

# An intertextual reading of female characters in Margaret Atwood's work

PhD

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## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Declaration of original authorship .....   | 3   |
| Acknowledgements .....   | 4   |
| Abstract .....   | 5   |
| Introduction .....   | 6   |
| Chapter 1: Engendering dialogue: intertextual analysis in Margaret Atwood's work ..... | 22  |
| Chapter 2: Negotiating with the body: <i>The Edible Woman</i> .....                    | 69  |
| Chapter 3: <i>Surfacing</i> : transforming identities .....                            | 106 |
| Chapter 4: Bodily Sight: <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> .....                              | 147 |
| Chapter 5: <i>Cat's Eye</i> : the power of sight .....                                 | 209 |
| Concluding remarks .....   | 261 |
| Bibliography of works cited and consulted .....  | 268 |

## **Declaration of original authorship**

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged

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## Abstract

The intertextual dialogue in a selection of Margaret Atwood's novels is the focus of this thesis. The chapters analyse four novels: *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*. Chapter 1 posits the theoretical framework, drawing ideas from Bakhtin, Kristeva, Riffaterre, Hutcheon and Foucault. The intertextual conversation in Atwood's novels questions traditional narratives in a continuous exchange that generates visions that are alternatives to the roles and rules of the androcentric society. The frequent use of intertexts allows a 'dialogic thought' that opens up to multiple diverse visions that deny dichotomous restrictive roles that are implemented through traditional narratives in schools and families in a consumerist and exploitative perspective. The openness to different views gives space to a broader human vision and possible multiple readings in a continuous relationship and conversation with the Other that generates identities in flux; it is a never-ending process that creates new meanings in changing contexts where opposites coexist. The incongruous roles proposed by society are therefore exposed as restrictive and menacing and new approaches are proposed that aim for human survival. From this view, humanity is saved in a process of continuous questioning that is self-reflexive as well as in tension with previous narratives from high and low culture and traditional and contemporary discourses where the angle continuously shifts in a revolutionary mode. This entails the intertextual 'dialogic thought', the disruptive vision of *écriture féminine* and the position of the reader function in conversation with the writer function within the novels. Various readings are therefore proposed without a definite closure, allowing further developments that go beyond the ending in a world of language where 'reality' is constructed in words. Atwood's literary world is representative of a political and social context and, at the same time, challenges this 'reality' in an attempt to rewrite these narratives from within through the intertextual conversation.

## Introduction

Intertextuality is a modality of perception, the deciphering of the text by the reader in such a way that he identifies the structures to which the text owes its quality of work of art.

Michel Riffaterre, *Syllepsis*, 1980

There is no either/or.  
However.

Margaret Atwood, 'Spelling', *True Stories*, 1981

You can wander away. You can get lost.  
Words can do that.

Margaret Atwood, 'Dearly', *Dearly*, 2020

The critical analysis of the intertextual dialogue in Margaret Atwood's novels reveals a constant conversation within the main text. The novels question and challenge the narratives of the androcentric dominant society via the recurring use of intertexts and allusions and invite a rethinking of traditional discourses. The intertextual references are reversed, deconstructed and revised in order to suggest a different vision which is diverse, multiple and non-dichotomous. It is an attempt to change the narratives from within to form a new human view in a female perspective. This perspective is multifaceted and open; it is in progress and encompasses different aspects of being human.

In my thesis I argue that Margaret Atwood's use of intertexts aims to revise traditional narratives of the patriarchal society in the sociopolitical context that existed at the time the novels I analyse were published. This attempted revision is also relevant at the time of writing in view of the risk of backlashes against women and human rights as well as against environmental concerns. Atwood's rewriting of these types of narratives is an attempt to remythologise the stories, myths and legends that construct our world, a world of language. The intertextual allusions and interpretations parody the texts in a dialogic mode that exposes the incongruities of the constricted roles of the patriarchal society. The intertexts are therefore a tool that deconstructs obsolete narratives and changes them from within; the intertexts propose alternative visions. Thus, questioning and proposing are the two parallel paths Atwood adopts to envisage a change in a polyvalent view that is diverse, flexible and in flux. It is a work in progress that needs to adapt to different sociopolitical situations. In this new vision, she is committed to giving voice and space to marginalised groups, especially to women.

The thesis focuses on four novels that are analysed chronologically. They span a period of about twenty years when second-wave feminism was proposing more radical views in a society that was turning more conservative and becoming more limiting for women. I argue that Atwood exposes the constricted and diminished roles forced on women in the intertextual dialogue and develops the protagonists' attempts to progress towards more autonomous selves. The selection of intertextual references that I have chosen to examine means to highlight the oppressive and threatening message of the patriarchal narratives, as will be seen in my analysis of the novels. The traditional narratives are exceedingly demanding; they not only force women into caged roles but also menace their being. Opposing and rebelling against the status quo seems to be the only way to survive developing self-awareness and knowledge through an exploration that involves the body and connects to the maternal *chora*, a pre-linguistic status that occurred before the symbolic law of the father, according to Kristeva. In this way, Atwood's female protagonists acquire power to form a whole self through language in a dynamic exploration in which the body is central. Through the intertextual dialogue, that is, through the reinterpretation of the intertextual connections within the main text, the novels propose alternatives to the reader. Thus, the reader is invited to take part in the intertextual dialogue; they are an active reader that develops awareness and knowledge in the course of their reading and takes an active part in solving the 'ungrammaticalities' of the text by exploring the intertextual connections and questioning the narratives of the dominant society. The reader is therefore called on to participate in the dialogue, to take a stand and maybe change their opinions and revise the narratives as well as to take action by seeking social justice. As Atwood claims in one of her interviews, 'I like the reader to participate in writing the book' and to make their choice in the sociopolitical context.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, Julie Sanders remarks that adaptations and appropriations create art and highlight 'how literature is made by literature'.<sup>2</sup> She quotes Derrida: 'the desire to write is the desire to launch things that come back to you as much as possible'<sup>3</sup>; this implies creativity and innovation as well as 'a political or ethical commitment' in the reinterpretation of the source text,<sup>4</sup> which occurs in Atwood's work. It is a 'rewriting' impulse that is inevitably a political act. The novelist's commitment to social justice and her environmental concerns develop throughout her work, proving her understanding of the potential of language to shape our world and her desire for possible alternative 'truths'; she points out this commitment via her parodic use of the intertexts, which is not just a playful postmodern strategy but is also, above all, an adherence to a practice that deconstructs traditional narratives. In *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, these concepts are at the first stage of development and interweave with a personal and Canadian

identity. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*, the discourse is further developed towards concerns about a backlash against civil rights as well as a concern about a broader view of the human condition. There is a continuous conversation in the novels that emphasises a tension between survival and what it means to be a woman, or, in a broader sense, what it means to be human in a society that endangers the human condition. The novels suggest alternatives that might influence the reader and trigger change in the particular sociopolitical context, such as the action that occurred after the release of the Hulu TV series of *The Handmaid's Tale* when protesters wore red outfits and white-winged headdresses 'to demonstrate the thin line that separates some current political states from the Republic of Gilead', as Kołodziejuk Feldman remarks;<sup>5</sup> this connects *The Handmaid's Tale* narratives to today's scenarios.

Furthermore, the open endings of the novels that I analyse testify to Atwood having a sceptical view of possible total changes, because the narratives can be rewritten but old stories loom and the protagonists go back to a society that has not changed (*The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*) or to an uncertain future (*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*); neither case allows the protagonists to implement what they have learned or to be understood in the course of their stories.

