye*), *The Guardian*, 27 January 1989, 27.

Toronto occurs not only in space but also in time, since her mind is completely taken over by the tyrannical and sometimes obsessive memories of her early life in the city which she now visits as almost a stranger. 40

The juxtapositions of episodes from Elaine's childhood and her stay in Toronto fracture the actual chronological order of events. The past becomes an image, at times a vivid one. As a result, it is no longer pure recollection, but blends with the present. The effect is one of simultaneous relevance: sequence is transposed in to coexistence, that is into a series of present moments.

In *Cat's Eye* the primacy of the subjective in our perception of time and space which the theory of relativity has exposed, is also emphasised from the point of view of perception. As the theories of astrophysics alluded to in the text maintain, 'we gaze at the night sky...we are looking at fragments of the past' since 'the stars as we see them are echoes of events that occurred light years distant in

40 As Elaine reflects on her return to Toronto, 'I shouldn't have come back here, to this city that has it in for me. I thought I could stare it down. But it still has power; like a mirror that shows you only the ruined half of your face'. (London, 1989, p.410). All further reference to this novel appear in the text.

time and space' (p.332).⁴¹ The implication of this is that 'there is no universal "present moment"'.⁴²

Now it's full night, clear, moonless and filled with stars, which are not eternal as once thought, which are not where we think they are. If they were sounds, they would be echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago: a world made of numbers. Echoes of light, shining out in the mist of nothing. It's an old light, and there is not much of it. But it's enough to see by (p.421).

3.3 INTERPRETING REALITY: BODILY HARM, LIFE BEFORE MAN, CAT'S EYE

There is the absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any one thing in particular.

Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

The price of this version of reality was testing the other one.

Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*

Atwood's critique of the certainty usually granted to visual perception challenges the notion of a single version of reality. Reality is presented instead as a composite, multifaceted entity. The texts' problematization of the notion of the 'real' poses questions regarding the interpretation of 'reality'.

41 'When we look at the universe, we are seeing it as it was in the past'. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London, 1988), p.28.

42 Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (Harmondsworth, 1988), p.123.

I have chosen *Bodily Harm* to illustrate these concerns. However, they constitute a significant aspect of Atwood's poetic imagination, as my reference to *Surfacing*, *Life Before Man* and *Cat's Eye* will show. The lack of an omniscient narrator in these novels is in consonance with their cognitive vision. These texts show a reluctance to explain the complexities of the world in simple, definitive and final terms. As a result they indicate that indeterminacy pervades the cognitive act of the interpretation of reality.

Critical readings of *Bodily Harm* have underlined the didactic purpose of the novel and its 'political massage'. We shall return to this point later in the course of this Chapter. Here, however, I want to point out that the complexity and interplay of narrative forms in *Bodily Harm* produces, as Lorna Irvine perceptively argues, a reading that goes beyond the didacticism of the political plot, or the significance of the feminist one, to expose a number of gaps and ambiguities which the text leaves unresolved.⁴³

43 'The Here and Now of *Bodily Harm*', in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form* ed. by Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale, 1988), pp.85-100. This reading of *Bodily Harm* argues that it is possible to go beyond the 'superficial plot' to find temporal and spatial ambiguities and elements of self-consciousness. The author highlights the presence of the 'disembodied' voice in italics (*Oh please*) and suggests that the entire novel could be

The presence of paradoxes, the poising of contradictory meanings and ambivalent positions, the antirealistic, to an extent, treatment of time and space, and the multiplicity of narrative voices, suggest alternative readings.

Bodily Harm has no single narrative voice, no single tense.⁴⁴ What characterises this novel is its style of dramatic presentation which sometimes assumes a high degree of impersonality. This type of narrative, constructed mainly by reported speech, creates a distance between the narrator and the characters. The text occasionally makes oblique reference to this distance. Working at one of her interviews and disagreeing with the opinion expressed by the interviewee, Rennie decides to write 'it all

read as Rennie's fantasy while she is in the hospital bed. The act of writing is seen as a theme the novel investigates and is discussed here with reference to Hélène Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*, which makes a connection between writing and flying, both present in the text. Also Coral Howells points out some ambiguities present in this text. (*Private and Fictional Words*).

44 The third-person narrative, employing both present and past tenses, which follows Rennie's point of view, is here juxtaposed by two narrative voices in the first person. The *diegesis* proper in the text, that is the events narrated as they happen (from the very beginning of Rennie's journey, at the airport), is told by an impersonal narrator in the third person and in the present tense. It is this narrator that partly provides retrospections of Rennie's life as it has been before the journey, narrated in the past. However the objective narrator is not an omniscient one, since its 'superior' knowledge is restricted to Rennie's life and it is not extended to other characters.

down in his own words' (p.33). When using dramatic presentation, the author resigns the right to his/her "own voice" thus losing direct control over the text. By creating this plurality of voices s/he rejects totalizing vision of authorial authority and produces "a particular, 'open' ontological structure of represented reality, full of intended contradictions, gaps and ambiguities".⁴⁵ The principle of documentary recording and the polysemy that it implies, requires 'that the world represented in the novel gives the impression of being open to diverse interpretation'.⁴⁶

Through Atwood's portrayal of the travel reporter Rennie, *Bodily Harm* poses the epistemological question of how the world to which the character is now part, is to be interpreted and what role she plays in it.

'Reality' on the islands is described as a series of deceptive surfaces which elude interpretation. Recurrently Rennie finds herself surrounded by 'impenetrable' signs (p.139). 'Opposite the boat the boy stops and waits for her with a smile she can't interpret' (p.175). Considered by some to be a political journalist, by others a CIA agent, Rennie

45 Stanislaw Eile, 'The Novel as an Expression of the Writer's Vision of the World, *New Literary History*, 9, 1 (Autumn 1977), 115-128 (p.124).

46 *Ibid.*

is caught up in a 'game' where places and people are different from what they appear. Although she believes the people she has met to be spies or secret agents, none of them, she eventually discovers, belong to these categories.

However, confusion about the identity and role of certain characters remain even at the end of the novel. Who is Paul, for example? A revolutionary, an opportunist, a representative of the CIA? On a superficial level, this 'comedy of errors' with its tragic resonances, can be explained by the tensions caused by to the fragile political equilibrium of the small Caribbean republics. Economically and politically they depend on more powerful and affluent nations which seek to achieve control over their strategically important geographical position.⁴⁷ In addition, the islands are 'off the beaten track' (p.17) and journalists of Rennie's type are rarely interested in them. On a deeper level, however, the novel questions the relation of the subject to the objective world of reality. To attribute to the outside world a definite interpretation is shown to be problematic since places and identities are revealed to be equivocal and 'double'.

47 St Antoine and St Agathe are given here, for obvious reasons, fictitious names: geographically they correspond to the Caribbean islands of St Lucia and St Vincent.

The multiple versions of reality which Rennie encounters are paralleled by shifting identities. The elusive, fluctuating sense of the real conveyed by the islands prevents the ontological certainties of a secure consciousness of being. Identity is presented as a shifting construct, and the islands acquire, correspondingly, a polymorphous quality, since people and places assume more than one role at the time.

Anyway, almost nobody here is who they say they are at first. They aren't even who somebody else thinks they are. In this place you get at least three versions of everything, and if you are lucky one of them is true. That is if you are lucky (p.150).

This shifting of roles is also underlined by the novel's narrative structures. In the alternation of the text from first to third person narration, Rennie moves from the position of a narrating subject to that of a narrated object, a device which highlights interchangeability of roles. However, it is also on the level of the plot that Rennie becomes caught up in this multiplicity of shifting roles, where everything is metamorphosed into its reverse, and renders uncertain our perceptions of reality and people. Despite her pretensions to detachment, she does not remain in the position of the spectator. Shortly after her arrival she starts to participate in the action. For example, she agrees to the request to take a box, supposedly containing medicine, to the

other island of St Agathe. This box is revealed to be a contribution to the arms smuggling constantly taking place in the Republics. The visits Rennie pays on St Antoine with Dr Minnow, who is personally involved in local politics, encourages people to assume that she has other interests besides the writing of her 'travel piece'.

The text's portrayal of shifting versions of reality and identity signals the impossibility of giving reality a definite, universal interpretation.⁴⁸ The challenge to the notion of a true reality in *Bodily Harm* undermines the antithesis between the true world and the world of appearance, a topic I shall discuss in the subsequent section of this Chapter.

The questioning of the notion of the 'real' as a given, unproblematic entity is carried out by the juxtaposition of two contrasting worlds, that of the urban Toronto and the rural Caribbean. The device has the effect of casting doubt on the existence of both, and attributes a symbolic nature to Rennie's journey. The difference of tense used to represent the events on the islands (described in the present)

48 Robert Lecker, discussing Atwood's previous fiction, notes how it 'may be read as an expression of the need to see truth as a shifting construct, or as a series of ... tricks with mirrors'. 'Janus Through the Looking Glass: Atwood's First Three Novels', in *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Arnold Davidson, pp.177-203.

and Rennie's life before the journey (described in the past) implies the existence of a fracture between the two worlds. In addition, when Rennie is on the islands, she experiences both a sense of invisibility (p.39) and a different perception of time. She recognizes the discontinuity between the 'normal' urban life in Toronto to which she will return, and her present experience in St Antoine where ordinary categories of space and time seem inappropriate. She feels that while on the island, she had been living in a 'different time... there has been a warp' (p.300).

The actual reality of Toronto is rendered uncertain, and the text seems to indicate that these two worlds are in fact incompatible. 'From here it is hard to believe that Daniel really exists: surely the world cannot contain both places' (p.284). A similar sense of uncertainty is present before Rennie's arrest, when she claims she is not involved in the attempted coup d'etat:

"I'm writing a travel piece. You can phone the magazine and check", she adds. "In Toronto, when they are open. It's called Visor". This sounds improbable even to her. Does Toronto exist? They won't be the first to wonder' (p.262).⁴⁹ This 'hesitation' she

49 An analogous juxtaposition between different worlds and version of reality returns in *The Edible Woman*, where Peter's severity (derived from his

experience about the existence of Toronto and her place of work, has the effect of undermining the irreducible opposition between the 'real' and 'unreal'.⁵⁰

The novel's reluctance, or inability to present definite versions of 'truth' or 'reality', its rejection of a single and final meaning, is also conveyed through Atwood's frequent use of verbal irony and word play, exemplified by the extensive use of puns which highlights semantic ambiguity. Similarly, we have seen the narrative structures employed in the text contribute to its indeterminate perspective on reality.

A sense of uncertainty is also conveyed by the first person narrative employed by Rennie and Lora. In personal narration cognitive statements are presented as 'other' points of view and their informational content remains uncertain. In addition, the first person narratives utilized by Rennie and Lora are not given any temporal and spacial reference, nor it is specified who they are

professional activity as a lawyer and then extended to his personal life) is opposed to the more flexible world of the English graduate student Duncan, whom Marian meets during a marketing survey she is making. The narrative indicates their incompatibility, and on occasion implies uncertainty about their actual existence. 'But she had almost ceased to believe in the existence of the three graduate students' (p.233).
 50 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (New York, 1975).

addressing. The novel opens with the remark 'This is how I got here, says Rennie' (p.11). The 'here' is presumably the prison of the Caribbean island. The text however does not validate this hypothesis. In addition, the narrative register occasionally moves to the 'spoken effect' with the insertion of an italicized *énoncé* (*Oh please* p.140;p.49) whose context of enunciation is left unresolved.⁵¹

However, the problematization in *Bodily Harm* of the existence of an 'objective truth' does not exclude the possibility of 'objective lies', as is indicated by the 'cover up' of the acts of violence which occur after the failed coup. Yet the text establishes a degree of resistance to closure and problematizes a single, definitive interpretation of reality.

Rennie's paradoxical statement, 'She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued' (p.301), gives the novel an indeterminate ending. This is underscored by the way the narrative material is organized in the concluding sections. Here, episodes narrated in the future tense, describing Rennie's

51 There is a significant difference in the narrative form between these sections - which use the formula ...'says Rennie'...'says Lora'- and the ones where Rennie and Lora are in prison. The episodes in the prison cell are narrated, like the others in the island, in the third person in reported speech. Lora's and Rennie's narratives instead do not have quotation marks.

release and her journey back to Toronto are interspersed with episodes which take place in the prison, and with Rennie's dreams, which presumably occur while she is still there. It is not clear whether her return to Toronto is real or a dream. Plot-closure exists only at a hypothetical level (Rennie actually leaves the cell, goes back to Toronto, and writes *Bodily Harm*, for example). I suggest that, by utilizing these devices, Atwood seeks to indicate the conventionality of narrative closure and at the same time rejects its conventions. A similar rejection occurs in Atwood's subsequent novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, where a structure of narrative closure is undercut by the novel's ambiguous epilogue.

The shifting versions of reality and identity in *Bodily Harm* and its ambiguous ending, seem to indicate that uncertainty is the sole criterion for understanding reality. As Atwood has recently noted in an interview "Perfection is an idea. I'm thinking of the uncertainty principle in physics. Even the physical universe is not 'perfect', that is wholly symmetrical, closed, finished. There's something in the nature of things that's against closure".⁵²

52 Geoffrey Hancock; p.263.

In *Surfacing* reality is represented as always in movement, animated and organic, where the elements that compose it are changeable and fluid.⁵³

Contemplating her mother's funeral the narrator reflects on the Western habit of inhibiting the fluid process of change in matter: 'The reason they invented coffins, to lock the dead in, preserve them... they didn't want them spreading or changing into anything else. The stone with the name and the date to weight them down. She would have hated it, that box, she would have tried to get out' (p.176). *Life Before Man* and *Cat's Eye* convey a conception of reality, or more precisely of matter being in a continuous state of unpredictable flux. Both narratives imply that 'there are no such things as discrete objects which remain unchanged, set apart from the flow of time' (*Cat's Eye*, p.219). As we read in *Life Before Man*, 'All the molecular materials now present in the earth and its atmosphere were present

53 This model of reality as being in constant motion, ultimately pure energy, relates to Oriental mysticism as well as to modern physics, as Atwood herself has elsewhere stated, underlining her affinity with science rather than religion. 'My background is scientific. Much of what you may interpret as mysticism is simply science translated into literary form ...if you take a physicist and push him far enough he will get to something that is pretty close to what you may call mysticism. If you take a crystallographer ... you'll arrive at the same resolution where the difference between matter and energy ceases to exist; ergo mysticism - if you wish' Interview with Karla Hammer, *American Poetry Review* (1979).

at the creation of the earth itself... These molecular materials have merely combined, disintegrated, recombined. Although a few molecules and atoms have escaped into space, nothing has been added' (p.169).

The elusive quality of reality, the resistance it shows towards definite interpretative models, is a theme that informs *Life Before Man*. The cognitive vision in this novel suggests that there is no real world out there, given, intact, full of significance, that can therefore be fully known. Like Elisabeth's bowls, reality offers itself in its 'beautifully shaped absence' (pp.25-25), of regulating laws and meanings. This results in the denial of any belief in laws of causality. As Elisabeth reflects, 'People do not become stars of any kind when they die. Comets do not really cause plagues. Really there is nobody in the sky. Really there is no round sphere of darkness, no black sun, no frozen silver man' (p.78). This lack of will to find a core, a centre responsible for what happens, parallels a lack of belief in the subject as a full entity, always present to itself, coherent and rational.

The concept of the precariousness and transience of nature is in these texts extended to the idea of the self. The ego is not conceived of as a permanent subject, but is regarded as involved in a process of

transformation. *Life Before Man*, for example, conveys an image of consciousness as constituted by a random assembly of a multitude of discrete parts. As Lesje reflects, 'She is a fleck, a molecule, an ion lost in time (p.210)...She is only a pattern. She is not an immutable object. There are no immutable objects. Some day she will dissolve' (p. 169). Indeed the only certainty in *Life Before* is the inevitability of death. So Nate considers, 'The world exists apart from him. He's rehearsed this often enough in theory; he's just never known it with certainty. It follows that his body is an object in space and that someday he will die' (p.276).

As the above passage suggests, the vision that emerges from the novel is one where man is no longer the 'centre', the bearer of rationality, of belief, of truth. The novel conveys a sense of a de-centred world, composed of heterogeneous forces, and man is only one of them. As Lesje reflects, 'Maybe man was invented by viruses, to give them a convenient place to live' (p.30).

From the perspective of Lesje, who is a paleontologist by profession, humanity is merely a part of the large process of evolution. Whether the 'human race' survives or not, is not really important. The 'dinosaurs didn't survive and it wasn't the end of the world' (p.27). Lesje believes

that in the case of the extinction of the human race, 'Nature will think up something else. Or not, as the case may be' (p.27). In *Life Before Man* nature appears to transcend life and death, in a perpetual motion of growth and decay, beyond value or morality. As it has no consciousness or ethic, the natural world lives and dies blindly, without intentions. It follows that there is no system, rather a multiplicity of life cycles where, 'nothing ever finishes' (p.188). Man is regarded one of a myriad of dissociated parts, not as an objective observer of an illusory unity.⁵⁴

In *Cat's Eye* Atwood's reference to the problematics of modern physics renders these concerns even more evident. The novel's allusions to astrophysics and quantum mechanics introduce cognitive theories about the origin and the nature of the universe. In particular, astrophysical theories of the origin show that, the more sophisticated and complex these theories become, the more fragile our interpretative models are. The universe is regarded as the product of random choice; identity becomes a shifting construct, an hybrid interwoven of conscious and unconscious. Modern physics, quantum theory in particular, has revealed that randomness dominates

54 This is the significance of Lesje's reflections. I do not think Atwood is in fact interested in delineating Lesje's cynicism or her monstrosity, as Hill Rigney maintains (*Margaret Atwood*, p.102).

the subatomic world and that the laws we use to understand phenomena are valid only because they express approximate statistical averages. Principles of continuity, ideas of universal law, causal relation, and the predictability of phenomena have been replaced in contemporary language and culture by ambiguity, probability, possibility, uncertainty.

Reality in *Cat's Eye* preserves its mysteries. As Elaine's brother, the physicist reflects, 'The universe is hard to pin down; it changes when you look at it, as if it resists being known' (p.388).

3.4 DECEPTIVE SURFACES: *BODILY HARM*

It is only after you have come to know the surface of things ... that you venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible.

Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar*

Critical interpretations of *Bodily Harm* tend to read the text as performing a progressive breaking of surfaces. Rennie Wilford the 'sold-out lifestyle' reporter,⁵⁵ is criticised for her refusal to bear witness since she resists becoming involved in the disturbing realities of the Caribbean island she visits. She is described as being 'confused', 'vulnerable', and 'falsely assertive' in her

55 Judith McCombs, 'Atwood's Fictive Portraits of the Artist: from Victim to Surfer, from Oracle to Birth' *Women's Studies*, 12 (1986), 69-88.

profession, and for filling her life with trivia.⁵⁶ The journey she takes and the imprisonment she suffers are seen to impart a political and moral lesson.⁵⁷ As a result, Rennie (whose complete name is really Renata, that is, 'born again'), is portrayed as experiencing a kind of re-birth, both on the personal and on the professional level.⁵⁸

However, as I shall argue in the course of this section, the question of to what extent Rennie is the focus of the reader's criticism is not so straightforward. The protagonist of this novel, for whom the text displays contrary elements of sympathy and condemnation, is not portrayed in isolation. She is given a specific cultural environment, that of urban Toronto in the 1970's and 1980's, which is important, I think, for an understanding of its protagonist. By describing the typical features of the eighties and exposing their limitations, the novel points at the contradictory aspect of

56 Rowand Smith, 'Margaret Atwood and the City: Style and Substance in *Bodily Harm* and *Blubeard's Egg*', *World Literature Written in English*, 25, 2 (Autumn 1985) 252-264.

57 Diana Brydon, 'Caribbean Revolution and Literary Conventions', *Canadian Literature*, 95 (1982) 181-184.

58 Dorothy Jones, "'Waiting for the Rescue". A Discussion of Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*', *Kunapipi* 6, 3 (1984), 86-100. Stanley Atherton maintains that Rennie's taking battered Lora in her arms when they are in prison cannot be considered a redeeming gesture, in that it comes too late and it is largely ineffective. ('Tropical Traumas. Images of the Caribbean in Recent Canadian Fiction', *Canadian Literature*, 95 (Winter, 1982) 8-14.

contemporary culture. Yet, simultaneously, it reveals an unresolved ambivalence towards some of the issues it raises, such as the contrast between the stylish, apolitical urban atmosphere of Toronto, and the harsh realities of the island, which demand political commitment.

The novel, for example, is described by critics as creating a gradual cracking of surfaces with the aim of emphasizing 'the reality concealed behind the screen of theatrical illusion'.⁵⁹ But, as I propose to show, surfaces do not break, the scrim does not rise to offer us a true picture of reality. The text instead, problematizes the notion of a supposedly objective 'real', as we have seen in the previous sections. It also interrogates the very existence of a true reality hidden behind 'the screen of theatrical illusion'. The opposition between deceptive surfaces and a supposedly true reality which I have discussed in the previous section is but one of the contrasts to which the text points: surfaces/depths, true/false, authentic/inauthentic, inside/outside are presented in an ambivalent way that attributes both positive and negative characteristics to each term of the opposition.

⁵⁹ Ildiko De Papp Carrington. In this interpretation all the events that Rennie experiences in the novel, starting with the crisis in her relationship with Jake, are seen as cracks in the surfaces of her life.

Rather than being merely didactic in perspective, *Bodily Harm* reveals an ambivalence in its treatment of the issues it raises. This ambivalence is reflected in Atwood's characterization of Rennie, which show a mixture of sympathy and criticism. As is generally the case in Atwood's fiction, the reader is asked to be sympathetic as well as critical towards the protagonist. The text describes Rennie as a 'naive persona' in a manner that is critical of her detached attitude. But at the same time it also shows her intelligence, her capacity for love and understanding.

Unattractive features of Rennie's personality coexist with positive ones. She rejects, for example, trends that regrettably have become common in the eighties, such as lack of solidarity, especially among women. Ill-at-ease with the sordid and destructive aspects of contemporary journalism she eventually refuses to write the 'profile' for the series on 'Women of Achievement', the aim of which turns out to be to discredit the woman in question.⁶⁰ Rennie finds it difficult to accept this new 'state of affairs' in journalism, feeling increasingly at odds with her work and desiring 'something legitimate

⁶⁰ However, perhaps influenced by her surroundings Rennie regards the fact that she herself is 'too picky' a 'problem' (p.65). She sees her own 'honesty' as a kind of 'perversion' and a 'disease' (p.64).

to say' (p.66). This ambivalence can be also noted in the way other characters function. Paul, a man from the island with whom Rennie has an affair, acts both as hero and as villain. It is through making love with him, that she regains contact with her body and overcomes the sense of alienation that she has felt ever since her illness. Nevertheless Paul has cultivated her company not from feeling of sincere affection, but to investigate her political allegiances and to discover whether she was linked to the CIA.

The oscillation between third-person narration and Rennie's personal narrative, and the novel's form of dramatic presentation discussed in the previous section, suggest that, on the whole, *Bodily Harm* withholds judgement on its protagonist. As a result, it partly endorses Rennie's perspective, making the reader stand, to some extent, with her, rather than entirely against her.⁶¹

Moreover, Rennie is portrayed as the product of a specific cultural scene, rather than being the atypical, cynical creature critics have depicted. The social and cultural milieu of Toronto in the 1980's, rather than being contingent, plays a decisive role in the characterization of Rennie, as the prominence

61 Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1973).

in the novel of the interaction between character and environment suggests.

The sense of historical consciousness present in the novel establishes an ironic distance towards the cultural and political movements of the recent past. The text contemplates the two preceding decades, exploring the changes which have taken place in the cultural and ideological climate during these years. The sixties' mood of unconditional political commitment, for example, is criticised here since it is shown to be mainly the result of uncritical enthusiasm, 'Rennie knows she's supposed to feel outrage. She remembers the early seventies, she remembers all that outrage you were supposed to feel. Not to feel it then was very unfashionable. At the moment though all she feels is imposed upon. Outrage is out of date' (p.135).⁶²

Set in the early eighties, *Bodily Harm* exposes the distinctive features and limitations of contemporary culture. The novel is so pregnant with reference to the contemporary cultural climate that its characters can be seen as paradigms of the

62 That political engagement had been popular because

fashionable is reinstated by one of the many disturbing puns where Atwood uses irony to allude to Rennie's seventies past. When the surgeon notes that Rennie's breast cancer does not show 'massive involvement' Rennie comments that such an 'involvement' has never been her thing (p.34).

postmodern sensibility and habit of thought. Both Rennie and Paul exemplify the fragmentation of society, the lack of any sense of the collective, what has been called 'the death of the social'⁶³ that runs throughout the decade.

Paul becomes an example of the breakdown of illusion and of the crisis of ideology that characterizes the eighties. As he observes,

Issues. I used to believe in issues. When I first went out there I believed in all the issues I'd been thought to believe in. Democracy and freedom and the whole bag of tricks. Those gadgets don't work too well in a lot of places and nobody is too sure what does. There is no good guys and bad guys, nothing you can count on, none of it is permanent anymore, there is a lot of improvisation. Issues are just an excuse. (p.140)

A feature of postmodernity that the text recalls is precisely the acknowledgment of the end of scientific metanarratives, of great ideological systems. Postmodernist sensibility dwells instead on the incredulity of their discourses and their mechanisms of legitimation, order, sense. Progress, science, truth, socialism no longer seem plausible. These Grand Narratives have lost their legitimizing

63 Jean Baudrillard, *A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses, ou la fin du social* (Fontenay-Sous-Bois, 1978).

function, their credibility, and their ability to compell consensus.⁶⁴

Rennie belongs to a world that has ceased to believe in the possibility of change through political action. The affluent, postindustrial society that constitutes Rennie's social enviroment, is one devoid of conflict. The notion of class consciousness, of the exploitation of labour, has disappeared to give way to a generalized indifference and skepticism that the text recalls (p.65). As a result, satisfaction is now sought in a plethora of seductive objects. This is the strategy, the search for happiness, characteristic of post 60's societies in the affluent world.⁶⁵ As Rennie, who is professionally involved with 'seductive objects' reflects, 'there was much to be said for trivia' (p.211).

On the other hand the Caribbean islands which Rennie visits are paradigms of a pre-industrial society which is at the opposite of her own. The novel outlines this contrast and the different strategies that the two worlds demand, and portays

64 Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, 1984). Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, translated by S. Smith (London, 1978); Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a PostModern Literature* (New York, 1971); Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Ohio, 1987).

65 Abrahm Moles, *Le kitsch. L'art du bonheur* (Paris, 1971).

Rennie as left somehow in the middle zone between the two. However, the novel conveys skepticism as to a positive result of political action. The rebellion against the misgovernment and corruption in the Caribbean islands has no relevant consequences in the distribution of power. The suave allure of surfaces registered by the text is counterpoised by the risks that relying exclusively on them may involve. The fascination with 'soothing' facades remains, but there is also an accompanying recognition of the necessity of political awareness.

The collapse of ideological systems, of the belief in man as political agent, as a subject of history, has been replaced by a world of objects and surfaces. Postmodern sensibility is one that has refuted interiority and intimacy in favour of the seductiveness of style.⁶⁶ This is recalled in the text by Rennie's own profession of 'lifestyle' journalist and by Jake, who is portrayed as recognizing 'the importance of style' (p.103). Rennie's friend Jocasta also brings into focus the relevance of stylish surfaces in her affiliation with the punk movement. This cultural context, which has been called 'the disappearance of the depth model', blurs distinctions between essential/apparent,

66 Jean Baudrillard, *Les strategies fatales* (Paris, 1983)

inside/outside, authentic/inauthentic.⁶⁷ The latter, for example, is evoked and undermined in the text by the erasing of a firm line between 'fake trends' and 'real' ones (p.25).

The changes which have occurred in the cultural atmosphere during the past two decades are represented by Rennie, who is aware of the transition that has taken place. This is a shift that could be defined as a movement from certitude to indeterminacy. This is again paradigmatic: fragmentation, indeterminacy, pluralism, discontinuity are concepts constitutive of postmodern culture and language. The assumption that history would progress in a predictable and linear fashion has been shattered and replaced by more localized narratives. History no longer involves a sense of continuity and is instead fragmented into a vast repertoire of images. The "Grand Narratives" have been revealed to be stories rather than absolute truths, becoming, as a consequence, meaningless and irrelevant. Narrative function has lost its magnificent heroes, its great dangers and purposes.

Rennie reflecting on this change and its effects on her personal life, notes that,

67 Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), pp.53-93.

Once she had ambitions, which she now thinks of as illusions: she believed there was a right man, not several and not almost right, and she believed there was a real story, not several and not almost real. But that was 1970 and she was in college. It was easy to believe in such things then (p.64).

The stress on the 'almost' and the 'several' suggest indeterminacy and plurality. As we have seen in this Chapter, this appears to be in unison, with the indeterminate, elusive note employed in describing reality and with its resistance to narrative closure, indicated by the novel's lack of a definite ending.

The problematization of oppositions like depths/surface, true reality/theatrical illusion present in *Bodily Harm*, can be found in 'Travel Piece', a short story in the collection *Dancing Girls*. Here the opposition between 'surfaces' and a supposedly 'true' inner meaning of reality is both pointed at and undermined. The story offers a perception of the world or the image characteristic of contemporary technocratic societies which conveys a lack of reality since the real appears as a construct divorced from the natural. As a result it is perceived as a screen, in other words a simulacrum.⁶⁸ This is how Annette, the travel

68 For discussion of the era of the simulacrum see Arthur Kroker & David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene* (Basingstoke, 1988); Mario Perniola, *La società dei simulacri* (Bologna, 1983); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, translated by P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman (New York, 1983).

journalist reflects about the reality that surrounds her:

She went her way undisturbed among the green trees, along the white beaches, between the blue sky and the undecently blue ocean, which more and more lately had come to seem like a giant screen, flat and with pictures painted on it to create the illusion of solidity. If you walked up to it and kicked it, it would tear and your foot would go right into another space which Annette could only visualize as darkness, a night in which something she did not want to look at was hiding (p.132).

Reality here is made to appear analogous with a screen. Moreover, the other side of the screen reveals not a meaningful 'inside' but merely a reduplication of surfaces:

Annette looks at the sky, which is more like a flat screen than ever. Maybe this is what has happened, she thinks, they've gone through the screen to the other side, that's why the rescuers can't see them. On this side of the screen, where she thought there would be darkness, there is merely a sea like the other one, with thousands of castaways floating around in orange lifeboats, lost and waiting to be rescued (p.139-40).

This image indicates that the simulacrum does not conceal depths, as it is suggested at first by the image of darkness. Instead it repeatedly offers its own image as true, while concealing nothing beyond.

The opposition between appearance and essence is therefore questioned and with it, the line dividing 'reality' and 'appearance', 'true' and 'false'. We are left with surfaces, however deceptive and

changeable, to which we cannot oppose a notion of essential truth. Atwood also touches on the impossibility of distinguishing between appearance and a supposedly true interiority in *Lady Oracle*, where Joan understands that 'facades were at least as truthful' (p.197). Similarly, in the short story 'Hair Jewellery', seductive and changing surfaces become synonymous with identity, which is presented as a shifting disguise. In this story there is no consistent identity behind appearances, there are only appearance behind appearance, an infinite proliferation of them. The protagonist of this story is represented as a female version of the 'dandy' whose self is exuberantly scattered along the surfaces of its disguises.

I resurrect myself through clothes. In fact it is impossible for me to remember what I did, what happened to me, unless I can remember what I was wearing, and every time I discard a sweater or a dress I am discarding part of my life. I shed identities like a snake, leaving them pale and shrivelled behind me, a trail of them, and if I want any memories at all I have to collect, one by one, those cotton and wool fragments, piece them together, achieving at last a patchwork self.⁶⁹

This notion of identity not only discards any humanist belief of a homogeneous, coherent, fixed

69 *Dancing Girls*, (London, 1981) p.102. Similarly Lesje in *Life Before Man*, looking at clothes in a store, 'flips through the racks, looking for something that might become here, something she might become' (p.26).

self. It is a statement that rejects interiority as a concept. There is no contrast between an inner and an outer dimension since the self reasserts its existence - however changeable and precarious it may be - through the exteriority of its polymorphous facets. Not only does the subject speak through its clothes⁷⁰. It is lost in the exteriority of pure form.

The kind of problematization of the distinction between 'reality' and 'appearance', 'deceptive surfaces' and 'meaningful depths' which is touched on in the short stories 'Travel Piece' and 'Hair Jewellery', is explored again in *Bodily Harm*.

The protagonist's sojourn on the island increasingly takes the form of a quest for meaning, a meaning which eludes her. Rennie feels that, 'Like everything else she's been reading, the instructions appear both transparent and impenetrable' (p.139). Nonetheless she continues to strive for a vision of truth, a vision which she continually fails to achieve. The reality that surrounds Rennie, takes again the one-dimensional form of a scrim, which eludes her quest. 'She goes outside. There's a tree beside the porch, covered with pink flowers... the whole vista is one-dimensional this morning, a scrim.

70 Umberto Eco, 'Social Life as a Sign System', in David Robey ed. *Structuralism: An Introduction*, (London, 1972), pp. 57-72.

At any moment it will rise slowly into the air and behind it will appear the real truth' (p.218). The emergence of 'real truth' does not, however, occur.

Bodily Harm establishes an ambivalent position as to whether there is a true reality concealed behind the deceptive signs. As I have mentioned at the beginning of this section, the novel does not solve any of the oppositions it introduces. Rennie's breast cancer has grown behind a deceptively smooth skin surface and has shaken her trust in 'surfaces'. The resistance to truth and meaning which Rennie frequently experiences, suggests the illusory nature of these concepts. This, on the other hand, is countered in the novel by a notion of secrecy. The latter implies truth and ultimately ideology since a belief, any belief, originate in considering something true. 'They've turned off the motor and are coasting, the tree sails belling out like old sheet on a line, patched and strained, revealing too many secrets, secrets about nights and sickness and the lack of money' (p.178). However, the ambivalence between the two is left unresolved in the novel.

3.5 A LOGIC OF COEXISTENCE: *SURFACING*, *BODILY HARM*, *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Atwood's problematization of binary oppositions, radically challenges the dialectic principle of mutual exclusion characteristic of Western thought. The latter has been structured around polarities, good/evil, presence/ absence, subject/object, which obey a logic of unity and subordination. These polar opposite are not considered as equal and independent entities, but are hierarchically arranged. As a consequence, the second term of the pair is the negative, a corruption of the first, and it is not considered important.⁷¹

Critics have observed that Atwood's work is 'obsessed' by dualities, such as body/mind, female/male, instinct/reason, nature/culture, time/space. In particular Sherrill Grace has pointed out that in Atwood's poetic vision 'freedom . . . does not come from denying or transcending the subject/object duality of life; it is not duality but polarity that is destructive'.⁷² However, this

71 It is Jacques Derrida work in particular that has argued against the Dialectic logic, and its production of universal truth which erases the movement of difference. Essays and passages on the dialectic are scattered throughout Derrida's work, especially in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978) and *Margins of Philosophy* (Sussex, 1982).