Nevertheless, in Atwood's last novel, *The Testaments*, and in recent talks and interviews, she reveals a more optimistic view. She trusts the new generation and recent movements such as MeToo, Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter. According to the novelist, young people involved in these movements are committed to change and fight for civil rights and for a better future for the environment. She remarks that there are several possible futures; which one we end up having depends on people's choices and on the way they vote. My method of examining the intertextual references is therefore in line with and confirms Atwood's sociopolitical aims that are developed in language, that is, in her revision of patriarchal narratives in a dialogic mode. Her desire for change and her exploration of possible alternative 'truths' point to personal and human survival in a world that is risking social and environmental extinction.

The four novels I chose to analyse were written in the first part of Atwood's career and work in pairs; they reveal the intertextual strategies circulating in the years of their publication, that is, the 1970s and 1980s. Kristeva reinterprets and applies Bakhtin's concepts of 'dialogic thought' and the disruptive function of the novel. These concepts support my arguments as well as Kristeva's theories of maternal *chora* and poetic language, as will be seen in the following chapters. My work explores various intertextual connections, which have not been investigated by critics before, through the lens of Kristeva's theories and some of Riffaterre's views about intertextual potentials and verisimilitude. The thesis identifies a dynamic relationship between



the intertexts and the theoretical discourse that allows fluidity and diverse alternatives, and, at the same time, promotes commitment to human right and environmental issues and further discussions. The conclusions are a work in progress that is offered to future readers and provides possible new visions of being human.

Various critics have pointed out that Atwood uses intertexts in a parodic and ironic way to criticise traditional discourses.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Atwood is in line with what Bakhtin and Kristeva claim about the novel:

The *novel*, seen as a text, is a semiotic practice in which the synthesized patterns of several utterances can be read.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, according to Kristeva, the novel cannot be considered to be an isolated product but is necessarily connected to other texts which gain value and are defined within the main text.<sup>8</sup>

Kristeva brings Bakhtin to the attention of intellectuals and linguistic theorists in her essay 'Word, Dialogue, and the Novel', which was first published in *Critique* in 1967.<sup>9</sup> She developed her concepts of intertextuality, the polyphonic novel, the carnivalesque and dialogue between texts from Bakhtin's line of thinking, which she interprets in the essay:

The novel, and especially the modern, polyphonic novel, incorporating Menippean elements, embodies the effort of European thought to break out of the framework of causally determined identical substances and head towards another modality of thought that proceeds through dialogue (a logic of distance, relativity, analogy, nonexclusive and transfinite opposition).<sup>10</sup>

The 'dialogic thought' expressed in Bakhtin's work and restated by Kristeva celebrates the carnivalesque and the modern polyphonic novel, their ambivalence and non-disjunction. The transgressive function of the novel is therefore expressed in the conversation between the main text and the intertexts, where the narratives of the ideologeme are questioned in an attempt to rewrite them. Furthermore, the ambiguous polyphonic function of the novel allows the coexistence of opposite views that operate in non-disjunction. The novel is the expression of a

contradictory ideologeme that is open to new views and to transgression and, at the same time, remains linked to the symbolic world of tradition; this is different to epics and monological texts, which have a symbolic function.<sup>11</sup> This polyvalent quality of the novel is linked to 'a semiotic practice based on the sign, [where] contradiction is solved by nondisjunction'.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, 'the novel is not possible unless the disjunction between two terms can be denied while all the time being there, confirmed and approved'.<sup>13</sup> This ambivalence allows the novel to produce 'a literary work [that partakes] of the semiotic practice of the sign' that is manifested in nondisjunction and deviation.<sup>14</sup> In Atwood's work this creates a continuous tension between new and old visions that disrupts and challenges the traditional narratives in order to change them, but their power is also reaffirmed.

Therefore, in a poetic literary world, there is a continuous intertextual dialogue that is polyvalent and transgressive at a linguistic level, that is, in the grammar and style of the text/s; it disrupts the narratives of the dominant society in a revolutionary way. The concept of nondisjunction gives space to multiple views that can be contradictory and coexist in an encompassing inclusive vision that Kristeva calls semiotic and links to the ambivalence of the sign. In Atwood's work, the exposure of the incongruities, contradictions and threatening qualities of the intertexts in the context of the novels reveals the need to change the angle – to modify the stories, to rewrite them. Consequently, the constructed and constricted roles imposed by the dominant society on the individual are restricting, frightening and entrapping. In the novels, the characters, mainly female characters, struggle to find alternatives to these roles in order to survive. It is a process that does not reach a conclusion and involves many failures but maintains a hopeful view. It is a movement of coming and going in an intertextual dialogue that is complex and implies doubts and drawbacks. This dialogue suggests alternatives but never states conclusions in a constant exchange that engenders multiple interpretations.

The intertextual references are therefore a means that Atwood uses to embed her stories in a world of literature, or language, in order to expose and parody the incongruities of the dominant society. It is an attempt to rewrite the narratives and to envisage a possible alternative ontological vision – a female view that is multiple. This vision is multifaceted and encompasses different ways of being human where identities are in flux. Fixed or frozen roles are therefore denied; instead, roles are in progression and do not have a final goal. The rules of these roles are implemented through school, family and advertising discourses as well as literary, religious and traditional narratives and are questioned in the intertextual conversation. Thus, in the novels, the

roles proposed by society are exposed as restricting; they alienate the self and do not allow transformation. From a consumerist point of view, they are exploitative roles, that is, the consumerist modern society forces these roles on people in order to control and exploit the individual for its own profit. Woman's marginal view gives her the opportunity to observe this situation from a different angle, to see things from within and from without in a movement that allows her freedom of thought as well as different points of view.

Regarding this alternative ontological vision, I use the word ontology to mean pure philosophical ontology, that is, the study of what exists, but this is not related in my study to scientific ontology or to computer science. Pure philosophical ontology considers the concept of existence and therefore how life is experienced by the subject. It should answer the following questions: 'what it means for something to exist [...] [and] why there exists something rather than nothing'.<sup>15</sup> Some philosophical approaches connect ontology to logic in a combinatorial approach, that is, these approaches suggest that they should complement one another and be integrated with scientific ontology as well.<sup>16</sup> In contrast with these ideas, Heidegger claims that '*ontology is possible only as phenomenology*',<sup>17</sup> that is, through reflection on experience, which connects his thinking to an existential view. He therefore reflects on 'what it means for something to exist or to be', and considers experience in his thinking.<sup>18</sup>

According to Grosz, ontology, which she renames ontoethics, is 'a way of thinking about not just how the world is but how it could be, how it is open to change, and above all, the becoming it may undergo.'<sup>19</sup> This cannot be separated from ideology, politics and possible socio-cultural changes. For this reason, I do not see ontology as being useful for explaining scientific and mathematical models, but as helpful in understanding how to experience life in relation to others and in consideration of a future that might be changeable. This is related to ethics and politics 'in the sense that they make a difference to how we live and act, what we value, and how we produce and create'.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Grosz connects ontology to Spinoza's thinking. The philosopher provides an alternative to the dualistic Cartesian opposition of *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (body), which reaffirms Platonic dualism.<sup>21</sup> Human understanding of the world and of ethics is based on relations with others that might create new values that contradict the dominant societal rules.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the ideal and material world are linked and multiple views coexist. For Spinoza, there is only one world or one order that we can understand, however temporarily or imperfectly.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the Cartesian dualism is overcome in the expression of one world that is both material and ideal. In this condition, ethics is produced 'by encounters with others', that is, relations in which subjects engage with other 'forces and powers' in order to

organise processes of understanding.<sup>24</sup> In this kind of ordering, things and ideas, that is, material and ideal substances, are 'two forms of emanation or expression of a single substance'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, mind and body are not separated but form one substance; they are connected in creative encounters that modify each other reciprocally.<sup>26</sup> This connection between mind and body and the relation with other minds and other bodies affect each other and generate new perspectives. It is a cohesive process that is centred around the body in increased scales of complexity and in a coexisting mode.<sup>27</sup> In addition, from this ontological perspective, language, art and artefacts are classified as activities that shape and colour the world 'in a distinctly human way'.<sup>28</sup> These entities are 'physical and abstract at the same time' as they manifest abstract properties and concepts that are embodied in culture.<sup>29</sup> Language, art and artefacts attempt to manipulate 'aspects of the physical world in the service of an idea'.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, in capitalist production, any concrete being has 'a double ontological quality, as both a material object of utility and an abstract exchange-value'.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the 'usefulness' or the commodification of an object or being is part of its entity and is political or biopolitical, and it is related to power, as Foucault claims.<sup>32</sup>