72 Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality*.

reading of Atwood's use of duality suggests a dialectic kind of relation between the two poles, that is, the privileging of one term over the other. But, as Linda Hutcheon has noted, the question is not so straightforward as often these polar opposites coexist in the texts and create, as a result, a permanent unresolved tension.⁷³

Surfacing is permeated by dichotomies such as mind/body, matter/spirit, subject/object, conscious/unconscious. In the text these oppositions are both pointed at and recreated according to a logic that opposes the hierarchy with which they have been traditionally conceived, in favour of difference, of their respective singular qualities. A critical re-thinking of the dichotomy of subject and object is also present in *Bodily Harm*, illustrated by the reporter Rennie's ambiguous relation to her new environment. The breakdown of mutually exclusive oppositions acquires a further significance in *The Handmaid's Tale* in that it refutes the conventional logic of true and false, and highlights the fact that these alternatives exist only in the paradoxical space of the text. Offred's contradictory versions of events put into question the trust in history's ability to tell the truth and challenge the common sense distinction that sees history as referring to

73 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.158.

the actual real world while fiction refers to a fictive universe.

In Chapter One I exposed the way *Surfacing* critically addresses the stereotypical opposition Canadian/American. In addition to the latter, the text introduces a further set of dualities in a way that rejects their opposition and the implied hierarchical order Western thought has attributed to them.

The second part of *Surfacing* opens with the narrator reflecting on the mind/body polarity: 'The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate' (p.91).

The undermining of the dichotomy between mind and body illustrated above, is underlined by the contrast between the celebration of reason, by the narrator's father, and the narrator's own experience, which goes beyond rationality. The 'illusion' of the separation between the mental and the physical which the narrator critically addresses, is a product of the Rationalist tradition, which has created this division. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* results in an identification of the subject with the mind rather than with the whole, a notion that has deeply permeated Western thought. The mind, severed from the

body, is given the task of controlling it. This separation contrasts sharply with the narrator's experience of union with the natural. In her union with the latter, intellect and intuition merge. This process produces a new holistic condition of being which involves the whole organism.⁷⁴

The protagonist's hallucinatory experience of union with the natural world, has, of course, a pronounced analogy with the experience of schizophrenia. Given that madness can be seen as the prevailing of unconscious processes over conscious ones, the 'experience of unreason'⁷⁵ becomes a moment of integration that rejects the hierarchical opposition between conscious and unconscious.

By transgressing logic, while her companions continue to 'talk the voice of reason' (p.216), the narrator refutes the structures that characterize Rational thought and their contention that communication can be achieved through language. In

74 This fragmentation of the subject has been extended to other activities and gives rise to a compartmentalization of experience. The splitting of the world into two absolute principles, subject and object, implemented by Western culture has enabled civilization to control and manipulate nature. As a result, the natural world becomes conceived of as separate part, to be exploited by different sets of interests. When this principle is applied to society it bring about a division into nations, races, religions and political groups. Such compartmentalization and discriminatory distinctions are critically addressed in *Surfacing*.

75 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, translated by Richard Howard (London, 1967).

Surfacing the sense of dissatisfaction with language contravenes one of the cardinal paradigms of rational thought: its faith in communication. 'To deny communication is tantamount to denying Reason itself. But more, for Reason, truth is bound up with communication. Truth that cannot be communicated becomes identical with untruth'.⁷⁶ Logic defines by delimiting, by shaping and channelling objects into smaller and smaller parts. Madness instead opens up alternative possibilities which follow a movement of integration rather than separation. The schizophrenia the novel presents is of a kind that unites either/or and both rather than polarizing them into 'either-or'.⁷⁷ As my analysis of *Surfacing* has pointed out in Chapter Two, at the beginning of her quest the narrator's subjective and objective worlds were divided to an extreme degree. When, at the opening of the novel, she returns to the island of her childhood, she admittedly looks at the world as if it were 'a TV screen'(p.14). This division will be overcome by breaking through of the barrier between conscious and unconscious, subject and object, that will allow an interaction between them.

76 Karl Jasper, *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*, translated by S.Godman (Hamden, Connecticut, 1971).

77 John Vernon, *The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth Century Literature and Culture* (Urbana, 1973), p.112.

This integration occurs also on the level of perception. By breaking the boundaries between inside and outside, she breaks the opposition between observer and observed, becoming a participant, part of nature itself, in sharp contrast to her attitude of detachment at the beginning of the journey. Once this process is set in motion she will take the forest into herself and will be subjected to its fluid process of transformation.

Similarly in *Bodily Harm*, a break-through of the subjective and the objective, of 'here' and 'there' (p.34), of the I that looks at the world and reality, highlights that there is no such a thing as a detached observer, but only a participant, as Rennie, despite herself, will become. This is conveyed in the novel by the investigation of ways of seeing.

Not only does Rennie look, as we have already discussed, she writes about what she sees. Visual perception cannot in fact be separated from the process of imbuing the world with meaning. The act of seeing is inextricably related to meaning and language, since it is hardly possible to think of the two activities separately. As is made clear by Merleau Ponty, 'It is untrue that, if I confine myself to what I really see, I am never mistaken and that sensation at least leaves no room for doubt.'

Every sensation is already pregnant with meaning'.⁷⁸
 The senses do not provide a record that is independent of the perceiver. Modern psychology maintains that what we see is constantly mediated by the brain and interpreted according to certain rules. The implication of such observations is that 'there is no reality experienced by man (sic) into which man's observations and interpretations enter...all human experience is an interpretation of the non human reality'.⁷⁹

Towards the end of *Bodily Harm* a new modality of seeing is envisaged, one that allows for a relation between subject and object which is based not on the logic of mutual exclusion but on mutual exchange. Commenting on Margaret Avinson's poem 'Snow', 'Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes./ The optic heart must venture: a jail break/and re-creation...'. Atwood notes: 'What these three lines suggest is that in none of our acts - even the act of looking - are we passive. Even the things we look at demand our participation, and our commitment: if this participation and commitment are given, what can result is a "jail-break", an escape from our habits of looking at things, and a "re-creation", a new way

⁷⁸ Marcel Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London, 1962), p.297.

⁷⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, (London, 1961), p.20.

of seeing, experiencing and imaging - or imagining - which we ourselves have helped to shape'.⁸⁰

The words 'participation' and 'commitment' speak in favour of an overcoming of the separation between us and the world we observe. The process of observing itself, the organization and reorganization of reality, can be a creative act, as Atwood's comment indicates. This suggests that the relation at stake here is that of art and reality, proposed in a way that rejects the duality of subject and object, observer and observed.

I have mentioned earlier Atwood's use of Pastoral motifs in *Bodily Harm* and *Surfacing*. Both novels use the pastoral focus on the protagonists' creativity, gained from the journey, and their capacity to regenerate themselves, as a result.⁸¹ They both show elements of self-consciousness which also belong to the pastoral form.⁸² The failed artist in *Surfacing* is capable of faking everything (p.61), but has not yet learnt to be creative; In *Bodily Harm* Rennie's failure to see is a failure to create: it is 'the way she sees' (p.300) things that has changed after her trip, when she resolves to write her report. In *Surfacing* in order to create, the 'escape

80 *Survival* (Toronto, 1972), p.256.

81 Peter Marinelli.

82 Bryon Loughrey, *The Pastoral Mode* (London, 1984).

artist' has to turn the mirror to the wall, and escape from her own self in order to project herself into another person - a process that characterizes the writing of fiction. The mirroring surface must turn from the world of objective reality, to create art's own reality. As the narrator's notes, ' I must stop being in the mirror not to sees myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's towards the wall' (p.205). Fiction does not reflect reality; instead is a discourse which constructs versions of reality.

However, it is not so straightforward as this. I have pointed out the interchangeability of roles at play in *Bodily Harm* where Rennie moves from the position of a narrated object to a narrating agent. The novel in fact repeatedly inverts the hierarchy of these narrative levels with the result that no lower or higher level can be identified. Modern self-conscious texts often play with narrative levels to question the borderline between reality and fiction, to suggest that there may be no reality apart from the narration.⁸³ In *Bodily Harm* the challenge to a rigid demarcation between reality and fiction is also conveyed by Rennie's habit of thinking in fiction. Similarly Joan in *Lady Oracle* constantly 'fabricates'

83 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* ((London, 1983).

her life, since as she says, 'the truth was not convincing' (p.150). Indeed it is not possible to establish to what extent the story Joan offers to the reporter, adheres to her life.⁸⁴

I have already discussed how *Lady Oracle* rejects firm boundaries between fantasy and reality and how Joan's own life and circumstance came to resemble a Gothic text. Like the heroine of Joan's *Costume Gothic*, Joan flees from one to the other situation: first she escapes from her mother, then from the liaison with the Polish Count and finally from her country.

In addition, the text creates a number of interactions and correspondences between Joan's life and the *Costume Gothics* she writes. An example is Joan's accidental collision with Arthur in a park, on their first meeting. Joan is self-absorbed, in the process of trying to elaborate one of the plots from the stories she writes, '*There were footsteps behind her ... there was an hand on her arm, and a voice, hoarse with passion, breated her name.*' At this point in my rehearsal I felt something on my arm. I looked down at it; there was a hand on it. I screamed, quite loudly' (p.164).

84 Susan Maclean, 'Lady Oracle: The Art of Reality and the Reality of Art', *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 28, 9(1980), 179-97.

At times the parallelism is between the two narrations is also discernible through the reiteration of quasi identical *énoncé* in two different scenes - Joan writing her story and the events in the gothic tale.⁸⁵

The specular relation between Joan's life and her writing becomes, as the story progresses, increasingly accentuated, and it reaches a climax in the final novel she writes. I have already discussed the positive outcome of their interrelation which culminates in the scene set in the maze. Fantasy mirrors reality here, and the result is acceptance of self, in its contradictory aspects, rather than escape.⁸⁶

The self-conscious elements discussed above become more overt in Atwood's later fiction. There is, however, a continuity of concerns. *Murder in the*

85 In *Stalked by Love* Felicia is exploring the maze: 'She took hold of the door knob and turned it. The door unlocked and swung outward... There standing on the threshold, waiting for her, was Redmond'. Joan while writing, hears footsteps 'But if I turned the handle the door would unlock and swing outward, and I would have to face the man who stood waiting for me, for my life' (p.343). Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal, 1980).

86 Joan's was named after Joan Crawford. An interesting parallel is at play here. A blurring of the borders between art and life is present in Joan Crawford's own career as a star. It was a conscious choice of the actress, who made her life reflects into the films she acted in, therefore offering them as true. This finds a correspondence with Joan's own specular relation between her life and her fiction. (John Kobal, *Romance and the Cinema* (London, 1973)).

Dark and *The Handmaid's Tale* develop the theme of writer as liar, of memory as unreliable, of fiction as a distortion.

A short story in *Murder in the Dark* presents a choice of mutually exclusive options, which appear jointly realized in the the text. The story shows a resistance to closure, countered by a preference for the possibilities implied in openings: 'So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun'.⁸⁷

In Chapter Two we have seen how in *The Handmaid's Tale* the central character's fictive reality proliferates in a multitude of 'other stories' which have no possibility of authentication. The different versions of a given event Offred provides do not validate any of them. It rather undercuts them all (p.150) with the result of undermining any firm guarantee of meaning. In addition, in this novel, the character's way of thinking and/or believing is contradictory in itself in that she refuses to accept a single version of reality.

The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me ,right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it./This also is a belief of mine. This also may be untrue (p.116).

87 'Happy Endings', p.40.

On the aesthetic level the coexistence of mutually exclusive alternatives undermine the structure of plot, which constitutes the foundation of realistic fiction and of Western formal logic.⁸⁸ On the psychological level it highlights a notion of the self as a locus of contradictions.

However, in the fictive reality of the text, this 'tale' is presented as an 'historical document'. The novel's Epilogue, consisting of the partial transcript of a Symposium on Gileadean Studies held in the year 2195 brings this status into focus. The device shows that there is always a conflict between biography and autobiography and the writing of history.⁸⁹ It also contributes to undermine a rigid distinction between the 'real' and the 'fictive'.

Offred's fabrications have the effect of taking the reader 'into a world of imagination only to be confronted with the world of history, and thus asked to re-think the categories by which we normally would distinguish fiction from 'reality'.⁹⁰ In this novel history is shown as a progression of desire as well as a progression of facts which has the effect of

88 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London, 1987).

89 Carolyn Steedman, 'Women's Biography and Autobiography: Forms of History, Histories of Forms', in Helen Carr, ed., pp.98-112, (p. 98).

90 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.17.

undermining the distinction between the cognitive and the poetical.

The academic paper, 'Problems of Authentification in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*' delivered by the pedantic and sexist Professor Pieixoto, provides material for a series of considerations and is probably the most 'pessimistic' part of the book.⁹¹ The self-reflexive epilogue addresses the problem of how we gain knowledge of the past. It has the effect of emphasising the novel status as a 'reconstruction'. The narrative is a 'reconstruction' for Offred, as she tells her story after she has escaped from Gilead (p.114), and a 'reconstructed' historical document, since it originally consisted in a non-ordered sequence of cassette recordings. It illustrates, in fact, that 'How we choose to construct history partly determines the history we are likely to get'. As Arnold E. Davidson notes, the novel's epilogue shows how this perception escapes Professor Pieixoto.⁹²

The self-reflexive epilogue addresses, for example the theme of the traditional invisibility of women in history which sadly recurs in the historiography of the future. As Offred perceptly foresees, 'From the point of view of future history

91 'Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Kathryn Van Spanckeren ed., pp.113-121.

92 *Ibid*, p. 115.

.... we'll be invisible' (p.240). This is indicated by the Professor's dissatisfaction with the material that is available to him, that is a precious text of women's history. In the concluding part of his paper, he remarks, 'As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clear light of our own day' (p.324). As Linda Hutcheon comments, 'in his universalizing first person plural maleness, he misses the gendered irony of his own worlds: "the matrix out of which they come" -the silence source of the selfhood of woman in the novel'.⁹³

In *The Handmaid's Tale* a supposedly true story is being told, but its status as a 'reconstruction' indicates that 'a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts'.⁹⁴ The novel in fact highlights how our access to the world of history is constantly mediated by the limits and power of our representations of it. Documents, the testimony of witness and other archived materials provide our only access to the past, which 'exists for us only as

93 *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.18.

94 Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca, New York and London, 1986), p.67 quoted in Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London, 1989), p.58.

traces and in the present'⁹⁵, and cannot be separated from our discourses about it. The movement the novel presents from the historical event, that is Offred's experience as an handmaid in the Gilead Republic, to its becoming fact highlights the constructed, discursive nature of historiography.

As I shall point out in the course of Chapter Four, the rejection of the dialectical principle of unification of opposites is extended to Atwood's critical approach to conventional ways of conceiving emotional relations between the sexes.

95 *Ibid*, p.73.

CHAPTER FOUR WRITING THE FEMALE SUBJECT

The significance of the factor of sexual overvaluation can be best studied in men That of women - partly owing to the stunting effect of civilized conditions and partly owing to their conventional secretiveness and insincerity - is still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity.

Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality'

But I tell the time by the moon. Lunar not solar

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

4.1 A FRACTURED IDENTITY

The traditional Freudian dilemma emerges throughout Atwood's representation of the female subject. In her works, however, the question, "What does a woman want?" is indissolubly linked with the question of how she is psychologically constructed. Before asking, "What is she?" comes the question of what she has been forged into, how she can reach beyond the 'sanctuary of womanhood',¹ beyond what is 'presented'. As in Atwood's early short story 'Betty', woman recurringly appears as a 'sphinx', a source of mystery and fascination at the same time'.²

1 Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (London, 1966), p.204.

2 'Fred, on the other hand, no longer intrigues me. The Freds of this world make themselves explicit by what they do and choose. It's the Bettys who are mysterious' (*Dancing Girls*, p.50).

Womanliness tends to be portrayed in many of Atwood's novels as a mask, a disguise that stubbornly resists interpretation, woman's adornment is presented as a simulation to please a masculine scopopic economy of pleasure. Like Joan in *Lady Oracle*, woman often chooses deceit and artifice.

Female subjectivity emerges in the texts as having been appropriated by the 'masculine', a process that denies woman any specificity in her relationship with the imaginary and with her own desires. Opaque, inert matter, she is there to offer man his own specularized self-image: like the moon, she only gives reflected light.

The question of female identity is in fact problematized, and runs like a red thread through Atwood's fiction, where the female protagonist tends to appear, to use Julia Kristeva's words, as 'a divided being before even being a split subject'.³ The self-division that marks Atwood's female character is reduplicated by her marginality, by her condition of being part of and yet excluded from the hegemonic discourse. Woman is located both within Nature and within Culture: a cultural speaking subject, she is at the same time, by means of her reproductive capacities, aligned with Nature. Like

3 "Femme/mère/pensée", *Art Press International*, 5 (1977), 20-32 (p.31).

Persephone - who provides the title for Atwood's first collection of poetry - she lives into two worlds.⁴ *Life Before Man*, for example, points at this contradictory position. It shows how woman transgresses both categories and simultaneously highlights that the categories of Nature and Culture are in fact a product of culture themselves.

In focusing on a female identity, Atwood's novels point at those crucial 'moments' in women's lives which generate certain roles (like, for example, the institution of marriage, as well as other structures of social pressure). They look at the process by which stereotyped or imposed representations are interiorized or behavioural strategies are established. Her novels, however, also focus on the female subject's resistance to these pressures and the different forms which this resistance takes.

These concerns run parallel to that of sexual politics. Atwood generally problematizes heterosexual relations to an extreme degree, as she did in her very first unpublished novel. Written before the

4 *Double Persephone* (Toronto, 1961). Daughter of Jupiter and Demeter, Persephone was taken away by Pluto to be his bride in Hades. But her mother threatens to stop life on earth if her daughter, who has disappeared without trace, does not come back. Through Zeus' intermission Hades will agree to let Persephone live above ground for half a year, while during autumn and winter she will be with him as Proserpina, Queen of Hades.

advent of the Women's Liberation Movement, the novel was, inevitably, at odds with the cultural climate of the time. As the author humorously comments years later: 'It ended with the heroine deciding whether or not to push the male protagonist off a roof, a conclusion that was well ahead of its time in 1963 and probably too indecisive now'.⁵

Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman*, already revolves around themes and concerns which will receive further development and exploration in her subsequent texts. These include the fetishization of woman's body and the question of pornography; femininity as a male construct; male subjectivity as fundamentally narcissistic since it constantly requires woman as a specularized self-image; finally, a female subjectivity which is more at ease with disorder as opposed to the male desire for order.

A focus on the male desire for mastery and possession is emphasized in her early fiction and collections of poetry, such as *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Dancing Girls*, *The Circle Game*, *Power Politics*, *You Are Happy*. In later works, however, this is accompanied by a search of a new dialectics between the sexes. Despite the presence of

5 Introduction to the Virago edition of *The Edible Woman* (London, 1985), p.7.

conflictual heterosexual relations, one notes also a parallel tendency to re-think difference so that it appears, in some cases, devoid of antagonism and opposition.⁶ The notion of sexual difference itself is investigated, in conjunction with the problematic of self and other discussed in the previous Chapter. This tendency can be traced particularly in works like *Murder in the Dark*, *You Are Happy*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and, to a greater extent, in *Cat's Eye*.

Writing and/or the process of creativity play a major role in this respect. Atwood's female characters often are fictive portraits of the heroine as artist. The writing they produce has different and complex implications but it seems to be Atwood's way of challenging one, and perhaps the oldest, of the discriminatory arguments in the debate around difference which claims women to be incapable of artistic creativity.

Once the topic of artistic creation is introduced, a question of language is inevitably raised. The inadequacy of language - with which the poet constantly struggles - is here reaffirmed by gender: 'He has the word'.⁷ Atwood however questions

6 Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism", in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (London, 1985), pp.57-82.

7 'Iconography', *Murder in the Dark*, p.52.

both the appropriation and the rejection of language enacted by her female characters. The particular relation they occupy with the act of writing is problematized to reveal a notion of the female subject that seems to find its specificity in her double dimension of being part of, and at the same time excluded from, hegemonic discourse. The female experience of both participating in and standing outside the dominant culture engenders an oblique position that partly explains the characters' sense of double belonging and the double register they make recourse to. Ultimately, it is woman's simultaneous belonging to different domains that creates the possibilities of her multiplicity, which is reflected by the text's plurality of genres, styles and their privileging of simultaneities rather than mutually exclusive alternatives.

4.2 THE 'MASQUERADE' OF FEMININITY: *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman*, appeared in 1969, at a time when the new-wave of feminist movement had just started in North America. The book, however, was written four years earlier and it thus anticipates issues that were to become central to the agenda of the Women's Movement in the early seventies, such as the quest for

identity, independence and self-fulfilment. *The Edible Woman* presents a feminine identity torn between society's expectations, which demand adherence to the traditional devalued feminine role, and the need for self-realization. The conflict - as we have seen in Chapter Two - is conveyed by the use of the double, functioning as the protagonist Marian's other, rebellious self, by Marian's anorexic symptoms, and by a narrative reflecting a split perception.

However, the novel is also a critique and portrayal of a society where woman can only be, or be made to feel, an object available for another's use and pleasure, her body appropriated by a masculine gaze.

Marriage and its consequent loss of autonomy, seems to be the normal choice for a woman, even for an educated woman in the early sixties, as the author comments in the introduction. The protagonist's engagement marks her identity crisis, becoming a turning point in the novel and in its narrative form. Getting married for a woman, the novel implies, can deeply affect, if not destroy 'the centre of her personality': by living for others alone, allowing them to live like a plant in water, at her expense, it seriously jeopardizes her own individuality. Although the novel undoubtedly focuses on this

concern, Atwood also employs irony in exposing and giving a critique of it. The issue is raised apropos of Marian's old friend from college, on whose situation her husband comments in what appears a patronizing speech:

Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her... So she allows her core to get taken by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know what she is anymore; her core has been destroyed (p.236).

The situation described here also represents, of course, Marian's possible future and is precisely what she fears, although the fact she knows the risk she is taking is not enough to help her. "Knowledge isn't necessarily power", observes Joan in *Lady Oracle* (p.42), and in fact it does not induce Marian to opt for action and break out of her present situation. Instead, despite herself, after the engagement she finds herself drifting into a passive role she had never experienced before. Accordingly the event is of consequence for her fiancé Peter, turning him from a confirmed bachelor into a 'rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability' (p.89). The novel in fact reflects on how certain roles may affect people's behaviour and expectations.

Marian's rebellion is at this point still on an unconscious level, and it is her body, here

associated with the unconscious, which manifests it. It is the hidden domain of her mind which communicates this fear through a dream she has which enacts her dread of what the future could hold for her. In her dream, her feet dissolving 'like melting jelly', her fingers 'turning transparent' (p.43) express her terror of becoming reduced to a mere receptive vacuum, devoid of her own subjectivity.

Subsequently in the novel this terror becomes a conscious anxiety: 'All at once she was afraid she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle' (p.218). The experience of dispossession towards her own body 'no longer quite her own' (p.218) partly explains the split between body and mind from which she starts to suffer. This takes the form of a uncontrolled, anorexic-like refusal of certain food. The psychoanalytic interpretation of anorexia underlines the 'struggle for control for a sense of identity, competence and effectiveness'.⁸ Anorexia is indeed a struggle 'against a part of the self rather than a struggle towards a self'⁹, against that part of the self which is striving for self-determination. It has in fact been observed that the disease is 'not a

8 Marlene Bodskind-Lodaml, 'Cinderella's Stepsisters: A Feminist Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia', *Signs*, 2,2 (Winter, 1976), 342-356 (p.220).

9 *Ibid.*

suicide wish - the starvation is a statement about autonomy not an attempt at self-destruction'.¹⁰ It is a self-defensive strategy that aims to preserve her sense of selfhood and identity from the predatory attacks of the other, here embodied by her boyfriend, Peter. As a result, Marian's desire and struggle to keep a secure sense of her subjectivity becomes a symptom, a form of pathology.

The feeling of dispossession which Marian experiences towards her body, develops gradually during the various phases of the preparation for the engagement party, a moment which symbolises the culmination of Marian's sense of self-estrangement. The change in her role from subject to object is effectively conveyed through a shift in the narrative voice. From the first-person narration of Part One, the novel moves to an objectified third-person in the second part, which describes the accentuation of her anorexic symptoms running parallel to the preparation for her wedding. The device, as Annette Kolodny notes, is 'at once a reminder of just how out of touch with herself she has become and, simultaneously, a linguistic notation that the movement from an "I" to an "her" perspective makes

10 Elspeth Cameron, "Femininity" or Parody of Autonomy: Anorexia Nervosa and *The Edible Woman*, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 20,2 (Summer 1985), 45-69 (p.58).

two separate people of the observer and the observed. As Marian takes on the standard female role of an object in the story so, too, the narrative grammatically "objectifies" her in and through the third person'.¹¹

For the engagement party Marian has dutifully submitted to her fiancé Peter's suggestion that she buy a new dress, not so 'mousy' as the present ones she owns, and make her hair-style more glamorous. Her new appearance will meet Peter's idea of a feminine beauty, but Atwood stresses the character's feeling of unease at being manipulated by the expert hands of professionals in a beauty salon and her discontent with the overall result.

The party, a crucial event in the narrative, symbolizes the entry into femininity, which appears as merely a role she puts on, however uncomfortably, like the red dress and the mask of make-up she is wearing for the occasion. This moment reveals how orthodox femininity is a construct of male desire, and effectively portrays the process as a *masquerade*, as Luce Irigaray has called Freud's notion of femininity. It is necessary, according to Freud, for the girl to make the painful transition, to 'pass from her masculine phase to the feminine one' in

11 'Some notes on Defining a "Feminist Literary Criticism"', *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (Autumn 1975), 75-92 (p.80).

order to become a normal woman.¹² The *masquerade* represents the moment in which women try to 'recuperate some elements of desire, to participate in man's desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain 'on the market' in spite of everything'.¹³ For a woman this movement signifies the 'entry into a system of values which is not hers, and in which she can "appear" and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men'.¹⁴

12 Freud does stress that the process of becoming a woman, is a painful one. The movement from activity to passivity, from mother to father, clitoris to vagina, is seen as a cause of loss, or 'injury', or even a 'catastrophe' - he maintains - when considered in relation with the changes it brings about in the sexual and psychic sphere of life. Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity' *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, vol. XXII (London, 1964) pp.112-135 (p.114); Jacqueline Rose, 'Femininity and its Discontent', in *Psychoanalysis in the Field of Vision* (London, 1986), p.91.

13 *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by C.Porter (New York,1985), p.133. The idea of femininity as masquerade was first introduced by Joan Riviere (1949) to indicate a failed femininity. The notion of masquerade was developed by Lacan, who saw it as the very definition of femininity. The concept has later been reappropriated by feminist critics. Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. by Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan, (London, 1986), pp. 34-44; Stephen Heath, 'Joan Riviere and the Masquerade', in *Formations of Fantasy*; Michele Montreay 'Inquiry into Femininity' *m/f* 1 (1978) pp. 82-101; Monique Plaza, 'Phallomorphic Power and the Psychology of Woman', *Ideology and Consciousness*, 4 (1978) 5-36.

14 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.134.

It is abruptly, in the period before the party, that Marian feels exiled from her own needs and/or pleasures, in a void, at a loss with herself: 'She wandered into the bedroom. It was too early to start dressing for the party, but she couldn't think of anything else she could do to fill up the time' (p. 217).

However, she will soon be ready, ready to appear in 'her finely adjusted veneers' (p.229). And the process inevitably leads to a painful self-laceration. It is only now, in fact, that Marian perceives the existence of her divided self: she envisages the conflicts between her public self, the one who has to meet social expectations, and the inner self, which is now most difficult to discern, buried as it is under the 'chivalric finery'¹⁵ of a femininity defined by the other's desire. The moment is symbolized by Marian's projection into the two dolls on her dressing table, where she sees herself 'for an instant as through she was inside them, both of them at once'. This moment of split perception highlights her self-division into appearance and interiority, 'the blonde eyes noting the arrangement of her hair, her bitten fingernail, the dark one looking deeper, at something she could not quite see,

15 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum: The Other Woman*, translated by G.Gill (New York, 1985), p.150.

the two overlapping images drawing further and further away from each other'. Marian becomes at the same time the perceiver and the thing perceived, and the result is a painful self-laceration: 'By the strength of their separate visions they were trying to pull her apart' (p.219).

By fleeing from the party Marian will finally reject this alternative, discard her red dress and what it represents: 'She had a vision of the red dress disintegrating in mid-air, falling in little scraps behind her in the snow, like feathers' (p.250). Marian thus escapes the enforced submission to the male gaze. She escapes from the extension of the gaze represented by the camera lense which would have held her there 'at the table of consummation and consuming'.¹⁶ The cake in the shape of a woman which Marian bakes and offers to her boyfriend is at the same time an ironical substitution and an act of resistance against male attitudes which had assigned to her the role of commodity; that is, something that has value 'only in so far as it can be 'used'.¹⁷

16 Mary Ann Caws, 'Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art', in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. by Susan Suleman (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986), pp.262-187 (p.270).

17 Fredric Jameson, 'Raification and Utopia in Mass Culture', *Social Text*, 1,1 (Winter 1979), 130-148 (p.131).

Marian's attempt to gain a secure sense of self is, as we have seen in Chapter Two, of central importance in the text. A feminine identity constantly split between the personal need for self-fulfilment, and the demands of self-renunciation and adherence to a model of femininity constructed around a male idea, is a prominent feature in Atwood's first novel. This notion of a femininity that exists merely in and through representation, ideologically constructed rather than being a reflection of some inner state of being, returns repeatedly in the texts, as will be discussed in the course of this Chapter. However, Atwood's presentation of femininity as a construction, where the 'artificial' becomes the 'natural',¹⁸ does not lead to the assertion of the existence of a 'natural', 'true', or 'real' self. As I have exposed in the course of this study Atwood problematises these notions, and the natural and the artificial are easily interchanged.

For a woman who, like Anna in *Surfacing*, has fully conformed to 'normality', there is no escape from self-division. Anna's soul is symbolically locked in the mirror, the prisoner of that other image of herself she has constructed on her face.

18 *Surfacing*, p.51.

From her handbag she takes a round gilt compact with violets on the cover. She opens it, unclosing the other self, and runs her finger tip around the corners of her mouth, left one, right one; then she unswivels a pink stick and dots her cheeks and blends them, changing her shape, performing the only magic left to her (p. 194).

The character's anxieties about her appearance illustrate how the cost of this demand for a woman is a self split into two. As John Berger suggests,

A woman must continually watch herself. She is also continually accompanied by her own image of herself... And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman... The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision : a sight.¹⁹

Anna makes a desperate attempt to adhere to an idealized and sterile version of femininity that has no correspondence in real life, but which acts as a trapping image. Femininity appears as the perfect simulacrum, the exact copy of something that never really existed in the first place.

Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around her eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is in itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's head (p.194).

19 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p.47.

In this quotation from *Surfacing*, Atwood indicates, it is the 'captive princess', locked inside the dungeon of man's psyche, that is most in need of liberation. This projection creates false images which women like Anna try to emulate. As a result of this male attitude, the female character in Atwood's fiction is often faced with versions of herself which are nothing but male idea(ls) of supposedly female qualities and beauty. In Atwood's *Life Before Man*, for example, Leaja recognizes at one point that her lover has conceived an entirely different version of herself, to which she nonetheless longs to adhere; she wishes to be the kind person he thinks she is: 'she wants to be this beautiful phantom, this boneless wraith he's conjured up' (p.267). As we shall see in the course of the Chapter, this is portrayed as a characteristic trait of masculinity in Atwood's work, and a constant cause of self-laceration for the female character.

4.3 A SCOPIC ECONOMY OF PLEASURE: *BODILY HARM* AND *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Photography appears frequently in Atwood's work as a one-way venture which is not open to the erotics of exchange, since its economy can only establish a

relation of dominator and dominated. The fixating look of the other, with its threat of the extinction of self, is often transferred to the camera lense. In the poem 'Camera' the speaker's partner desire to control and master her as well as his surroundings is conveyed through the camera metaphor.²⁰ In *Surfacing* the camera becomes a 'bazooka or a strange instrument of torture' (p.160), something 'that could steal not only your soul but your body also' (p.139).

As well as introducing references to photography and its implications, the texts repeatedly address the question of pornography. With its voyeuristic modality of pleasure, pornography shares with photography a privileging of the visual. As we have seen in Chapter Three, Atwood's fiction and poetry challenge the certitudes usually granted to visual perception and the assumptions that equate visibility with truth.

In *The Edible Woman* the climax of the objectified role Marian adopts is represented by Peter's desire to immobilize and freeze her in a photographic shot. Indeed the camera lense is seen by feminist critics as an extension of the male gaze: it has the power to assess, judge, control, but at the

20 *The Circle Game* (Toronto, 1978), pp. 56-57.

same time allows the security granted by distance.²¹
 This is what happens to Marian, who after her
 engagement with Peter discovers herself to be a body
 trapped by his gaze:

Lately he had been watching her more and more.
 Before in the summer, she used to think he didn't
 often look at her... These days however he would
 focus his eyes on her face ...She couldn't tell what
 he was searching for when he looked at her like that.
 It made her uneasy... He was sizing her up as he
 would a new camera (p.149).

The capacity to judge and control is in fact
 characteristic of the power of the look to which
 Marian, from now on will be subjected. However, she
 objects strongly to Peter's desire to crystallise
 her into a snapshot: 'Once he pulled the trigger she
 would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture,
 that simple stance, unable to move or change' (p.245).
 The threat of violence, the experience of
 objectification, is here conveyed by the comparison
 of the camera with a gun. It is in fact not
 accidental that Peter's select collection of guns and
 pistols lies beside his cameras in the cupboard. With
 Peter's camera focussed on her, Marian experiences
 the sensation of becoming an object, of being

21 Ann Kaplan, 'Is the Gaze Male?', in Ann Snitow,
 Christine Stansell, Sharon Thompson eds., *Desire: the
 Politics of Sexuality* (London, 1984), pp.321-338.

transformed into an image, available for the use of others:

Her body had frozen, gone rigid. She couldn't move, she couldn't even move the muscles of her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter-release but she couldn't move... (p.232).

Roland Barthes' essay on photography *Camera Lucida* furnishes an illuminating clue on the subject. Barthes notes the painful experience of objectification experienced by the person photographed, as well as the concomitant feeling of inauthenticity stemming from the desire to appear to others in a certain light. The photograph, Barthes writes, 'represents the very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death... I am truly becoming a specter'.²² The photograph, he adds, requires an helpless consent and surrender to the photographer's demands.²³ It is only at the end of the process that the person photographed will have

²² *Camera Lucida*, translated by R. Howard (New York, 1981), p.14.

²³ *Ibid*, p.13. 'In front of the lens, I am at the same time: The one I think I am, the one I want other to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture'. *Ibid*, p.13

access to the final product, the Image, over which (s)he will nonetheless have no control.

The way Barthes describes that instantaneous movement between subject and object, and the process of mimicry associated with it, is remarkably similar to how feminist theorists have described the reification of woman's body for the other's use and pleasure. The photograph, as Woman, is present on the scene of representation, but she, as Luce Irigaray notes, 'c'est du côté de ce dont on jouit et non de qui jouit'.²⁴

It is significant that during the party Peter does not manage to take Marian's photo. She has managed to avoid being trapped by a 'dominant scopic economy' which signifies, once again her relegation to passivity: she will be the beautiful object'.²⁵ Marian goes through in fact a process of objectification, fetishization and display. Fixing woman's body into a male gaze can be seen, in fact, as a form of fetishism.