In my research, these concepts are related to what Atwood develops in her work. She develops a vision of being human which is multiple and involves both mind and body in a multi-layered perspective. This view is rooted in the ontological thinking that answers existential questions and is based on phenomenology, that is, on experience. It is both material and abstract because it involves the expression of opinions that might affect the material world in an interchange of viewpoints. This also happens in a world of interactions, of relations between bodies and ideas, of connections between texts in a 'dialogic thought' where temporary understandings are developed and possible changes are proposed. The intertextual exchange is therefore justified in a broader view that involves the essence of being human and is based on both material and ideal experience; the aim of this is to understand the world around us and to survive, which, at the same time, shapes the world through art and language.

The intertextual dialogue within the novels progresses in a continuous exchange that reflects Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogic thought',<sup>33</sup> that is, the constant dialogue between texts that engenders multiple meanings and new interpretations and via which the reader becomes active in their 'relationship with the text'.<sup>34</sup> In this way, the text, and therefore the intertextual dialogue too, form and transform personalities, emphasising communication and relationships.<sup>35</sup> Meaning and interpretation are generated in a dialogue which is always contextual, that is, it is 'always dependent on the interdetermination of the texts we have experienced'.<sup>36</sup> This can be

'experienced as a kind of simultaneity, a perception of two or more things in one'; some critics have called this perception 'palimpsestuous',<sup>37</sup> which is a characteristic we can also find in Atwood's novels in the form of bricolage and pastiche. These layers of interpretations influence the referential works, that is, the intertexts, as well as the reading of the main text. In the intertextual practice of borrowing, quoting, reversing and rewriting, Atwood acknowledges the power of the intertexts in the narratives of society. For this reason, the alternatives proposed by the novels deny and reaffirm, at the same time, the discourse of modern society in a 'dialogic thought' that reshapes identities.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, Atwood not only refers to texts that are present in the 'real' world, borrowing from low and high culture, visual, literary and musical texts, but she also creates her own intertexts, evoking products that are present in reality. Intertexts are commonly described as texts that directly refer to a tangible, real aspect of reality, for example a book, a picture or a song.<sup>39</sup> In addition to this kind of intertext, Atwood sometimes adopts intertextual references that are close to reality but the object is not present in the 'real' world. I argue that these are intertexts as well, as Atwood treats them as such in her perspective, that is, as a means to comment on and parody the rules and roles of the dominant society. In her novels, she uses them in a transgressive, subversive way in order to suggest alternative visions. For example, even though there was not a Moose Beer commercial in reality (*The Edible Woman*), the advertisement refers to the commercials of the 1960s, such as those for Canada Dry. In Elaine's paintings (*Cat's Eye*), which are reversed ekphrasis, the pictures are inspired by works of Canadian painters that Atwood mentions in the foreword. In *Surfacing*, the indigenous pictographs the protagonist finds during the exploration of the lake do not refer to specific products but, as Atwood claims in an interview, to her notion of pictographs she took from a book by Selwyn Dewdney.<sup>40</sup> These intertexts are created by the narratives and evoke something that is present in the 'real' world. There is therefore a conversation between the created intertext and the main text that questions the reader and challenges the narratives of the dominant society, which is similar to what happens via the 'tangible' intertexts in the novels. The network of the intertexts is therefore complex and multifaceted in Atwood's work. The created intertexts engender new interpretations; they criticise and parody prescribed views and propose alternatives in a constant transformation that occurs at the linguistic level according to the transgressive function of the novel.

From this intertextual perspective, the reader is important both in the interpretation of the intertextual dialogue and in their choice to be engaged with it. The reader is invited to connect

with the intertexts and re-read them in view of the narratives of the novels and compare them with the narratives of modern society, as will be seen in Chapter 1. This implies an involvement that is also a continual questioning and rethinking that involves tension between the main text and the intertexts but is also in parallel with what occurs in the 'real' world. The concepts of intertextual reading and intertextual dialogue are not new, although the term 'intertextual' was used for the first time by Kristeva in the 1960s. The idea that all products of art and literature are a copy of a copy goes back to Plato and is developed in the Socratic dialogues as repetition of previous thoughts and oeuvres that are discussed and possibly reinterpreted. This concept of repetition and reinterpretation in a dialogic exchange is also present in the work of Latin authors, such as Cicero and Quintilian; the latter highlights 'a process of transformation'<sup>41</sup> that the Latin author names 'liquefaction', that is, an assimilation between the main text and 'its "originating" model'.<sup>42</sup> It is a dynamic imitation that generates new interpretations and whose original source is impossible to locate.

In Western culture, the intertextual dialogue is testified to in the works of authors such as Bacon, Shakespeare, Erasmus, Montaigne and Du Bellay.<sup>43</sup> The quotations, allusions and 'stealing' always imply a view that supplements meaning, assimilates the intertext and reinterprets it at least in part. It is an active discussion, for example, in Montaigne's essays, where the tradition is questioned, as it occurs in the Socratic dialogues. Critics and philosophers of language, such as Bakhtin, Genette, Kristeva, Riffaterre, Culler, Barthes, Foucault, Bloom, Hutcheon and Derrida have approached intertextuality in different ways, as will be seen in this thesis. Their thoughts range from Bakhtin's description of it as 'dialogic thought' that generates transgressive intertextual dialogue within the novel, which was developed further by Kristeva, to Riffaterre's concept of 'fictional truth' in which the intertextual reading engenders a 'system of verisimilitude'.<sup>44</sup> Barthes opens the concept to diverse possible interpretations and to different, sometimes untraceable texts that empower the reader at the expense of the author. Genette proposes the concept of transtextuality,<sup>45</sup> that is, 'everything, be it explicit or latent, that links one text to the others',<sup>46</sup> and connects his study of palimpsestic texts to 'new and different circuits of meaning and meaningfulness'.<sup>47</sup> According to Derrida, using repetition is the only way in which a text can be made understandable. Therefore, it is inevitable that a network of texts must be inserted in the main text as a part of a dissemination of meanings where the centre or the source is always displaced. The intertextual reading therefore poses several questions, the answers to which reaffirm and renew past narratives in a transformational perspective that is always in process and has lost its original referent.