From a psychoanalytic point of view fetishism responds to an unconscious necessity to negate the danger of castration that the female body

24 *Ce Sexe Qui N'En Est Pas Un* (Paris, 1977) p.132. The original French has been used in this particular case because of the polysemy inherent in the verb *Jouir*, which is lost in the English translation.

25 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.101.

signifies.²⁶ As Laura Mulvey argues, one of the strategy that the male subject can employ to overcome the horrifying threat is a 'complete disavowal of castration' which can occur by 'turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous'.²⁷ Thus fetishistic scopophilia frames up the physical beauty of the object, which is transformed into something satisfying in itself. In this way fetishism, in the cinema or elsewhere, restores the female body from the threatening discovery of the lack: 'Thanks to the fetish, which covers the wound and itself becomes erotogenic, the object as a whole can become desirable again without excessive fear'.²⁸

Besides this process helps consolidate the (male) subject sense of his own identity. By identifying with his own look and with the camera, he himself becomes a 'pure act of perception' which allows him to achieve a sense of unity, control and mastery. Coherence of vision entails a controlling knowledge which is a 'guarantee of the untroubled centrality and unity of the subject': the mastery over the signifier implies in fact a unified and

26 Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', in *Standard Editions*, vol.21 (London, 1961), pp.147-67.

27 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, 3 (Autumn 1975), pp.6-18 (p.14).

28 Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', *Screen*, 16, 2 (Summer 1975), 14-76 (p.72).

coherent ego capable of controlling the effects of the unconscious.²⁹

The cinematic way of seeing appears, as has been illustrated, inscribed in a logic of subject and object relations, where man occupies the role of subject in relation to a man made object, woman. When such a modality of seeing is implemented, it seriously impairs any kind of exchange or interaction, since, the objectified person, by definition, cannot take the role of a subject. This logic is magnified in the fragmented representations of woman's body such as the one presented in pornographic materials. Atwood deals with the reification of woman's body implemented in pornography in *Bodily Harm*, while in *The Handmaid's Tale* she considers the question of censorship of pornographic material.

In the former the female hero, Rennie, is asked to write a piece on 'pornography as an art form' and to explore the theme from a 'woman's angle' (p.207). Rennie reluctantly starts her investigation into the worlds of porno 'seized objects' and videoclips, with their disturbing representations of the abuse of woman's body, culminating with a 'surrealistic' video image of a rat in a vagina.

29 *Ibid*, p.51.

Bodily Harm shows a two-fold interest in pornography. As well as illustrating that the public and the private spheres of life are inseparable, pornography also draws attention to the degrading and abusing iconography of the female body, a theme which often appears in Atwood's texts. In *Bodily Harm*, for example, the images range from the ravishing beauties victims of aggression and murder, 'totally helpless because totally dead' (p.246), that Rennie finds in forties' thrillers, to the synecdochic logic of the representation of the female body in pornography.

The soft-core posters that Jake hangs in Rennie's bedroom are another example of the manipulative effects of pornography. The 'display' posture assumed by these half-clothed women renders them fully accessible to the look, where they become the space - pure spectacle - on which phallic power and male pleasure are inscribed. In one of the hard core video clips Rennie is shown, a fragment of a woman's body - her vulva - fills (in a shocking way for the woman spectator) the frame of representation, thus giving the masculine spectator full accessibility of the genitalia. In hard-core pornography sexuality and sexual difference are in fact highly emphasised. The close-up of woman's genitalia solicits the spectator's attention with the promise that he will attain both pleasure and

knowledge from his looking. It appeals to the voyeur's conviction that the riddle of femininity will ultimately be disclosed and that he will be able to come to terms with this mystery, achieving the knowledge secured through looking.³⁰ 'It is as if, by staring hard enough, the reader can somehow come to possess and master her subversive sexual difference'.³¹

Hard-core pornography reveals, in other words, an obsession with the otherness of femininity which fails to either recognize or imagine the real difference of woman. In its paradoxical logic it expresses the need to represent the difference of woman's sexual pleasure in a way that cannot really imagine difference: its formulation of the economy of woman's pleasure is able to envisage woman's desire only as the desire for the penis.³² The rat appearing in the close-up of the vagina is another indication of a phallic visual economy that equates sexuality with penetration.³³

30 Annette Khun, *The Power of the Image* (London, 1985).

31 Andy Moe, 'Pornography', in *The Sexuality of Men*, ed. by Andy Metcalf and Martin Humohies (London, 1985), pp. 44-69 (p.56).

32 Linda Williams, 'Fetishism and the Visual Pleasure of Hard Core: Marx, Freud, and the "Money Shot"', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 11, 2 (1989), 23-42 (p.35).

33 It also repropose the association of woman with the beast and /or of woman as bestial, capable of gaining sexual satisfaction from animals, which is part of nineteenth-century female iconography. Bram

One of the questions *Bodily Harm* raises with respect to pornography is how to assess the relation between pornography and erotica, and how to reconcile this public use of woman in pornography as 'raw material' (p.55;p.65) with one's own personal love and sexual relationships. Rennie at first regards her partner's sexual fantasies and games as fantasies which she need not fear. But her survey on pornography shatters her sense of security. The line dividing reality from such fantasies narrows, and Rennie progressively becomes uncertain of the border between the two. She more and more needs reassurance that what she experiences with Jake is different, and that she need not fear being used. It later becomes evident to Rennie that Jake is unable to conceive of his sexual life beyond this framework of playing the rapist, of making up 'pornographic' poses for her and faking dangerous situations.

However, pornography has also been theorized as a sign of male anxieties. This finds a correspondence in the novel in the representation of Rennie's own partner Jake, as well as in the more general reflection of sexual politics in which the novel engages. Jake's emphasis on his sexual ability is an indication of the anxiety 'attendant on the

performance principle' that men feel. In its solipsistic consumption pornography relieves the subject of any fears of impotence, inadequacy and failure. This preoccupation with the ability to perform sexually, some theorists claim, is partly due the challenge which woman has posed to male structures of authority, self-esteem and power, since this has a deeply disorienting effect on masculine identity.³⁴ One result of this confusion is the withdrawal of men from sex, as the episodes related by a female acquaintance of Rennie's show. According to Jocasta, the changed scenario in the relations between the sexes has not brought about significant changes in the way men conceive of sexual relations. Jocasta contends that men don't really want love, understanding and meaningful relations, as they claim. 'They still want sex, but if they can take it', only if they manage to 'keep control' (p.167).

Atwood's futuristic dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses more directly on the problems arising from the campaign against pornography and its apparently dangerous implications. The 'Republic' Atwood creates in this novel is a patchwork of conservative tendencies, drawn from both past history and contemporary society. One can trace echoes of right-wing puritan tendencies in the North America of the

34 Andy Moye, 'Pornography', p.50.

eighties, with its climate of moral backlash, together with the intransigent attitudes of religious fundamentalists.

Retrospectively, by means of reference to the narrator's past, the novel re-considers actions and issues relating to the women's liberation movement over the past twenty years. One of them is the campaign against pornography.³⁵ The burning of porno-materials carried out by militant feminists, at a time prior to the Gilead military coup, appears, in the light of what is to follow, a Pyrrhic victory. Although the text does not suggest an ideal solution there are a few indications of the problematic aspects of the women's struggle against pornography. The political paralysis that allowed the coup to take place indicates that it is crucial to recognize the danger of the single-issue nature of certain sections

35 In North America the anti-porno activists groups lead to the approval of an anti-pornography ordinance in Indianapolis and Minneapolis in 1983. The law was drafted by Andrea Dworkin (author of the controversial *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London, 1981) and Catharine MacKinnon but was declared anticonstitutional by the supreme court in 1986. Since the publication of Dworkin's book, which considers pornography as the main agent of oppression and enforcement of male power over women, the debate on the topic has been very lively. Discussion of analysis and solution have proliferated within and outside the feminist community, leading to serious disagreement among feminists regarding the necessity of legal control over porno-material.

of the antipornography movement.³⁶ Pornography cannot be separated from the political and economic system that makes its use profitable. The forced and rigid role-confinement of women in the novel is inseparable from the political perversions that the text describes. Sexual and political abuses are, as in *Bodily Harm*, shown to be interrelated. Accordingly, pornography should not be related to a separate sphere but considered as integral part of power politics.

Besides, the veto on all kind of porno-material imposed by the Régime's oligarchia and their attitude to sex ironically agrees with the claims made by anti-porno feminists who have actively worked to outlaw pornography. The novel in fact shows how discourses of pro-censorship can easily be manipulated into values and ideas antithetical to feminism.³⁷ The risk inherent in the censorship of pornography is implicitly stated. Censorship restraints and limits the area of free expression, and the novel indicates that in a situation of the

36 Ruby Rich, "Not a Love Story": a Film about Pornography', *Feminist Review*, 13 (February 1983) 57-67.

37 It is interesting to note that the ordinance proposed by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon was supported in America mainly by extreme right-wing forces and by religious fundamentalists. For an exhaustive discussion on the topic see *Feminism and Censorship: The Current Debate*, ed. by Gail Chester and Julianne Dickey (Bridport, 1988).

general restriction of individual freedom it is women that will suffer most.

4.4 THE SPECULAR LOGIC: MURDER IN THE DARK, BODILY HARM, YOU ARE HAPPY

Women are considered deep. Why?
Because one can never discover any bottom to them.
Women are not even shallow.

Federich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Atwood's representation of a socially acceptable femininity frequently shows 'Womanliness' as a masquerade, thus stressing the notion of sexual identity as a construction, as has been discussed above. In particular it reveals how woman is viewed by man as his reflection, his own specularized other, which implies a denial of her difference. 'Masculine' modalities of relation between self and other do not allow for Otherness or alterity, constantly seeking instead for symmetry, for the reproduction of likeness. Thus Atwood's position on this matter is in open contrast with the Freudian argument that conceives men to have a greater capacity for object-love, while women are considered more narcissistic. Atwood, on the contrary, presents woman forged by man in order to constitute a mirror for his self-construction.³⁸

³⁸ A brief discussion of man's 'specular logic' at work in Atwood's poetry is provided by Barbara

In *The Edible Woman* male subjectivity is shown to be unable to conceive itself outside a specular structure, since it is in constant need of a reassuring encounter of self with self. 'Now', Irigaray writes, 'if this ego is valuable, some mirror is needed to reassure it of its value. Woman we'll be the foundation for this specular duplication, giving man back "his" image, and repeating it as the "same"'.³⁹ This need of self-specularization as a characteristic trait of male subjectivity and the image of woman as a receptive 'speculum' or, in turn, a flat mirror, devoid of its own light, are pervasive features throughout Atwood's fiction and poetry. The poem 'Tricks with Mirrors' which will be discussed in this section, provides a sharp and acute description of male 'desire for the same': 'It will be your own/mouth you hit, firm and glassy, / your own eyes you find you/are up against closed closed'.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, Atwood's work shows an ambivalent use of specular images. The perception of a reflected self appears an indispensable phase in the constitution of the subject (the Lacanian 'Mirror

Blakeley, 'The Pronunciation of Flesh: A Feminist Reading of Atwood's Poetry', in Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir eds., *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System* (Vancouver, 1983), pp.33-52.

39 *Speculum*, p.54.

40 *You Are Happy* (Toronto, 1974), p.24.

Stage'), 'To live in a prison is to live without mirrors/To live without mirrors is to live without the self'.⁴¹ However Lacan's formulation underlines the risk inherent in it. 'But the mirror stage is also the stage of alienating narcissistic identification... the subject is his own double more than he is himself'.⁴²

In Atwood's texts it is woman who from a symbolic point of view furnishes the inert, opaque matter that enables the (male) subject to secure - by means of a self-specularization - its status as a subject. An example is Circe in *You Are Happy*: 'Look at me and see your reflection' (p. 56). Similarly in *Surfacing* the narrator reflects, 'He didn't love me, it was an idea of himself he loved and he wanted someone to join him, anyone would do' (p.160). The prevailing modality in which men relate to women in Atwood's work tends to be one of possession and/or self-specularization. As the male character muses in "Polarities": 'Yet in self defence he reasoned that his desire for her was not altogether evil: it was in part a desire to be reunited with his own body, which he felt less and less that he actually occupied' (p.73).

41 *Two-Headed Poems* (Toronto, 1978), p.15.

42 Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, translated by D.Macey (London, 1970), p.81.

In *The Edible Woman* Peter is an obvious paradigm of male narcissism: 'He and Trigger (Peter's friend) had clutched each other like drowning men, each trying to make the other the reassuring reflection of himself that he needed. Now Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty' (p. 27). When Peter finds that the reassuring presence of his friend will not be available for him any more, he hopes that Marian replace him. The substitution promptly takes place. Peter proposes and Marian notices her own image imprisoned, reduced in stature, fixed and deformed in Peter's eyes: 'I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes' (p.83).

Atwood's poetry extensively explores the way a feminine identity is constructed to satisfy and reassure man by means of self-specularization. In her poems woman often appears reduced to a pure reflective surface, a 'pool', a 'mirror', or else, a 'map':

So how you trace me /
like a country's boundary.../

and I am fixed, stuck /
down on the outspread map /
of this room, of your mind's continent. 43

In the poem 'Tricks with Mirrors', which I quoted at the beginning of this section, the author
43 *The Circle Game* (Toronto, 1966), p.49.

comments humorously on male narcissism: woman here becomes the specularized facade that exists only to satisfy the (male) subject desire to gaze into a universe 'eternally identical to the self'.⁴⁴ For man 'Mirrors/are the perfect lovers'. But the voice goes on to underline the constraint she has to impose on her own identity: her suffering, her desires, and her pleasures are repressed and denied expression. They can only appear, if at all, the poem seems to imply, on a different stage, one which would be alien to the codified representations we know.

'Don't assume it is passive /
or easy, this clarity / with which I give you
yourself. /
Consider what restraint it /
takes; breath withheld, no anger /
or joy disturbing the surface /
of the ice' (p. 26).

Nonetheless the female character does not seem to be exempt from the risk of being caught in a specular logic, as is the case of Joan in *Lady Oracle*: 'I felt I'd never really loved anyone, not Paul, not Chuck the Royal Porcupine, not even Arthur. I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own reflection, enchanted and sparkling' (p.289).

However in a patriarchal culture it is generally woman who plays the role of the flat image in the

44 *Speculum*, p.135.

mirror, a facade and flat surface, which like any other reflection trapped in the looking-glass, is devoid of depth. The reflection in the mirror does not even allow for interpretation. It is not a 'sign' since its existence is linked with a presence, not with an absence.⁴⁵ In the mirror image nothing but appearance is recognizable, nothing beyond what in actual fact *is seen*. It is this kind of role that the speaker in 'Tricks with Mirrors' rebels against:

I wanted to stop this, /
 this life flattened against the wall, /
 mute and devoid of colour, /
 built of pure light, /
 this life of vision only, split /
 and remote, a lucid impasse / (p. 27).

In *Murder in the Dark*, Atwood's prose poem entitled significantly 'Iconography' illustrates with bitter irony the mechanism of woman's estrangement from her own needs and desires. As a result of masculine appropriation, she is left with no sexual impulse and no subjectivity of her own. She merely moulds herself into (the vessel of) male desire.

'Iconography' starts with this description of a male-female relationship, which the syntax and verbal repetition make all the more striking: 'He wants her arranged just so. He wants her, arranged.'

45 Umberto Eco, *Sugli Specchi* (Milano, 1985)

He arranges to want her. / This is the arrangement they have made' (p. 52). The narrative voice goes on to describe man's manipulative power over the nameless female character. Here it appears that man's most pernicious act is this process of 'creating' woman out of his own ideals, of 'making her. Over, from nothing, new. From scratch, the way he wants' (p. 52).

In such a situation, the only alternative left to woman, other than silence, is mimicry; she will have to ape the desire and positions induced by the other: 'To make her do something she didn't like and then make her like it, that was great power. The greatest power of all is when she doesn't really like it but she is supposed to like it so she has to pretend' (p. 52). Femininity is thus achieved only by means of false representation and simulation. What the essence of woman might be, however, is left unsaid. Indeed one might say that it is femininity itself that is presented as dissimulation.

In 'Iconography' woman becomes therefore pure image, an icon, beyond which it is impossible to go. Deprived even of her own consciousness, she appears merely the 'simulacrum' of a woman, 'the original nowhere',⁴⁶ filling the space of representation with a scene created by and for the other: 'It can never
46 *Surfacing*, p.194.

be known whether she likes it or not. By this time she doesn't know herself. All you see is the skin, that smile of hers, flat but indelible, like a tattoo. Hard to tell, and she never will, she can't' (p. 52). This notion of femininity as mimicry, of womanliness as a role that can be acted is present in *The Edible Woman*. Here sensuous femininity is presented as 'a bad imitation of whoever it happens to be a bad imitation of ..' (p.190), and returns in *Cat's Eye* where Cordelia 'attempts at conversation' with boys 'are a performance, an imitation'. As Elaine comments, 'She's mimicking something, something in her head, some role or image that only she can see (p. 244).

The manipulative attitude which men adopt to women is effectively depicted in Atwood's *Bodily Harm*, where it is explored in its many facets. In this novel the travel correspondent Rennie moves from the powerful and disturbing pornographic images which she encounters in urban Canada to the physical and sexual violence perpetrated against women in the Caribbean island prison. Rennie's awareness of the acts of male violence perpetrated against women in the social sphere is mirrored, though in a more subtle way, in her personal relationship with her partner, Jake. Only at a late stage in their relationship, when she has contracted cancer, does

she see that Jake wants her to conform to his own idea of woman, his own idea of sex: 'Fight for it, he said. Tell me you want it. This was his ritual, one of them, it had once been hers too and now she could no longer perform it. ... He needed to believe she was still closed, she could still fight, play, stand up to him' (p.201).

Rennie eventually understands that Jake is forging her into something resembling his desires not hers: 'It took her more time than it should have to realize that she was one of the things Jake was packaging. He began with the apartment... Then he started on her' (p.105). Sometimes with Jake she felt like 'a blank sheet of paper' for him 'to doodle on' (p.105). A blank page in which he could reinscribe his self, continually reaffirming his own subjectivity. This enactment of 'writing' oneself into another person is regarded by feminist theorists as a typically male operation by means of which man can achieve self-confidence and the pleasure of self-representation which are denied to woman.

In Western philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse woman has often been represented as absence and negativity. Freud, with his emphasis on the 'gaze', defines woman as 'nothing to be seen'. The Freudian scheme formulates sexual difference within a procedure that has 'analogy, comparison,

symmetry, dichotomic oppositions' as its major tool.⁴⁷ As a result woman is described by her lack of the penis, and in the Freudian exposition 'Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having nothing'.⁴⁸ Freud posits the moment in which the constitution of femininity takes place as one in which woman is deprived of subjectivity. The identification with the mother is in fact a crucial phase in the process, but it locates her on the side of lack, of absence and dispossession.

Up to now we have discussed the representation of woman in Atwood's *Bodily Harm* either as nothing at all, invisible, or else 'a space, a blank' (p.235), a 'darkness' (p.236). But beside this nothingness she is also perceived in terms of 'fragmentation' and 'dismemberment':

Mardson looks at Rennie, seeing her this time. His movements are slow enough, outwardly calm, but he's excited, his eyes gleam in moonlight. Fragmentation, dismemberment, this is what he sees when he looks at her. Then he is ignoring her once more (p.258).

As opposed to the phallus, which is conceived of as a unitary whole, woman is not regarded as one body. In the phallographic psychoanalytic representations, her sex is dealt with as clitoris, labia, uterine cervix, never as a whole. The result of this, as Annette

47 *Speculum*, p.28.

48 *Ibid*, p.48.

Feral notes, is that we have 'Fragmentation on the one hand, guarantee of a non-locus; affirmation of a singular and indivisible unity on the other, guarantee of the Ego'.⁴⁹ And it is precisely this reasoning which is responsible for the opposition 'Male/Female' being presented as a logical, natural one, instead of being seen as a construction.

4.5 A NEW DIALECTIC: *BODILY HARM, CAT'S EYE*

Chaque époque - selon Heidegger - a une chose à penser. Une seulement. La différence sexuelle est probablement celle de notre temps.

Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*

The vengeance of the sex is love.

Angela Carter, *The Passion of the New Eve*

The previous sections have shown how the male's ontological need for self-assertion causes woman to function as the repetition of the Same in disregard of difference, a process that allows man to reassure himself of the structures which define him.

Similarly a preoccupation with difference is apparent in pornography which aims at either distancing or assimilating the otherness of femininity.

Pornography, especially hard-core porn, reveals in

49 'Antigone or The Irony of the Tribe, translated by A. Jardine and T. Gora, *Discritics*, 8, 3 (Fall 1978), 2-14 (p.4).

fact, an obsession with difference which it constantly tries to neutralize.

The attention Atwood gives in her texts to the question of difference, since she adopts the position of the woman subject or spectator, is in total contrast to this phallogocentric perspective. Atwood's approach to this question reveals an inclination to thwart attitudes that seek to simplify or erase the facts of difference. In this section I want to point out how the emphasis on difference brings about the possibility of a new modality of interrelation between the sexes.

In contrast to the masculine logic of Sameness, which I have been discussing above, it is difference, asymmetry, non coincidence that appear privileged. The dialectic principle of the unification of opposites is strongly rejected since it inevitably implies unity and resemblance, and as a consequence the submission of one of the terms of the opposition. The conceptual logic of binary opposition in fact, as Jacques Derrida has argued, does not allow for difference.⁵⁰

These concerns are particularly evident in Atwood's later works, from *Bodily Harm*, to *Cat's Eye*, which show a change in attitude to the relation

⁵⁰ See Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configuration of Woman and Modernity* (New York, 1985).

between the sexes, one that attempts to step beyond an anti-male position, despite the numerous difficulties and contradictions this involves.

Despite the mistaken view of certain critics,⁵¹ Atwood's attitude to sexual difference is by no means essentialist, that is, it does not accept that there are 'innate' qualities proper to the male or female sex. However, the female characters Atwood creates do tend to have more 'positive' qualities than their male counterparts, in their capacity for love and understanding, their less dogmatic views on existence, and their capacity for change. In the texts they are presented vis-a-vis male characters who inhabit worlds 'far less alterable'. Worlds that contain 'a long list of things that could never be changed'.⁵² Male characters are often presented from a critical perspective on account of their desire to impose order or control. 'He believes in predestination. He believes in doom. She should have known that, being such a neat person, he would not be able to stand anarchy for ever'.⁵³

51 Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*.

52 'Hurricane Hazel', *Bluebeard's Egg*, p.38. 'He (William) sees no reason why anything should ever change', (*Life Before Man*, p.19).

53 'The Salt Garden', *Bluebeard's Egg* (p.225). Male desire for order, embodied by Peter in *The Edible Woman* and made to contrast Marian, returns throughout Atwood's fiction. 'He likes doing this... stashing the butter in the compartment marked BUTTER, pouring the coffe beans into the jar labelled COFFEE. It

The following lines from *Two-Headed Poems* provide another example of this distinction between the representation of male and female characters: 'He said: foot, boot, order, city, first, roads, time, knife. / She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood'.⁵⁴ As Frank Davey comments what we have here is again an image implying 'sexual dichotomy':

For him foot unit of measurement, boot, to separate the human body from earth, order, to arrest process, city, to conceal earth, fist to assert human will, roads, to rationalize space, time to measure and control process, knife to assert will, to stop process, to objectify meat. For her water, protean shape, unshapeable, night, unilluminated, willow, the water tree, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, blood, primitive, biological, flesh joiner to earth'.⁵⁵

It is true that to emphasise difference involves the risk of being criticized for creating a rigid male/female dichotomy.⁵⁶ However, the texts do not reproduce this distinction over-dogmatically since they also indicate the necessity of distinguishing between sex and gender.⁵⁷ The novels

makes him feel that some things at least are in their right places', 'Spring of the Frogs', *Bluebeard's Egg* (p.174).

⁵⁴ *Two-Headed Poems*, p.52.

⁵⁵ *Op.cit.*, p.29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ If sex is located in the biological realm, gender is a term that has psychological and cultural connotations; 'male' and 'female' are the proper term for sex, whereas 'masculine' and 'feminine' are the

problematize the notion of femininity and its constructions, and, to a lesser extent, show an interest in dismantling the myth of masculinity as natural and universal.

Sexual identities are portrayed in the novels as the product of cultural constructions for both the male and female personae, and the gendered qualities of 'feminine' and 'masculine' are shown to reside in characters of both sexes. An example of this is the narrator's partner Joe in *Surfacing*, who shows the characteristic 'feminine' trait of evading speech in his attitude of estrangement from language. ⁵⁸ Besides, his 'failure' in achieving a successful career (p.67) indicates that he has not adopted the conventional masculine attitude of 'male superiority'.⁵⁹ As previously discussed, Joan, the protagonist of *Lady Oracle* recognizes that she has

corresponding term for gender, which is independent of biological sex.

⁵⁸ The male world of cruelty and destruction illustrated for example, in *Surfacing* by the attitudes of the Americans towards the environment, is one in which women can also participate. The narrator feels a complicity with acts of violence. The abortion she has had make her feel like 'a killer' (p.170) and she also bears responsibility, and a 'complicity' (p.154) for the killing of the heron. Her father who is said to provide the narrator with rational knowledge, himself went beyond 'the failure of logic' (p.171) and led her, through his drawings and maps, to the lake. And it is here that she has her first intense emotional experience.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Rutherford, 'Who's That Man', in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. by Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London, 1988), pp.21-67.

been caught in a 'masculine' narcissistic love relation with her partners. In *Life Before Man* it is Elisabeth who thinks and orders her life according to rules, who seeks to impose control. On the other hand, her lover Chris is presented as someone who has not split the world into 'the legal and the illegal, the polite and the impolite, the job and the "vacation"'.⁶⁰ The power of appropriation attributed to the male gaze, and to the camera, returns in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where sexual pleasure is associated with watching.⁶¹ However the novel also provides an ironic re-thinking of the issue, since it shows that women too that can use this capacity to exert power, employing it to size man up. The narrator comments:

To be a man, watched by women. It must be entirely strange. To have them watching him all the time. To have them wondering, What's he going to do next?... To have them sizing him up. To have them thinking, he can't do it, he won't do it; he'll have to do, this last as if he were a garment, out of style or shoddy, which must nevertheless be put on because there is nothing else available (p.98).

Another example of Atwood's rejection of biological determinism can be found in her critique of the attitude towards women in the Republic of Gilead. The emphasis placed by the Régime on women's

60 Frank Davey, p.90.

61 'While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking ... This watching is a curious sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. (p.194).

purity, chastity and fidelity and on their reproductive capacities, creates a view of women as 'two-legged wombs' (p.146) and renders the narrator's relation towards her own body unhappy and conflictual. The Régime's exaggerated focus on undifferentiated male lust show how pernicious a certain kind of biological essentialism can be. The supposedly 'natural' constituent of each sex that the regime emphasises, legitimates its aim - that of secluding women in passive, silent roles - as one that simply 'return things to Nature's norm'.⁶²

Atwood's challenge to ideologies which claim that men and women are naturally different is even more apparent in *Cat's Eye*. In this novel Atwood's attention to childhood and adolescence consistently underlines the presence of social and cultural conditioning as an influence on human behaviour. Little Elaine playing with her girlfriends is conscious of 'doing an imitation of a girl' (p. 52). Boys are similarly shown as needing to demonstrate that 'they are strong and not to be taken in' (p. 237), permanently involved in their endeavour to 'work at acting like boys' (p. 103).

Despite the fact that the idea of sexual identities as absolute is refuted, the question of difference is constantly presented and problematized

62 *The Handmaid's Tale* (p.232).

in the texts, is also reflected on the level of language, as it will be discussed in this Chapter.⁶³ To an extent Atwood's focus on difference is in tune with the shift in feminist thought from a position aimed to establish sex-equality to one that affirmed and celebrated female difference.⁶⁴ I want to highlight here how the emphasis on difference has relevant consequences in Atwood's portrayal of the relations between the sexes.

The question of sexual difference is coextensive with the difference between 'I' and 'you', self and other, where the other tends to appear as 'the other

63 In a lecture given in 1982 Atwood humorously discusses difference between man and women ('*They don't think the same*') and between men ('*not all men are the same. Some of them have beards*'), and approaches the problem from the point of view of representing difference in fiction. She discards the assumption of early feminist criticism which demanded the female characters to be 'warm but tough, wise and experienced, but sensitive and open, competent, earth worthy and passionate but chock full of dignity and integrity'. She notes that in the late seventies even feminist critics' were willing to admit that women too might have blemishes, and that universal sisterhood, though desirable, had not yet been fully instituted upon this earth'. On the other hand, she stresses that it is important not to be trapped in certain mystifying images. 'As for woman to define themselves as powerless and men as all-powerful is to fall into an ancient trap, to shirk responsibility as well as to warp reality. The opposite also is true; to depict a world in which women are already equal to men, in power, opportunities and freedom of movement, is a similar abdication'. 'Writing the Male Character (1982)', *Second Words*, pp.412-430 (p.422; p.429).

64 Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (London, 1984).

sex'.⁶⁵ The way in which difference is presented proposes again a radically different way of conceiving the relation between self and other. Re-thinking a new form of dialectics between the sexes, signifies in fact the adoption of a stance that rejects facile claims of equality as well as a conception of the two sexes being complementary, two halves, so that together, as Stephen Heath humorously puts it, 'they make a real one, a union'.⁶⁶ In the realm of sexuality, for example, this kind of thinking presents woman's pleasure as the same as man, thus following again an identity principle, the principle of unity and resemblance. To highlight difference can be instead a reaction and a struggle against the logic of Sameness and Oneness and a sign that alternative representations may be thought possible. It means in fact re-thinking difference in a way that points at and disturbs the dominant

65 As Julia Kristeva writes, '...every perturbation of the allocutionary polarity brings about or follows interferences between the two sexes. It's one way to show that sexual difference is correlative to difference between discursive instances: that the 'other' is the 'other sex' (*La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris, 1974), p.326 as translated by Alice Jardine, *Gynesis*, p.114). A similar conclusion is reached by Luce Irigaray: 'Ce qu'est l'autre, qui est l'autre, je ne le sais jamais. Mais l'autre qui m'est à jamais inconnaissable, c'est l'autre qui diffère sexuellement de moi'. Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris, 1985), p.20.

66 *The Sexual Fix* (London, 1982) p.153.

practice of conceiving woman as different: that is different from man. The following section aims to show that it is in this context that Atwood's emphasis on sexual difference could be read.

To return to the starting point of this discussion, one notes how the texts offer various clues that indicate a resistance to embrace a tout court anti-male position. One of them can be seen in the way male characters function. In *Bodily Harm* for example the presentation of Paul is ambivalent as he is portrayed both as 'hero' and 'villain'. Sexual intercourse is perceived by Rennie as 'agony' (p.49) while she is on the island. It is nonetheless through making love with Paul that Rennie regains contact with her body and overcomes the sense of alienation towards it that she had felt ever since her illness.

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before...She's open now, she's been opened, she's been drawn back down, she enters her body again...she's grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched (p.204).

In this novel, however, heterosexual relations are highly problematized from a feminist point of view. The text highlights a whole range of form of manipulation and violence which men perpetrate against women. The domestic violence and sexual abuse of Lora's childhood and adolescence, the violence and mistreatment that takes place against Rennie and Lora

while they are in prison; and the manipulative attitude of Rennie's partner. Nonetheless, despite Jake's 'doodling' on Rennie, Daniel's rigidity and Paul lack of commitment, Rennie does not want to exclude men from her life. The contradictions and conflicts are not solved, however, and Rennie's need of love and trust from her male companion is constantly frustrated.

A similar concern is present in the short story 'Liking Men'. Here it becomes extremely difficult to dissociate the image of the man one loves from that of the rapist, of the soldier, the policeman, who won't hesitate to use violence against you. Nevertheless in this text the female narrator shows a desire to go beyond this impasse. 'Liking Men' is in itself an attempt to bridge the abyss that separates the two sexes. It exemplifies a position that safeguards difference and at the same time works to establish a new relation between the sexes, a concern that becomes increasingly present in Atwood's later novels: 'But just because all rapists are men it doesn't follow that all men are rapists, you tell yourself. You try desperately to retain the image of the man you love and also like, but now is sand - coloured plain ... Who defines *enemy*? How can you like men?'. ⁶⁷

67 *Murder in the Dark*, p.54.

Yet, in this poem, a necessity emerges to redefine this notion, as a tout court identification of man with enemy is questioned: 'Still you continue to believe that it can be done. If not all men, at least two, at least one. It takes an act, of faith' (p.54). In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood's earliest published novel, Marian's protest is orientated towards what Peter represents rather than he himself as a person, since she recognizes that he 'was not the enemy after all' (p.271). 'Liking Men' closes with an image signifying difference conceived of as a process taking place in the history of the individual where the cultural and the social interact with the biological. It also indicate that the 'journey' undertaken by the male subject has taken place through 'internalized patriarchal values'⁶⁸ which need to be explored and then discarded:

There is his foot, sticking out from under the sheet, asleep, naked as the day he was born. The day it was born. Maybe that's what you have to go back to, in order to trace him here, the journey he took, step by step. In order to begin. Again and again (p.54).

Difference is not presented here as some pure biological essence, but is related to the particular individual, having a precise constituted materiality. In other words, is the product of human activity, of

68 Adrienne Rich, p.18.

its meanings and representations: a cultural phenomenon.

In *You Are Happy* woman still seeks to relate to man as other, but only if he is freed of those stereotyped versions of masculinity which define men as 'heroes'. The 'strong man' stereotype, presented to males as the most desirable form of behaviour, is rejected since it tacitly implies an affirmation of masculinity through violence. The text indicates interest and appreciation only towards those men who have dodged the trap of such mystifying images:

Man with the heads of eagles /
no longer interest me /
or pig men, or those who fly /
with the aid of wax or feathers
(...)
I search instead for the others, /
the ones left over, /
the one who have escaped from these /
mythologies with barely their lives,
they have real faces and hands (p. 47).

The theme of sexual difference is touched on extensively in Atwood's *Bodily Harm* where it is treated in terms of the different ways of experiencing love, sex, interpersonal relations, illness and the irrational. The two sexes appear in this novel to be extremely apart and remote from each other, 'more like beings from different planets'.⁶⁹ These conflicts, however, appear here to

69 Clark Blaise, p.112.

be mediated by a tension towards the 'understanding' of the other in which love plays a crucial role. One sign of Rennie's desire to know the male other is her wish to know his dreams. But the replies she gets from her partners are inadequate or aggressive, showing a minimal consideration of the irrational and the unconscious.⁷⁰

Notwithstanding Atwood's awareness of men's appropriation of women, one also notes in these works a tendency to acknowledge difference in which love plays an important role. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, love is regrettably the major 'absence' of the 'Republic of Gilead'. The emotional deprivation of Gileadan society is frequently emphasized. As Offred reflects, 'Nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from' (p.113). When she is allowed by the Commander to express criticism of the regime, she makes the same point:

What did we overlook?

Love, I said.