Atwood's work is also in line with what Woolf, Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray state about *écriture féminine*; she proposes and develops this form of language, though she does not advocate it. These feminist writers envisaged a future in which women writers would develop their identity and vision. For Atwood, this future is happening right now. She is a woman writer who develops a female vision in various forms: poetry, essays, short fiction, novels, reviews, conference papers and critical work. She borrows, challenges and rewrites the stories of the dominant society in an intertextual dialogue within the main text in her novels. It is a process that is open to possible future development where multiple different visions coexist in a revolutionary view that happens at a linguistic level and relates to the disruptive function of the novel and the transgressive quality of the intertextual dialogue. According to Cixous, who theorised *écriture féminine* in 1975, women should write starting from their bodies in order to express their feelings and passions, that is, their vision, which is different from the views and roles imposed on them by the patriarchal society. This writing is therefore transgressive and in opposition to the roles that have been assigned to women for centuries. According to Cixous, this practice will engender 'une mutation des relations humaines de la pensée, de toutes les pratiques' that will change history and human relations.<sup>48</sup>

My contribution to the study of Atwood's work is to highlight and analyse this intertextual dialogue in her novels and to emphasise the connections with a wider intertextual theory, as expressed by theorists such as Bakhtin and Kristeva, Hutcheon and Riffaterre, and her associations with the feminist works of Woolf, Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, as will be seen in Chapter 1 and in the analysis of the novels. Atwood's work is in line with the theories of all these authors; she develops what these authors have already described in their works. Her novels therefore test the narratives of the dominant society and put them in tension with possible alternatives that give space to marginalised voices such as those raised in women's stories. A revolutionary progression develops in her work in an attempt to define a different way of being human that is non-dichotomous and implies a wider vision that encompasses different perspectives. In this view, intertextuality operates in Atwood's novels in a deconstructive way. It exposes the incongruities and obsolete roles of modern society, acknowledges the power of the narratives and attempts to suggest different interpretations. These readings do not intend to demonstrate or state any definite solutions or viewpoints but nevertheless operate at a socio-political level. As Benjamin claims, 'the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency' and vice versa.<sup>49</sup> Everything happens in the 'living social context' which is 'determined by conditions of production'.<sup>50</sup> The author is a producer and the reader becomes a collaborator in a dialectic exchange with the texts.<sup>51</sup> This concept reflects the approach that is taken in Atwood's

novels, where the narratives are engaged with the sociopolitical discourse and special attention is given to the female condition in order to give voice to marginalised situations. This view associates the conversation of the novels with the intertexts and with the 'real' world, that is, a world constructed in language. As Benjamin claims in 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man',

[I]language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question 'What does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicate itself.'<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, everything occurs in language in a construction that Benjamin calls 'naming' and implies a 'mental entity' that is in language too, and engenders identity.<sup>53</sup> This 'mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language'.<sup>54</sup> In a similar way, the answer to Mallarmé's question 'Who is Speaking?' is again language itself. This confirms the impossibility of having a unique truth in the world of language; this truth is ineliminably changeable in time and therefore it is in flux. Language speaks its own meaning, as Foucault claims; it is an autonomous reality where the essence of human beings, that is, their identity, is both empirical and 'transcendental'.<sup>55</sup> According to Foucault, it includes the 'thought' and the 'unthought', that is, their empirical reality.<sup>56</sup> As Atwood claims, 'I do see the novel as a vehicle for looking at society – an interface between language and what we choose to call reality, although that is a very malleable substance.'<sup>57</sup> Thus, identity is constructed in language, in the dialogic exchange between texts where the revolutionary approach of the novel is connected to the social context. In Atwood's novels, this approach is confirmed in a linguistic construction that transforms and shapes identities in words, that is, in writing, in the practice of *écriture féminine* and in the intertextual dialogue. My intertextual reading of Margaret Atwood's work intends to explore this transgressive progression; she not only deconstructs the androcentric world in her novels, but also rethinks reality and identities. From this new perspective, women and other previously marginalised categories of people would be allowed to have more opportunities. Therefore, in the analysis of the novels, I will pay attention to the interlacing paths of intertextuality, language, *écriture féminine* and the reader's function in the texts. The 'dialogic thought' connects these elements in Atwood's texts, suggesting and engendering new possible visions that are multiple and inclusive.

The first chapter, 'Engendering dialogue: intertextual analysis in Margaret Atwood's work', presents the critical framework I use in the analysis of the novels. It is divided into three



sections: intertextuality, *écriture féminine* and the reader. My intertextual analysis is mainly based on Bakhtin's and Kristeva's theories but also draws ideas from Riffaterre's concepts of syllepsis and ungrammaticalities and Hutcheon's interpretation of parody in Atwood's work. The notion of the novel as disruptive and revolutionary in a poetic world that is polyvalent is at the core of Kristeva's theory, which echoes and develops Bakhtin's ideas, and is the key concept in Atwood's work. *Écriture féminine* is linked to this conception because it suggests an alternative language, a female language that starts from the body and is different from the language of the patriarchal society. It disrupts and opposes its rules and roles and proposes an alternative vision. In this quest for a new identity, Atwood's female protagonists express their emotions through a pre-language that is connected to the body and to the relation with the mother in order to attain wholeness in a new dimension that encompasses mind and body and defines a new vision, a female vision.<sup>58</sup> In the section about the reader, I analyse the reader's function by employing the theories of Barthes, Riffaterre, Eco and Foucault. I compare their concepts with what Atwood claims in *Negotiating with the Dead*, when she emphasises the function of the active reader, who is crucial in her novels. The reader is an accomplice and voyeur but also the *Dear Reader*, the 'You' to whom the novel is handed over; the reader grants its survival through the act of reading and interpretation, which is free but also bound to the novel's style, that is, to its language and intertextual references. Therefore, the reader's interpretations are indefinite but not infinite. The concepts delineated in the three sections are connected through their transgressive strategies that question the narratives of modern society and propose alternative visions and multiple inclusive discourses.

Chapter 2, 'Negotiating with the body: *The Edible Woman*', explores how Atwood demystifies the romance plot in her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, by exposing the world of consumerism as artificial and threatening to the point of cannibalism. This is revealed through references to fairy tales and myths with cannibalistic undertones and is also highlighted in the reference to the theme of the eaten heart in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. The narrative points out the inherent cannibalistic quality of the consumerist society in which human beings are commodities and their roles are dictated by commercials and the ferocious rules of profit. The intertextual dialogue develops this connection, criticising the constricted roles assigned to women, and men. From this perspective, the protagonist's body rebels against the roles assigned by society and speaks a pre-language that allows her to envisage a possible different vision. The body speaks its rebellion, as suggested in *écriture féminine*, a rebellion that relates to the disruptive function of the novel that occurs in the intertextual dialogue.

In Chapter 3, '*Surfacing: transforming identities*', I explore the deconstruction of myths and fairy tales which exposes the constructed gender roles in the dominant society. The novel subverts and reverses traditional texts, opening them up to new possible interpretations in the Canadian context and in the modern context in general. New ideas are investigated to look for different possible paths. From this viewpoint, the novel highlights the importance of finding new narratives that refer to Canadian folk tales, such as the indigenous stories of the Wendigo and the Quebecois stories of *Loup Garou*. The Grimm Brothers' fairy tales and the Demeter–Persephone myth are also explored in a quest that involves the protagonist at both a personal and a national level. The protagonist's language reflects the experimental quality of *écriture féminine* at the border with prose and poetry, as will be seen in the chapter, which fits with the disruptive element present in poetic language, as Kristeva states. The intertextual dialogue emphasises the re-mythologising of traditional stories in the open space offered by the wilderness of the island where the novel is set. In her progress, or female journey, towards a possible wholeness, the surfer envisages a possible inclusive vision that implies transformation and the acceptance of multiplicity.