Love? said the commander. What kind of love?

Falling in love, I said (p.231-2).

As Coral Howells notes, in *The Handmaid's Tale* 'Heterosexual love is the excess term which the

70 'What do you dream about? Rennie asked Jake, a month after they started living together....Why does every woman in the world need to know that? Said Jake. A few good fucks and they have to know what you dream. What difference does it make?' (p.116).

system can neither accommodate nor suppress. Its stubborn survival continually subverts the regime's claims to absolute authority, creating imaginative spaces within the system and finally the very means of Offred's escape from Gilead'.⁷¹ Love functions in a similar way in *Bodily Harm*, where thinking or remembering moments of love becomes a survival device for Rennie while she is in prison: 'She wants to remember someone she's loved, she want to remember loving someone' (p.283).

In these texts the male other is thought of for what he is, different, elusive, impossible to possess, irreducible. And it is in this mystery which the other sex represents, that the fascination lies.

The recognition of difference implies an engagement in a dialogue between self and other which allows for alterity. In these texts it is the feminine that re-inscribes the masculine in a new way, as it overturns the binary logic of our conceptual system. The principle of identity, the principle of unity and resemblance is refuted in favour of difference and heterogeneity.

This inclination in the texts to allow for difference abolishes hierarchy and the masculine domination of the One. The dialectical process by

71 *Private and Fictional Words*, p.69.

which 'the subject is going out into the other in order to come back to itself.'⁷² is refuted in favour of a non-coincidence and asymmetry. The overturning of the logic of Sameness implies that one of the partner will not succumb and be assimilated by the other.

In Atwood's earlier work the relations between the sexes were often characterized by feelings of hatred or selfish possession, leaving out an entire emotional sphere, that of passion.⁷³ Here love becomes synonymous with possession, a modality that is depicted as typical of men. We read in a short story of the seventies, ' "I'd like to have a castle like that", he says. When he admires something he wants to own it'.⁷⁴ In *The Edible Woman* Atwood comments ironically on the property instinct that seems to dominate Peter's attitude towards Marian after their engagement: 'He sounds as though he'd just bought a shiny new car' (p.88). However Marian is not entirely exempt from such feelings since after

72 Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.78.

73 For a discussion of the concept of ownership, of romantic 'possession', and of Atwood's general exploration of sexual politics see Gloria Onley, 'Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle', *Canadian Literature* 60(Spring 1974), 21-42. Also Sherrill Grace provides an illuminating study on how this theme is conveyed through Atwood's use of language in *Power Politics*. (*Violent Duality*).

74 'The Grave of the Famous Poet', *Dancing Girls*, p.92.

the engagement she does on one occasion experience a 'sense of proud ownership' towards Peter (p.146).

Male desire to assimilate, master and possess coexist, in Atwood's most recent texts, with an attempt to redefine and explore new possibilities in the relations between the sexes. In order to achieve a new dialectic there is the need to create a new place in which there is room for love and wonder. The male other still remains in his otherness, representing that which can never be fully captured or assimilated. What the other is, what the other experiences appears unknowable, remaining a cause of astonishment. ⁷⁵ Rennie 'wondered what it was like to be able to throw yourself into another person, another body, a darkness like that. Women could not do it. Instead they had darkness thrown into them' (p.236). Such questioning surfaces in *The Handmaid's Tale* (p.99) and becomes more prominent in *Cat's Eye*.

Although *Cat's Eye* explores the complexities and contradictions of relations between women, the text shows, to my mind, a continuity of concerns regarding the question of difference and the relation to the other sex I have been discussing here. In *Cat's Eye* the other retains all its mystery and alterity, and this is shown to create a possible space for love.

75 Luce Irigaray, *Étique de la différence sexuelle*.

Elaine's relation with her second husband may be an indication of this. However, in contrast, the novel also explores the destructive atmosphere of war between the sexes exemplified by Elaine's first marriage. Ben, on the other hand, does not attempt to mould Elaine into his own idea of woman, nor does he try to 'rearrange' Elaine into an image of Pre-Raphaelite beauty as her former lover, Josef, did (p.304).⁷⁶

This fascination with the alterity that the male universe embodies is recurrently present in Elaine since her adolescence. Life as it is experienced by the other sex is surrounded by puzzling mysteries. Although Elaine relates more happily to her fellow male contemporaries, there are still certain obscure elements in their lives, which retain for Elaine all the seduction of the enigma.

Part of the fascination which Elaine experiences is engendered in the body and finds its expression through the visual which then loses its mastering and assimilating connotations of the gaze. 'My love for them is visual...When I am lonely for

⁷⁶ This is also perhaps a statement about the necessity to overcome an attitude of war between the sexes that the novel seem to forebode. Such struggle is founded on a series of dogmas, like the ones shared by the women Elaine feels uneasy with. The antagonism between the sexes, with its dogmatic positions advocates a series of truths, thus implicitly stating the impossibility to change.

boys it's their bodies I miss. I study their hands lifting the cigarettes in the darkness of the movies theatres, the slope of a shoulder, the angle of a hip' (p.240).⁷⁷

The other sex, its emotions and experiences appear as an irreducible enigma. 'How is going in through a door different if you are a boy?' (p.46). And it is precisely this element of wonder and admiration that is crucial in the process of achieving a renewed dialectic between the sexes.⁷⁸

Difference is irreducible but nonetheless necessary. That is why in *Bodily Harm* the idea of Rennie's friend Jocasta of having men and women

77 Later Elaine's love for Joe is manifested though the visual, that becomes a substitute of touch. She runs her 'eyes on him like hands' (p.341). This fascination with the body is no naive biologism. Very little of this for Elaine 'has to do with sex' (p.240). Still the importance given to the bodily dimension suggests a notion of subjectivity that resides in the body, not in the sense of a pre-given biology but as a constructed arrangement of forces. 'The body is pure energy, solidified light' (p.240).

78 As Luce Irigaray writes, 'Pour advenir à la constitution d'une éthique de la différence sexuelle, il faut au moins faire retour à cette passion première selon Descartes: l'admiration... Ainsi l'homme et la femme, la femme et l'homme sont toujours une première fois dans la rencontre parce qu'ils sont insubstituables l'un à l'autre. Jamais je ne serai à la place d'un homme, jamais un homme ne sera à ma place. Quelles que soient les identifications possibles, jamais l'un n'occupera exactement le lieu de l'autre - ils sont irréductibles l'un à l'autre... Cet étonnement, émerveillement, admiration devant l'inconnaissable devrait revenir à son lieu: celui de la différence sexuelle', Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris, 1985), pp.19-20.

turning into the other sex, for a brief period of time so that they could know how it was like to be a woman or a man, is, even hypothetically, presented as untenable in the text (p.156). This dream of sexual transfiguration could be seen as a sign of the anxieties existing between the sexes, which represent a thematic concern in the novel. The idea brings to mind the Greek myth of the seer Teiresias, who had in his life been both man and woman.⁷⁹ The significance of Teiresias' legend could be that our deepest dream is not sex, but the 'faculty to see both sides of sex'.⁸⁰ Dream interdicted since for having gained the knowledge of the other's pleasure Teiresias will be blinded. The possibility of heterosexuality itself lies, in fact, in the mystery that envelopes the pleasure of the other. It is within this absolute singularity of pleasure that sexual difference appears to be founded.

Rennie herself has stopped foreseeing a man's next move, as she used to: the other has become unknowable, unassimilable, unpredictable.

79 As a young man Teiresias happened to see two serpents coupling. Attacked, he stroked them killing the female and was immediately transformed into a woman, and became a famous harlot. Seven years later the same event occurred. This time Tiresias killed the male serpent and turned again into man. He was however punished for the knowledge he had gained.

80 Jean Baudrillard, *Les Strategies Fatales* (Paris, 1983) p.116.

Once upon a time Rennie was able to predict men; she'd been able to tell exactly what a given man would do at a given time. When she'd known that, when she was sure, all she had to do was wait and then he would do it. She used to think she knew what most men were like, she used to think she knew what most men wanted and how most men would respond. She used to think there was such a thing as most men, and now she doesn't. She's given up deciding what will happen next (p.241).

Atwood's evaluation of difference is thought also with relation to language and the speaking subject. The position of the woman in language, her role and exclusion from the literary scene, the peculiar relationship she entertains with the act of writing are all object of critical reflection in the texts.

4.6 LANGUAGE, SEXUALITY, DISPLACEMENT: *SURFACING*, *BLUEBEARD'S EGG*, *LIFE BEFORE MAN*

Love you must choose /
 Between two immortalities: /
 One of earth like trees /
 Feathers of a nameless bird /
 The other of a world of glass, /
 Hard marble, carven word.

Margaret Atwood, *Double Persephone*

My own house is divided in two: a room full of paper, constantly in flux, where process, organicism, and fermentation rule and dustballs breed; and another room, formal in design, rigid in content, which is spotlessly clean and to which nothing is added.

This passage from Atwood's 'Unearthing Suite',⁸¹ which has a woman writer as narrator, synthesizes, in a metaphorical image, the dialectics of the process that writing involves. It is an image that suggests a double-sided relation between language and the speaking subject, a relation that can be explained in terms of Kristeva's distinction within the signifying process, between the Semiotic and the Symbolic.

As I have mentioned in the course of this study, the signifying process, by which language is constituted, occurs within two modalities, the Symbolic and the Semiotic. The Symbolic, in the Lacanian sense, is that which imposes names, order and explanations. In the Symbolic order of language, independent signs are bound together by specific laws.⁸² Kristeva contrasts this notion with the semiotic, which she describes as the feminine aspects of language. She posits it as being 'transversal' to the sign, to syntax, to denotation and to meaning. Its articulation is provisional, its rhythm non expressive.⁸³

⁸¹ *Bluebeard's Egg*, p.270.

⁸² Kristeva describes the Symbolic as 'that which, in language, includes all that is sign, that is, at the same time, naming, syntax, meaning and denotation of an object first, or of a scientific truth afterwards'. *The Revolution of Poetic Language*, p.25.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p 30.

In the signifying process these two modalities coexist in a dialectic that is determined by the particular type of discourse involved (narrative, poetry, metalanguage). The subject is simultaneously constructed in the Semiotic and Symbolic, and therefore the signifying system s/he produces is necessary indebted to both. The Semiotic is marginal to the Symbolic, as women are marginal and marginalized in society. Kristeva sees the dialectic between the two as especially relevant to the role of the writer. Atwood's poetic vision, however, the subject's relation to language is thought of in terms of gender. It is the female character in particular that is presented as having a twofold relation to language.⁸⁴

The contrast between different conceptual attitudes to language is often embodied by the contrast between two female characters. Two alternative choices seem to be presented to them. One is to appropriate language - despite its being

⁸⁴ A number of poems treat this theme, 'After the abrupt collision / with the blade, the Word, / I rest on the wood/block, my eyes/draws back into their blue transparent / shells like mollusca, / I contemplate the Word/which was never much under / my control, which was always / inarticulate, still runs / at random through the grass, a plea/for mercy, a single / flopping breast' - 'Songs of the Men's Head', *You Are Happy* (p.41); See also 'Two-Headed Poems', *Two-Headed Poems*, p.59; *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, (p.42 ;p.54); and Atwood's review of Erica Jong's poetry in *Second Words*, pp.167-174 (p.172).

monopolized by men to express woman experience. The other is to reject it as a male instrument that will merely reinscribe woman's marginality, failing to determine any specificity of woman's experience. Atwood's fiction presents this problem in a way that suggests a double-sided relation to language as a possible solution.

Her female protagonists, who are usually, fictive portraits of woman as artist, display a complex relation to language that results in a dynamic of 'appropriation' and 'separatism',⁸⁵ which to a large extent mirrors the condition of the woman writer. This oscillation between the two alternatives, apparent in Atwood's texts, heightens the risk that wholly endorsing one or the other attitude might imply. Homologation, the inscription of woman into the discursive truth of the dominant order, must be avoided, since it does not precipitate changes, and it implies the adopting of a dogmatic position.⁸⁶ On the other hand, for the female subject to remain outside magisterial discourse will not challenge or subvert the discourse of power. What

⁸⁵ Introduced by Mary Jacobus, these options involve the contrasting approaches to language I have described above. 'The Difference of View', *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus.

⁸⁶ Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, (New York and London, 1985), p.44. Jean Francois Lyotard 'One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggle', *Substance*, 20 (1978), 9-17.

one finds in Atwood's texts is an interplay of these two strategies, where the female character appears both inside and outside hegemonic discourse. The character's double nature is reaffirmed and reflected through language, in the double voices and register she uses.

In 'Circe/Mud Poems' in *You Are Happy*, Circe is a paradigm of Atwood's characterization of the female subject in relation to the symbolic order of communication. Here the duality of Circe is also indicated by the title of this sequence of poems. Circe's capacity for transformation and prophecy indicate a capacity to manipulate language, but she also shows a deep distrust for 'these wrecked words' (p. 48). Such a position brings into focus a split subjectivity: it indicates how, on the one hand, woman adheres to the symbolic register, since she speaks, while, on the other hand, she is tied to biology, because of her bodily involvement with the functions that pertain to reproduction. For a woman the problem of reproduction represents itself physically every month and, on a psychic plane, permanently.⁸⁷ In Atwood's work this duality does

87 Julia Kristeva, 'femme/mère/pensée', ed. by Catherine Frabchlin, *Art Press International* (5, 1977), 20-32; Sherry Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?', in *Woman, Culture, Society*, ed. by Michelle Rosaldo and Luise Lamphere (London, 1974), pp. 66-87.

not create mutually exclusive alternatives. On the contrary Atwood problematizes the alignment of woman with nature and silence, as well as the complete adherence of the female subject to the symbolic order of communication. She tends to present her female subject as split between the two domains, at the same time creating a kind of balance and dialectics between the two.

The possibility of women appropriating language and therefore reproducing their experience as women is counterpoised by an opposite stance that sees language as an alien construct and therefore utterly inadequate for women. In Atwood's work this oscillation between an appropriation and a rejection of language is constantly presented and appears, in fact, necessary. The character's double sided relation to language seems to duplicate the experience of the woman writer and her oblique, marginal relation to hegemonic discourse. As Kristeva points out, 'Trapped within the frontiers of the body' a woman 'always feels exiled' from dominant discourses and practices'.⁸⁸ But it is writing itself that can be seen as the overcoming the contradiction

⁸⁸ Julia Kristeva, 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident', translated by Sean Hand, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford, 1987), pp.292-300 (p.296).

and the risk of dangerous identifications with the silent mother.

The protest Marian makes in *The Edible Woman* is enacted at a non-verbal level (the refusal of food), as is the final resolution at the end of the novel, the making of the cake in the shape of a woman. Marian herself recognises that: 'What she needed was something that avoided words, she didn't want to get tangled up in a discussion' (p. 267). Marian's anorexic symptoms can be seen as a device she and Atwood adopt to question the possibility of representing woman's experience through language. But language is also appropriated as a neutral tool, to make sense of the experience. In the novel it is Marian who is the 'manipulator of words' (p.110). She is in fact telling the story, as can be inferred from the discrepancy between knowledge and awareness of Marian the narrator and Marian the character. In this novel, as in *The Handmaid's Tale* 'there is a reflective quality about the narrative that would...rule out synchronicity' (p.315).

Joan's writing in *Lady Oracle*, the Gothic Romance she produces under the pseudonym of Louisa K. Delacourt, though marginal and marginalized, provides her chief means of survival, and also enables her to discover her multiple identities. The fiction and poetry which Joan writes constitute the very space

where contradictions are enacted and ultimately faced. A sign of linguistic appropriation here, as in *The Edible Woman*, is the fact that it is the female protagonist Joan Foster who narrates her own story, as it is implied by the novel's *incipit*.

In *Surfacing* the temporary transcendence of language by the female subject, though presented as a liberating experience, brings about the risk of her plunging into the intransitive language of madness. The novel appears to stereotypically identify the narrator's father with intelligence and rationality, while portraying the mother as in unison with nature. The mother's diaries, in which she merely records the changing of the seasons, indicate, in fact, her distrust of the capacity of language to represent feelings. However, as we read, we realize that Atwood undercuts these polarized identifications and presents them as unsatisfactory. The narrator's identification with the mother is created and then refuted by her. As she comments, 'The only place left for me is that of my mother' (p.60). However, shortly afterward she adds, 'Impossible to be like my mother' (p.60). The text inscribes a solution which does not polarize the opposition between men and women as one

of culture/nature, but concludes that 'For us is necessary, the intercession of words' (p. 224).⁸⁹

Atwood's poems frequently appear to imply that language itself is a male construct and that women have to enter it from the outside in order to have any voice at all. For the female subject to refuse to use man's language is to choose incomprehension and silence.⁹⁰ This sense of non-belonging, of estrangement, also recurs in her poetry. The narrator comments: 'I am a word/in a foreign language'.⁹¹ Women have always been blamed for this silence, this refusal. They have been 'accused - says Circe - of being silent because they would not speak in the received language'.⁹² However, as we shall see, the question is not so simple or clear cut, since both the female characters rejection of language and her appropriation of it is questioned and problematized.

Life Before Man for example highlights the risk for woman of identifying with the silent mother, a risk faced by the heroine in *Surfacing*, as she comments on her sense of exclusion and estrangement from her fellow companions, 'The only place left for me is that of my mother' (p.60). Caroline,

89 Margaret Homans, "'Her Very Own Howl'" The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women's Fiction', *Signs*, 9,2 (Winter 1983), 186-205 (p.197).

90 Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood*, p.43.

91 *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, p.11.

92 'Circe/Mud Poems', p.49.

Elisabeth's younger sister, has pursued the identification with the mother to the extreme point of madness and death. On the other hand, Elisabeth's manipulative use of language, her tricks and lies, which nonetheless enable her to survive, exemplify an appropriation which is equally problematic. She muses on the word mother, commenting 'Mummy. A dried corpse in a gilded case. Mum, silent. Mama, short for mammary gland'. Elisabeth realizes that in the future her daughters will transform her into such an object. She 'will become *My Mother*, pronounced with a sigh' (p.250). To acknowledge the tie to the mother, as Caroline does, is to become silent or to die mad; but to fail to name the mother, as Elisabeth does, and to survive instead 'by annexing other's languages is to survive into silence, the mummified object of the others' speech'.⁹³

However, the texts' re-working of contrasting alternatives to language in a manner that proposes instead their coexistence and interplay, by no means erases difference. *Woman* is still portrayed as the

93 Margaret Homas, *op.cit.*, p.197. In this excellent article, to which I am partly indebted for the above discussion, the author illustrates the different operation pursued by Anglo-American and French feminist criticism and their different readings of the texts, in relation to their contrasting conceptual attitudes to language and experience. Her discussion includes, among other authors, Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Life Before Man*. Although I agree with her on most points, my reading of Lesje differs substantially from hers.

intermediary between culture and nature. As a participant in human social dialogue, she is positioned at the periphery of culture. For the woman writer, as for Atwood's heroine as artist, the relation to the hegemonic discourse finds its specificity in her double belonging - to Nature as well as to Culture - and accordingly, in the double register she uses. This stems from her own marginality, from her oblique relation to the dominant culture, her being within it yet also being 'outside of it, alien and critical'.⁹⁴

Atwood's work frequently focuses on the presence of a double register in relation to the heroine or the woman writer. In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Moodie being herself a writer, the poetic persona notes that: 'Two voices/took turns using my eyes' (p.42). By alternately appropriating and rejecting the dominant discourse, Atwood's female characters duplicate their (and the author) ambiguous experience of both participating in and standing outside the dominant culture. This theme also manifest itself by her use of the motif of 'the double' and internally divided characters.

Atwood's short story 'Loulou; or the Domestic Life of Language', which appears in her recent

⁹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of Own's Own* (London, 1981), p.93.

collection *Bluebeard's Egg*, specifically explores the question of women's marginal position within hegemonic discourse. The story dramatizes woman's (self) exclusion from language, and the strategies of resistance and survival she adopts in a male dominated context, where the power of naming is in the hands of male poets.

Although deceptively light and entertaining in tone, the story exposes - through its female protagonist - the negative position which woman occupies in the symbolic discourse, and can be read in the light of recent psychoanalytic theories, which connect woman's position in language to her sexuality.

Loulou's self-estrangement from language is indicated by the way she eludes and avoids speech: 'Mostly Loulou doesn't like talking in bed. But she is not fond of talking at other times, either' (p.66). Woman's marginal position is emphasised in the story by Atwood's reference to 'the women poets' who 'are only on the edges' (p.70) of the editorial board of small poetry magazines.

Completely immersed in material existence (she makes a living wedging clay) Loulou is contrasted with the male poets who are committed to the abstract qualities of the Logos. It is she who supports the poets, both practically and

metaphorically, by providing them with a house, with the 'daily bread', as well as with her own sheer existence, her *being* there. In order to endure the unbearable condition of being speaking subjects, of having the 'Word', the poets need to rely on a figure who is separate from their own world. It is in this manner that Loulou functions: to guarantee the poets their soul.

Why do you put up with us, Loulou? ' Phil asked her once. Loulou sometimes wonders, but she doesn't know. She knows why they put up with her though, apart from the fact that she pays the mortgage; she is solid, she's predictable, she's always there, she makes them feel safe. But lately she'd been wondering: who is there to make her feel safe?' (p.70).

The strategy of resistance to the poets which Loulou adopts is non verbal, and it is carried out against or beyond language. By making love to her accountant as a token gesture of rebellion, she locates her sphere of action outside language, in the physical realm of the body. This gesture illustrates her position of estrangement in discourse. At the same time it locates her on the side of the body, and sexuality, where she appears as the excess term. Lacan's psychoanalytic theory portrays woman as absent and 'excluded from the nature of things, which is the nature of words'⁹⁵. He nonetheless sees woman

95 Jacques Lacan, 'God and the *jouissance* of The Woman', in *Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*,

as having access to a 'supplementary *jouissance*'.⁹⁶ which is beyond man and the Phallus, that is, beyond the Symbolic order of communication.

Positioned on the side of 'representation' rather than 'creativity', Loulou is merely 'represented' in the language of the poets, where she appears as fragmented in a certain number of words. She is described by the poets as 'Marmoreal', 'Chthonic', 'Telluric', 'Geomorphic', 'the foe of abstract order' (pp.63-64). The Lacanian formulation of femininity sees woman as not whole in symbolic representation. 'The woman is not-all, there is always something with her which eludes discourse'.⁹⁷ In the story Loulou is located within a 'gap', which proves to be a great source of fascination for the poets. She becomes the 'gap between the word and the thing signified' (p.66), the inter-dit beyond signification. Her negative relation to the symbolic order causes her to elude discourse and to be identified with the realm of the body. As Stephen Heath notes, commenting on Lacan's theory, woman: 'misses out on the phallus and misses in the

ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (London, 1983), pp.137-148, (p.144)

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Encore. Le séminaire, livre XX* (Paris, 1975), p.34 (This translation by Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen*, 3, 19 (Autumn, 1978), 51-113.

discourse which it organizes and which is the relay of her excess, her sexuality'.⁹⁸

The contrasting representations of the female character which Atwood creates in her novels also raise the question of language. The conflict between Elaine and Cordelia in *Cat's Eye* is enacted within this realm. Cordelia's appropriation of language is set against Elaine's feeling of inadequacy and powerlessness in mastering it. However, Cordelia quickly discovers this appropriation to be tragically inadequate. Her attempted suicide is a non-verbal way of communicating her suffering, and subsequently she plunges into the non-communicative subjectivity of madness. Elaine, on the other hand, does not have the words to fight Cordelia, and her protest becomes non-verbal, painfully turned against her own body. As they grow up there occurs also a role reversal since as a girl Elaine appears more adept at words than Cordelia is, taunting Cordelia verbally.

A similar contrast between the characters' relation to language is present in the earlier novel *Lady Oracle*, where Joan's marginalization is contrasted with Marlene (an earlier version of Cordelia) and her ability to manipulate language to torture the young heroine. Unlike Elaine, Joan and

98 Stephen Heath, 'Difference', p.59.

Marlene meet in their adult life. The episodes relating to Marlene show that she has unproblematically appropriated the dominant language. Atwood's characterization of Marlene is sharply ironic. It highlights Marlene's faith in the 'power of words'. Her belief in being open about one's feeling is shown to be causing many problems and to be ineffectual. Such elements are absent from the portrayal of Cordelia, who is somehow redeemed by having realized the inadequacy of her strategy, even if at the price of her sanity.

In *Life Before Man* the relation of Lesje with the women's consciousness raising group also raises the question of language. Lesje, like Elaine, feels ill-at-ease with the women's group partly because 'she didn't know the language' (p.63). Both Lesje's and Elaine's reluctance to take an active part in these groups (that is, to relate personal stories and anecdotes) casts doubt on the empiricist belief that language can translate experience.⁹⁹

A focus on woman's distrust of language as a male construct that cannot represent women's

99 However, Atwood also locates woman as the excess term of speech. This can be seen in the narrator's mother extraordinary capacity and love for story telling - the stories themselves being not apt for a male audience, with their frequent reference to bodily pain of which men are thought of being far less capable to bear in comparison to women ('Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother', *Bluebeard's Egg*, pp.21-22).

experience, was already present in Atwood's early collection of short stories, *Dancing Girls*. In the short story 'Giving Birth', the narrator speculates on the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the expression that provides the title for the story: 'But who gives it? And to whom is it given. Certainly it doesn't feel like giving, which implies a flow, a gentle handing over, no coercion ... Maybe the phrase was made by someone viewing the result only: in this case, the rows of babies to whom birth has occurred' (p.225).

Pregnancy and birth in Atwood's works are images often depicted as an artistically creative process. The mother giving birth is the analogue of the artist 'giving life to a world of words'.¹⁰⁰ As in the poem 'Useless', in *You Are Happy* where the 'words we never said' are like 'our unborn children' (p.10). However, once the analogy between reproduction and intellectual production is posed, it has to be noted that Atwood presents also the conflict between the woman and the artist in order to question and reject the supposed dichotomy between motherhood and artistic creativity.

In *Life Before Man* pregnancy becomes a 'creative act',¹⁰¹ by means of which Lesje finally succeeds in

100 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto, 1988), p.148.

101 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.152.

overcoming her previous attitude of passivity and victimization. However, even before the pregnancy, Lesje had already been obliquely depicted as an artist. Her job as paleontologist, poses the question of the appropriation of language (a scientific one in this case), that she is supposed to achieve. Lesje's work on the Ontario Museum among dinosaurs also involves a naming of the world (p.157), a theme Atwood relates more explicitly to the work of the writer in 'Unearthing Suite':

'Perhaps it was then that I began the translation of the world into words. It was something you could do without moving' (p.271). Lesje's naming, as well as her painting, reduplicate the ambiguous experience of the woman artist.¹⁰² However Atwood in this novel takes the question further. By introducing the theme of Lesje's pregnancy she draws attention on the traditional dichotomy between the 'woman' and the 'artist'. This topic was already present in Atwood's first novel, where the notion of creativity is an explicit theme, which the characters discuss overtly.¹⁰³ In *The Edible Woman* the unresolved contrast between Marian, the 'manipulator of words',

102 It is interesting to note that Lesje enjoys painting and that when she paints she rebels against the law of the referent, changing the colours of the dinosaurs from the prescribed ones the experts, to whom she belongs although 'in a minor way' (p.19), have established.

103 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p.151.

with her feeling of revulsion and disgust towards the pregnant body, Ainsley's desire for motherhood, and Clara's pregnancies, finds a possible resolution in *Life Before Man*.¹⁰⁴

Marian's rejection of motherhood could be seen as the artist's refusal to procreate in favour of intellectual creative production. The incompatibility between artistic and literary production and biological reproduction (one which Existentialism profusely stressed) that Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman* seems to imply, is revised in later texts which challenge such mutually exclusive alternatives. *Surfacing*, *Life Before Man*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and finally *Cat's Eye* show how Atwood has overcome the Existentialist dictum, that sees artistic creativity and motherhood as irreconcilable experiences: that is, woman is either confined to the realm of the biological or the intellectual.¹⁰⁵

104 It is Marian who 'tended to forget that Clara had a mind at all or any perceptive faculties' (p.130), who refers to Clara pregnancy as a 'vegetable state'. Besides Clara's third baby bring somehow the possibility of her own pregnancy 'much too close' (p.129).

105 The argument that sees motherhood not compatible with creative work has its roots in the scientific disquisition of XIX century England. To think was to spend vital energy; women however needed to conserve their energy to create in the physical realm. As a consequence all unnecessary brain activity was advised against (Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*); Atwood critically presents this opposition also in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the handmaids, the

It is Lesje's pregnancy in *Life Before Man* that points to and attempts to solve the contradiction. In the short story 'Giving Birth', pregnancy is portrayed as a state that implies a partition (p.230). Pregnancy itself symbolises, in fact, the division of the female body between two registers, the symbolic and the biological. Ultimately it epitomizes, and is the moment where woman's double belonging, to nature as well as culture, occurs.¹⁰⁶ In *Life Before Man* Atwood presents the problem in terms of language and gender, and comments critically and ironically on the traditional assumption of the incompatibility between artistic production and maternity: 'A pregnant paleontologist is surely a contradiction in terms. Her business is the naming of bones, not the creation of flesh' (p.308).

Recurrently in Atwood's critical writing, prose, and poetry she points at the conflict and dilemmas which the woman writer is forced to face, as Atwood herself did, at the beginning of her career.¹⁰⁷

breeders, are forbidden any kind of intellectual activities.

106 Julia Kristeva, 'Femme/mère/pensée'.

107 'You would come to a fork in the road where you'd be forced to make a decision: 'woman' or 'writer'. I chose being a writer because I was very determined, even though it was very painful for me then (the late fifties and early sixties); but I'm very glad that I made that decision because the other alternative would have been ultimately much more painful. It's more painful to renounce your gifts or your direction in life that it is to renounce an individual'. Karla Hammond, 'An Interview with

In the poem 'Spelling' Atwood criticizes a culture that has forced women to choose between sexual reproduction or artistic and literary production. It addresses the women who have submitted to the dichotomy imposed by the other and renounced motherhood, 'so they could mainline words',¹⁰⁸ thinking in a similar manner to Atwood's poet, who retrospectively, sees the fallacy of her choice: 'Don't do it, she wanted to tell them, don't make the mistake I made. But what was her mistake? Thinking she could save her soul, no doubt. By the word alone'.¹⁰⁹

Atwood's position then in relation to language is two-fold. It involves in fact a conjunction and interplay of different and contrasting positions. For to remain outside hegemonic discourse involves great risks, and does not challenge the discourses of power. On the other hand woman's total appropriation of hegemonic language lead to different kind of failure. These two modalities are constantly investigated in Atwood's texts, and she

Margaret Atwood', *The American Poetry Review*, 8, 5 (Sept/Oct 1979), 27-29, (p.29).

108 '...and I wonder how many women / denied themselves daughters, closed themselves in rooms, drew the curtains / so they could mainline words. / A child is not a poem, / a poem is not a child. / There is no either / or./ However. ('Spelling', *True Stories*, p.63)

109 'Lives of the Poets', *Dancing Girls*, p.193. Emphasis in the original.

manages to interplay and combine the two. Woman's marginality, her double 'belonging', is reflected on the level of language. The symbolic order of communication is in fact subjected to a constant dynamic of 'appropriation' and 'separatism'. It is precisely by appropriating and rejecting the dominant discourse that the female characters duplicate their experience of both being part of and standing outside the dominant culture.

Ultimately in *Cat's Eye* Elaine resolves her inadequacy, her 'confusion about words' by turning to painting. Atwood herself resolves it with her own writing which in itself reproduces and problematizes the two modes. 110

110 As Elaine comments on her choice of becoming a painter, 'A lot of my painting then began in my confusion about words' (p. 268). At times Elaine longs to be freed from the tyranny and constraint of words: 'I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be freed from words now, I can lapse back into wordlessness, I can sink back into the rhythms of transience as if into bed' (p.143).

AFTERWORD

I began to forget myself
in the middle
of sentences

Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

'Appropriation' has been defined as a key strategy in the Post-Modern aesthetic. In the course of this study I have discussed the various implications and effects of this strategy in Atwood's fiction. The use and abuse of conventions and literary traditions Atwood makes install and destabilize them. The self-conscious elements in the texts both point to these paradoxes and to their critical re-reading of the art of the past.

The ironic re-appropriation of genres and traditions I have analysed questions notions of originality and authorship.¹ This is indicated, for example, by the use Atwood makes of parodic intertextuality and by Atwood's own vision of writing. Atwood's conceives of the activity not as expressing one self, but as an 'opening', a 'discarding' of the self, 'so that the language and the world may be evoked through you. *Evocation* is quite different from expression... Writing itself is

1 Susy Gablik, 'The Aesthetic of Duplicity', *Art and Design*, 3, 78 (1987), 36.

a process, an activity which moves in and through time, and it is self-less'.² However Atwood sees the writer as being 'inescapably connected with ... society'.³ The writer in fact 'bears witness', both an 'eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others'.⁴ This gives to Atwood's own artistic production the contradictory qualities that have been defined as typically postmodern. Art is a construction separated from the world but at the same time it carries with it political and ideological implications.

Atwood's focus on the ideological and epistemological nature of the human subject problematizes the entire notion of subjectivity, and it points to its dramatised contradictions. The subject as conceived of by liberal humanism, unified and coherent, is replaced by a portrayal of subjectivity as plural and decentered. This brings about a more general questioning of any totalizing and homogenizing system. The notion of centre has in fact been used to function as the pivot between

2 Writing as self-expression, she notes, has unfortunately and improperly been used especially in critical discussions of women writers. 'An End to an Audience', pp.334-359.

3 'Matthews and Misrepresentations', in *Second Words*, pp. 129-150 (p.148).

4 'An End to Audience?', p. 348.

binary opposites which always privilege one half: male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity.⁵ This opening of binary structures that occurs at various levels in Atwood fiction, as this study has illustrated, has a liberating effect as it moves from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of decentering (difference).

The text's problematization of identity presents the ego as a 'transitional' construct, as we read in *Cat's Eye* (p.180). The discontinuity in the texts' narrative forms parallels a lack of unicity in the subject. The latter is represented as a non-synthesized totality, a name that denotes a site of conflicts. The connection I have tried to point out in *The Handmaid's Tale* between subjectivity, textuality and the writing of history show that both literature and history become 'unstable process in meaning-making, no longer final products of past and fixed meaning'.⁶ I have also highlighted Atwood's critique of the Enlightenment project. However, I think, that rather than being paralyzed by the loss of stability and unicity of the Cartesian order, there is an attempt to devise a strategy to live within this predicament.

5 Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.62.

6 Ivi, p.189.

Surfacing, for example, starts with a typical modernist theme of the single and alienated consciousness confronted with otherness. In the concluding part, however, the novel presents a positive resolution in breaking the rigid lines that form the binary self and other. In *Lady Oracle* the dominant image is that of the trapeze, an image which signifies a movement that includes different dimensions. The result is the postmodern multiplicity, heterogeneity rather than binary oppositions and exclusion. However, Atwood's investigation in the ideological construction of subjectivity portrays women as particularly contradictory subjects, but also attributes a positive value to woman's marginality. It is in fact from the margin that one can recognize the centre as a construct, not a fixed unchangeable reality, so that the either/or axis can be broken down in order to give way to the both/and of multiplicity.

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