The fourth chapter, '*Bodily sight: The Handmaid's Tale*', focuses on how and why Offred's discourse challenges Gileadean narratives, using intertextual references in a parodic way to expose the incongruities of the dominant oppressive society, and it offers possible alternative visions. The intertextual references, which are mainly biblical but also refer to myths and literary texts, deconstruct stereotypical conceptions of binary oppositions that are used as propaganda in the dystopic world of Gilead. The novel offers a possibility of transformation, and this is reflected both in the language used and in the tension between Gileadean stories and the novel's parodied versions that expose the necessity of adopting a different angle. This implies a tenacious process of survival in a constant metamorphosis, as well as the need to save human culture in a wider perspective. The intertextual dialogue within the novel gives space to a rethinking of the rules and roles of the oppressive dominant society and questions the reader's position in this world as well as societal power relationships.

The last chapter, '*Cat's Eye: the power of sight*', analyses the interweaving of literary, visual and scientific references in the narration. This reveals a complex, multi-layered, encompassing view that entails literature, science and visual art. Thus, both at the level of language/s and in the intertextual dialogue, the novel suggests an alternative view of being human which is a work in progress that does not reach a final goal and is open to different views that coexist and to further developments. The novel reveals existential elements that envisage a possible comprehensive

view. Narration is essential from both a linguistic and a visual point of view and is mediated by language in the novel; it considers different languages, including the language of science. This gives a wider ontological view to this novel, in which the 'dialogic thought' is at different levels and works both vertically and horizontally in the course of the narration. It works horizontally in the connection between language or literature, art and science, and vertically in the 'transparencies' or the different layers of Elaine's memories that superimpose themselves onto the intertextual dialogue. This creates a complex network of references that interweave with her life and proposes a possible new vision of being human, which is related to the theories of intertextuality, *écriture féminine* and the reader's function. It is useful to end my analysis of Atwood's oeuvre with *Cat's Eye* because it suggests a broader comprehensive view compared with the views in Atwood's previous works and sets out an alternative human vision. It is an encompassing and multifaceted view which aims for human survival in a more open and inclusive perspective. This vision is not final and does not give final answers; it is a work in progress that invites a rethinking of the narratives and a possible rewriting of traditional stories in a more comprehensive view.

My analysis will therefore encompass the multi-layered implications of intertextuality, *écriture féminine* and the reader's function that interweave in Atwood's novels and will suggest an inclusive view that might entail language, art and science. It is a new ontological vision, a female vision that disrupts the order of the patriarchal society and offers alternatives to the flaws of its narratives.

Drawing together these viewpoints, the thesis presents an intertextual reading of Margaret Atwood's work in which power and pleasure coexist in the dialogic relation between reader and text/s. I will pay specific attention to the ways in which Atwood uses irony and parody and palimpsestic elements or recurring signs in the world of the language of the text.<sup>59</sup> In the polyphony of the subversive novel she gives voice to marginalised categories, especially women, recreating roles and myths in a 'fictional truth' that mobilises interpretations and points to hope.<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ewelina Kołodziejuk Feldman, 'Mothers, Daughters, Sisters: The Intergenerational Transmission of Womanhood in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*', *Elope*, 17, 1 (2020), pp. 67-85 (p. 68), available at <<https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.17.1.67-85>> [accessed 25 March 2021].

<sup>6</sup> See Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 4-5; Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 11; Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 9; Jane Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 6; Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern. A study of contemporary Canadian fiction* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 138, 144 and 146.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text', in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 36-63 (p. 37).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Alice Jardine, *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*, ed. by Mari Ruti (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 64-91 (pp. 85-86).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Dale Jacquette, *Ontology* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 4-5, 9 and 42-43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20, emphasis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13 and 23.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>28</sup> Jacquette, p. 265.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>31</sup> Kiarina Kordela, *Being, Time, Bios: Capitalism and Ontology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. xi.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Dennis Cutchins, 'Bakhtin, Intertextuality and Adaptation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. by Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-16 (p. 2).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> In this context, Caselli's innovative work, *Beckett's Dantes*, has an interesting approach to intertextuality; it amply demonstrates in a close, almost philological reading, which is in line with Dante's critics, how frequently Beckett borrows from Dante's work, especially from *The Divine Comedy*. This marks a difference between Beckett and Atwood: whereas Beckett in his work mainly refers to one author and one work, repeating and re quoting Dante (often reiterating the same passages from *The Comedy*), Atwood borrows from different sources, referring to high and popular culture. Nevertheless, Caselli's critical method of closely analysing the words and structures might be a useful way to analyse Atwood's work and connects to her parodic use of intertexts. Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> This is suggested by Kristeva in 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', in Kristeva, *Desire in language*, p. 65 when she speaks of the text as 'a dialogue among several writings' that 'Bakhtin situates ... within history and society'.

<sup>40</sup> 'An Interview with Margaret Atwood 20 April 1983', in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form*, ed. by Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 215-32 (p. 224). See also Selwyn Dewdney, *Indian rock paintings of the Great Lakes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

<sup>41</sup> *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Worton and Still, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), p. 50.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 315 and 317. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 315-16. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 322 and 327.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 344-45 and 347.

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Conversations* (1978; London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 246.

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva links pre-language to the concept of maternal *chora*, which is 'anterior to naming'. Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to Another', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 133.

<sup>59</sup> 'Palimpsestuous' is an adjective coined by Philippe Lejeune and used by Genette to highlight the 'palimpsestuous nature of texts', as Gerald Prince remarks in the 'Foreword' to Gérard Genette's *Palimpsestes*, p. IX, and as Genette claims in Genette, p. 399.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 397.

## Chapter 1

### Engendering dialogue: intertextual analysis in Margaret Atwood's work

#### Intertextuality in Margaret Atwood's work

Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.<sup>1</sup>

Julia Kristeva, *The Word, the Dialogue and the Novel*, 1966

Books speak of other books and every story tells a story that has already been told.<sup>2</sup>

Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, 1983

Words may lie yet they still tell a truth if the rules are followed.

Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, 1990

Margaret Atwood creates a complex network of allusions and intertexts that interweave in the narrative of the main text. As Wilson claims, 'this leads to a multifaceted interplay between explicit and implicit meaning or, to put it another way, a prismatic multiplication of sense'.<sup>3</sup> She does not rely on one meaning or on dichotomous concepts but explores multiple possible facets that lead to coexisting, sometimes opposite views. Along these lines, she creates a dialogue between texts that has a distinctive subversive and parodic quality, which simultaneously challenges and reconfirms the traditions of past and contemporary texts. More specifically, she uses parody and irony in an attempt to change the system from within; she suggests alternatives to the rules and roles of society by partially rewriting the narratives of past texts and remythologises myths, legends and fairy tales, proposing alternative views that envisage non-dichotomous visions, that is, a different concept of being human. Her open-ended conclusions do not give final solutions or certain referents. This concept of intertextuality is in line with what Kristeva claims:

[T]he *text* is defined as a trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of language by relating communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances. The text is therefore a *productivity*, and this means: first that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.<sup>4</sup>

The production of the text implies intertextuality, that is, a process of deconstruction and reconstruction where different texts interweave questioning the autonomy of the main text and, at the same time, reaffirming its originality and revolutionary quality.<sup>5</sup>

In Atwood's work, intertextuality and postmodernism are closely connected. Postmodernism declares the rupture with the myth of a coherent past tradition. Postmodern contemporary authors imitate, plagiarize, quote and use irony and parody levelling the traditional division between high and low literature, classic and modern texts, and art and business: the authors believe that these are all replaceable and reusable. This implies a 'dynamic (egalitarian) element' in the intertextual and postmodern discourse that may be understood as truism or, on the contrary, as a clever attempt at reinvention.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis is on the process rather than on the final product, valuing the fruition of products and services rather than the importance of the object in itself.

In a similar way, intertextuality is intended to be the self-reflexive use of past works in the form of ironic quotation, parody, pastiche, patchwork, palimpsest and appropriation. It is applied in Atwood's oeuvre in a subversive and parodic way, challenging and mixing genres and texts and subverting but also reconfirming the tradition. Not only has the 'grands récits' lost its significance in favour of the 'petites histoires',<sup>7</sup> but they mix and match: they are levelled, diversified and varied in a patchwork characterised by a ludic element.<sup>8</sup> In an intertextual reading, the dialogue between texts is the main focus of intertextuality, a phenomenon that goes back to

Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Montaigne and was first codified by Bakhtin and Kristeva in the 1960s and further developed by Barthes, Genette, Derrida, Bloom, Riffaterre, Hutcheon and others. This dialogue implies a tension between the main text and the intertexts, creating a network of allusions, references and quotations that produces multiple readings.

The term intertextuality was first used by Kristeva in the 1960s; she developed Bakhtin's theories of the dialogic self, of heteroglossia and of the revolutionary quality of the novel. According to Kristeva,

each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. In Bakhtin's work, these two axes, which he calls *dialogue* and *ambivalence*, are not clearly distinguished. Yet, what appears as a lack of rigor is in fact an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, intertextuality is not a concept that has only been used recently; it dates back to classical writers, such as Plato and Aristotle, whose theories might be associated with modern approaches. Plato believed that the poet copies an act of creation which is already a copy. Thus, the poet's work is never original but a copy of a copy without a unique source, which can be related to Baudrillard's concept of simulacra. The Socratic dialogues that Plato adopts in his work are based on quotations and repetitions of past works; these works are discussed and therefore developed in the discussions that philosophers have. Therefore, new interpretations arise and fresh views evolve from previous thoughts, without denying the importance of tradition, and fresh meanings are proposed.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle's thought focuses on universal truths which seem to be in contrast with the diversity of the intertextual discourse, but because he draws from a variety of sources, his discourse is linked by critics to the polyphony of dialogism.<sup>11</sup> Following Aristotle's



concept of imitation, Cicero and Quintilian claim that imitation is not just repetition of what has been said before but also involves interpreting and developing past thoughts. We can learn through studying and imitating others' actions and works. It is an act of criticism; it implies change and transformation, and it is also a creative act, a regeneration, which implies a 'creative struggle'.<sup>12</sup>

Subsequently, the modernist period reevaluates the influence of previous texts (*Urtext* and intertexts), reusing them in an intentionally fragmentary way, as in T.S. Eliot's work. Modernist writers use irony and parody in a serious, sometimes cynical, way to express their crisis and the pain caused by it. Comparing the use of parody in modernism and postmodernism, Hutcheon claims that

[t]he continuity between the postmodernist and the modernist use of parody as a strategy of appropriating the past is to be found on the level of their shared (compromised) challenges to the conventions of representation. There are significant differences, however, in the final impact of the two uses of parody. It is not that modernism was serious and significant and postmodernism is ironic and parodic, as some have claimed; it is more that postmodernism's irony is one that rejects the resolving urge of modernism toward closure or at least distance. Complicity always attends its critique.<sup>13</sup>

There is a shift in the intertextual parodic discourse where modernists' writing is often mythical and symbolic and aims for order and control and to give shape and meaning to the chaos of the modern world;<sup>14</sup> the postmodernist view instead leaves unresolved open endings. However, the modernist view does not mean to resolve or unify incoherencies but only to control it in 'the form of binary conflicts: flesh and spirit, self and society'<sup>15</sup> where the postmodern perspective suggests multiplicity. In modernism, for the first time, there is full critical awareness of the importance of the influence of past tradition on the composition and production of a text and consequently on its interpretation. The stress is not only on the fragmentary character of past and present production but also on the importance of past works to interpret and understand a text and consequently the world of language a text refers to. According to Hutcheon, 'the novel is not the copy of the empirical world, nor does it stand in opposition to it. It is

rather a continuation of that ordering, fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience.'<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the use of previous texts is never banal (copy and paste or plain citation) but 'a mosaic of quotations', as Kristeva remarks, that aims to analyse, comment on and interpret the past and the present in an ironic way.<sup>17</sup>

Kristeva revisits Bakhtin's thinking in her seminal essay 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel' by using his literary analytic tools.<sup>18</sup> She claims that, according to Bakhtin, the Socratic dialogues are a form of intertextuality, as different voices and points of view contribute in a dialogue that searches for truth, or at least aims to shape concepts, objects and experiences through an interaction with others.<sup>19</sup>

Meaning is produced only when there is a participation of all the recipients in the communicative and creative event. This means that the product reflects and refracts all the different thoughts of the different participants, creating multiple viewpoints. The constant developing and dynamic and dialogical interaction between the participants to shape a concept (text, object, experience), which is the process of understanding, is necessary as a never-ending work in progress and it is impossible to ascertain the last word.

According to Kristeva's interpretation, Bakhtin situates the text in history and society. The text is therefore read and rewritten by the writer and is seen 'as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context'.<sup>20</sup> The interaction generates the text and the decoding of the text for the different participants, which occurs in the dialogue between texts, that is, in the discourses of the different participants within the text. It is intended that the cultural context is the plot structure, where we encode the events of the story according to the shared codes of our language and culture. The reader and the writer are not in two separate spheres in this process, but, as Atwood claims, 'the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist'.<sup>21</sup>

Bakhtin is mainly interested in utterances, that is, in living speech, the communication act in which the individual consciousness is constituted in the dialogue with the Other. Bakhtin also differentiates monologism, or the 'language of truth' that is linked to the epic world and high literature, from the heteroglossic quality of the novel, where the

carnival expresses its revolutionary characteristics.<sup>22</sup> The novel parodies past literary traditions and is in a constant state of change. It 'fights against the view of the world which would valorize one "official" point-of-view, one ideological position and thus one discourse, above all others'.<sup>23</sup> The novel is therefore the best example of a dialogic discourse.

Kristeva pushes Bakhtin's ideas further, merging intertextuality with her studies of Derrida, Althusser and Lacan. She links intertextuality to semiotics and to the transgressive quality of the maternal *chora*. The text is open to dissemination of meanings that makes it heterogeneous and polyvalent, and, consequently, revolutionary. According to Kristeva, poetic language, that is, the 'literary word', is in constant dialogue with other writings<sup>24</sup> in a 'mosaic of quotations'.<sup>25</sup>

Roland Barthes speaks of some intertextuality of sorts in *Le Degré Zéro de L'écriture*, calling it *cryptographie*:

Any written trace precipitates, as inside a chemical at first transparent, innocent and neutral, mere duration gradually reveals in suspension a whole past of increasing density, like a cryptogram.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, a text implies elements of other texts, as Barthes demonstrates in his analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*. The reader is in focus and the author is dead, and therefore it is the reader who recognises the various references and citations, that is, the polyphony of the text, as Worton and Still point out.<sup>27</sup> It is a search that is always open to new interpretations and is changeable. This is also meant to free the reader from the constrictions of the author.

Genette proposes the term 'transtextuality', that is, a 'textual transcendence'; it places the text in a relationship with other texts.<sup>28</sup> He also divides the concept of intertextuality into five subcategories: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, archtextuality and hypertextuality.<sup>29</sup> The main text is the 'hypertext' and its intertextual reference is the 'hypotext'. Genette also highlights the new meaningfulness generated in the intertextual practice, which Allen highlights, and describes a palimpsest in relation to intertextuality as writing in 'the second degree'.<sup>30</sup>

Riffaterre focuses on the reader's perception of the text; they are engaged in hermeneutic activity in order to decode the 'ungrammaticalities' of the text, that is, the 'hidden' meanings that are not linked to the plot of the narrative of the main text but refer to other texts. For this reason, the reader looks for intertextual references to interpret the text and resolve the ungrammaticalities. In this way, socially shared codes are transformed in a backward process that decodes the clues referring to previous texts.<sup>31</sup>

According to Worton and Still, Harold Bloom considers that writers are engaged in an Oedipal struggle with fathers which causes 'anxiety of influence'.<sup>32</sup> In his analysis of texts, especially poetry texts, he resists acknowledging definite sources of intertextual influences, leaving the discourse open.<sup>33</sup> He believes, at the same time, that the struggle with predecessors against oblivion seems to be the main effect of intertextuality rather than resignification or parodic readings of previous texts.

Foucault advances an alternative viewpoint: he suggests that intertextual discourse is influenced by 'principles of constraint' that control the 'production of discourse' and operate 'within existing networks of power, simultaneously creating and disciplining the text's ability to signify'.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, there is a relation of power between subject and text and the interpretation of texts produces ideology. Thus, reading a text is not a free act but is guided by social codes and power relations.

Margaret Atwood's work fits with the intertextual discourse proposed by theorists, as will be seen later in this chapter and in the analysis of the novels. She subverts and parodies genres, applying the rules of realism and mainstream fiction, but also subverts them to highlight unresolved contradictions, question universal concepts and suggest multiple views and possible changes. The subversive parodic voice present in her work challenges universal wholeness, that is, the fixed 'natural truths' of society. Her work does not give final answers or definite solutions; it is an invitation to explore ourselves and our world, which is a world constructed in language.

From this angle, the reader acquires an active role. They are invited to reconsider their position in the worlds of language through the intertextual references proposed by the

text. In Atwood's novels, the reader function is therefore linked to the intertextual discourse, that is, to the different and alternative interpretations this discourse implies, as will be seen in this chapter. Furthermore, the intertextual connections are not simple references to other texts; they work at a linguistic level too. As Kristeva claims, echoing Bakhtin, 'Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality.'<sup>35</sup> Writing is 'a reading of the anterior literary corpus and the text [is] an absorption and a reply to another text'.<sup>36</sup> This notion is further developed by Kristeva in the concept of poetic function in literature where the 'social code is destroyed and renewed'.<sup>37</sup> This language is heterogeneous. Kristeva calls this disposition of language 'semiotic' and it is linked to the *chora*, a 'receptacle, unnameable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently maternally connoted'.<sup>38</sup> This 'semiotic heterogeneity' is distinguished from and in opposition to the symbolic function that represents the law of the father; it represses the instinctual drive and the relation to the mother.<sup>39</sup> Thus, poetic language is transgressive and disruptive and 'shows the constraints of a civilization dominated by transcendental rationality'; using poetic language means that this constraint is overcome.<sup>40</sup> As will be seen in this chapter, Kristeva links the maternal *chora* to *écriture féminine*, which is explored in Atwood's novels as female writing that starts from the body and encompasses body and mind. It is an alternative disruptive language that questions the narratives of the dominant society and is linked to the intertextual discourse. Therefore, the novels are an attempt to revise and rewrite the narratives of the dominant society.

Various critics have highlighted intertextual references in Margaret Atwood's work. With the exception of Sharon Wilson,<sup>41</sup> whose study focuses on the intertextual analysis of fairy tales and myths in Atwood's work, critics such as Howells, Brooks Bouson, Davidson, Madeleine McMurry-Kavanagh and Bruce Stewart highlight some important intertexts but do not analyse their implications in detail as this was not the main aim of their research.<sup>42</sup> Their analysis is not specifically focused on intertexts and how they amplify the resonance of the main text, adding overtones to Atwood's work. In the broader field of studies on Atwood, critics have discussed and pointed out her subversive use of 'novelistic narrative and its ability to flout established social and literary conventions'.<sup>43</sup> Atwood's work is 'polyphonic', meaning that it offers multiple voices and different versions in a multi-layered vision that opens out to new

possibilities of being human beyond stereotypes and traditional roles.<sup>44</sup> This involves a reinterpretation and envisages a new perspective 'which offers a critique of the value structures and power relations (the "ideological implications") coded into texts'.<sup>45</sup> In this way, intertexts offer a self-conscious reflection that echoes past texts, "reversing" and revisioning', transforming, parodying and investigating women's position and women's journey in society.<sup>46</sup>

According to Wilson, Atwood interweaves 'more than two narrative strands [...] in dialectic with one another: the frame narrative [...] and the embroidered intertexts, usually heightened, exaggerated, or parodied'.<sup>47</sup> She describes Atwood's 'intertextual tactics' in eleven points, such as reversing the gender of the hero or heroine, doubling roles, displacing the 'truth' and 'giving voice to the silenced'. Further ploys that Atwood uses are tropes and symbols 'to enlarge the meaning of the ordinary', displacing the original plot line so that the female experience becomes central; she transforms and blends tones and genres using irony and parody, transgressing the conventions of language and pushing it into 'anti-language'. Finally, by using 'delegitimation (creating an unexpected story), and writing beyond the ending, Atwood engages readers in creation of the text and remythification of patriarchally amputated intertexts'.<sup>48</sup> Wilson also indicates that there are 'five connected purposes' in Atwood's use of intertexts: focusing on the characters' cultural contexts and their entrapment in pre-existing roles, commenting on and deconstructing traditional plots and 'offering the possibility of transformation'.<sup>49</sup>

Though Wilson's analysis of the intertexts of myths and fairy tales is exhaustive in its own right, it does not refer to other intertexts, so it lacks meaningful connections that might specify the critical interpretation through more significant texts and open it up to a wider perspective. Besides, she evinces intertextual techniques that are widespread in the world of fairy tales but might produce something too literal if applied to certain intertexts. She rightly points out that 'Atwood uses intertexts to dramatize her characters' movement from symbolic dismemberment to transformation'.<sup>50</sup> However, there is a crucial connection between 'transformation' and 'power', as Howells claims.<sup>51</sup> The emphasis is on identities, which are negotiated in the dialogue with the Other and other texts; these identities are 'shifting, double or split, and possibly multiple'<sup>52</sup> – they are in process. My contribution to the study of Atwood's work,

through a detailed intertextual analysis of some of her novels, intends to revise and supplement what has already been said, emphasising the importance of intertextual resonances in her work. The dialogue between texts implies a redefinition of identities and power relations, suggesting alternative visions that have ontological implications and open up to a wider, multifaceted view of being human.

The frequent intertextual connections present in Atwood's work include quotations from and references to literary, non-literary and visual texts. They aim to reshape, disrupt and partially rewrite what has been said before but pay particular attention to the condition of women, human rights, environmental debates and issues concerning historical interpretation. There is a rupture with traditional gender roles, which entrap women, but also men, in stereotypical positions that enforce the rules of society. Atwood exposes the constructed and obsolete artificiality of these roles that are implemented through education, family and religion as well as the inflexible rules of profit. For this reason, the way in which she uses intertextual references is mainly parodic and ironic, in line with a postmodern view, as Hutcheon claims: 'In all of Atwood's fiction formalist concerns (such as parody and metafictional self-reflexivity) are never separate from political ones, and this is largely because of the very postmodern paradox that ties them together.'<sup>53</sup> She alters what has been said without negating it completely. In this sense, irony and parody subvert traditional narratives and at the same time confirm them. Her use of irony marks the gap between the practices and discourses of modern society posited as 'truth' and the discourses of the novel that disrupt those narratives.<sup>54</sup> In a similar way, parody is an imitation that implies disruption and ridicule, defying past narratives. Both tropes clearly pinpoint intertextuality.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Atwood creates her own intertexts within the main text in order to articulate a multifaceted, alternative viewpoint that suggests the subtle, fabricated quality of a world constructed in language and, at the same time, refers to it directly.<sup>56</sup>

For example, Elaine's pictures in *Cat's Eye* have a crucial role in the narrative that completes Elaine's story.<sup>57</sup> Sherrill Grace remarks that Elaine gives the 'verbal equivalent' of her pictures; they are 'harmonious completion in multiplicity' of Elaine's discourse,<sup>58</sup> and for Fiona Tolan the paintings are manifestations of the unconscious.<sup>59</sup> From this viewpoint, Elaine's pictures are visual references that the novel creates to

complete the narrative in a multifaceted perspective. Atwood claims that the pictures are influenced by the visual artists she names in the foreword. Similarly to the Moose Beer commercial in *The Edible Woman*, which refers to the advertisements of the 1960s, and the pictographs in *Surfacing*, which refer to indigenous rock paintings, Elaine's paintings have analogous subtexts in the 'real' world. The verbally detailed descriptions evoke an image which is in dialogue with the main narrative, constantly commenting on and subverting the discourse as well as offering different and interpretable viewpoints, as will be seen in Chapter 5. Therefore, Atwood uses the created intertexts in the same way as the other subtexts, constructing a network of references that links to Riffaterre's concept of verisimilitude, as will also be seen in this chapter.<sup>60</sup>

From a methodological point of view, I will adopt the distinction Riffaterre proposes between syllepsis and intertext, adapting it to Atwood's practices. Riffaterre describes syllepsis as 'a trope consisting in the simultaneous presence of two meanings in one word',<sup>61</sup> where the repressed or latent meaning evokes in the reader different possible interpretations that solve and explain the 'ungrammaticalities'<sup>62</sup> the reader finds in the text and in this way completes the text's incompleteness. Syllepsis can be one word or one sentence and is presented as isolated in the text. In Atwood's work, this occurs in puns, word games and allusions – for example, songs – which are considered only as brief references, that is, concepts that are not developed further. The original text is misquoted or positioned in a different context, which creates a hiatus that questions its significance. In this way, Atwood proposes a different version that only apparently adheres to the 'original' one but actually challenges its validity and suggests a new vision.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, intertexts (also called subtexts by Riffaterre<sup>64</sup>) are 'fully developed narrative units that are embedded in the main narrative and sometimes scattered through it [...] it is the text-intertext entirely within the text – a case of intratextual intertextuality'.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the intertexts are layers of narratives which are explored and reflected upon within the text, such as fairy tales and myths in several of Atwood's novels. Nevertheless, this theoretical framework will not be implemented mechanically but will be used to analyse by what means Atwood uses intertexts and allusions and how she tactically interweaves them with the main text to guide the reader. Her strategy invites the reader's response and is always dynamic and in flux.



Furthermore, this dialogue between texts remains partially open though necessarily connected to explicit references that are present in the main text.

In Riffaterre's work, the 'rhetorical transformation' of the narrative guides the reader's interpretation and constructs a system of 'verisimilitude' that conforms with ideological models.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, 'truth' is a 'concept that depends on grammar', according to Riffaterre; it resists changes.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, 'truth' is a linguistic perception and is performative.<sup>68</sup> '[F]ictional truth' must 'parallel in language the cognitive processes we use in everyday life';<sup>69</sup> it follows conventions and, at the same time, points to 'the fictionality of fiction'.<sup>70</sup> It declares the fictional quality of the story and reasserts its 'truth'. According to Riffaterre, the intertexts and allusions are fundamental to the reader's process of making sense of the text. The reader is engaged in an experience of 'truth-finding', following intertextual clues in a process of understanding that is also an experience of self-discovery.<sup>71</sup>

In a similar way, Atwood's storytelling refers to a 'reality' that is not totally estranged from what happens in everyday life.<sup>72</sup> This is linked to the concept of verisimilitude in Riffaterre, as explained above. She refers and conforms to a grammar, a 'consensus about reality', that conveys the 'impression of truth and is encoded in language' and makes the text plausible to the reader.<sup>73</sup> Riffaterre's theoretical framework is helpful in the analysis of Atwood's work. There are examples of verisimilitude in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the abuses and tortures of the oppressive regimes reflect what happened, and happens, in real life, as testified to in Atwood's collection of interviews and articles on which parts of these stories are based.<sup>74</sup> Significantly, Atwood claimed that *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a dystopian novel but speculative fiction, as what is narrated has already happened and still happens in some countries.<sup>75</sup> In recent talks (e.g. a book club talk via Zoom on 11 February 2021), Atwood has remarked that it is not true that dictatorships will not emerge today and that democracies cannot turn into oppressive regimes. She believes that the US was not a democracy at the beginning but was a theocracy, and a lot of people were excluded from it, such as women and black people. Therefore, things can change, as we have a number of possible futures and people need to make their choices. She also expressed the hope that young people can make changes for the better, such as via the Extinction Rebellion movement. Therefore, I argue that the artificiality of fiction is questioned in

the sense that if killing, rape, torture or environmental issues refer to what happens in real life, causing permanent damage and deaths, this is not a 'simulacrum' but a 'fictional truth', as Riffaterre claims; it is fictional and true at the same time and refers to coded conventions.<sup>76</sup>

In my intertextual reading, Kristeva's development of the concept of intertextuality is crucial. She echoes and develops Bakhtin's concepts in 'The Bounded Text' and 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel'.<sup>77</sup> Bakhtin refers to the carnivalesque discourse, which positions the text in history and society, in which the writer participates by transgressing the abstraction of history 'through a process of reading-writing'.<sup>78</sup> Poetic language is 'polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse'.<sup>79</sup> It is 'a social and political protest' that challenges official codes and laws. Hence, poetic language is transgressive and multivalent in its constant dialogue with past texts, which are contradicted and reaffirmed without being completely erased.<sup>80</sup> According to Kristeva, this concept is also linked to the maternal *chora* that mediates and transgresses the symbolic law of the father.<sup>81</sup> This in part differs from Riffaterre's point of view where the emphasis is on the structural function of allusions and intertexts and how they prompt interpretations and produce meaning. Kristeva insists on the capacity of the novel to create new meaning in a polyphonic intertextual exchange that is always transgressive. The 'extra-novelistic' texts (intertexts) have value and are defined within the novel according to the use made of them by the author and according to the interpretation of the reader. It is a 'coming-and-going movement between subject and other, between writer [...] and reader[;] the author is structured as a signifier and the text as a dialogue of two discourses'.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, the narration is regulated in the 'dialogue of the subject with the addressee'<sup>83</sup> which occurs in the world of the language of the novel through intertextual references.

In this dialogue between texts, the novel is a 'mediator' and a 'regulator'<sup>84</sup> because it interrogates social patterns and 'ways of seeing', which are 'never settled', as Berger claims.<sup>85</sup> It is subversive, at least double, and is characterised by its semiotic practice, which is different and ambivalent, expresses a 'nondisjunctive function'<sup>86</sup> and allows simultaneous contradictory interpretations. In this intersection of words (texts) and utterances there is a continuous dialogue between writer, reader and texts within the

main text, and this dialogue creates polyphony and produces transformation.<sup>87</sup> In this way, past writings are challenged and a new logic of change is proposed.

For this reason, contrary to the static monologism of the epic, the novel is polyphonic, multi-levelled and multivocal. It constantly develops and generates meaning in a dynamic, dialectic way in which the self is defined in dialogue with the Other, as Bakhtin claims.<sup>88</sup> The force of the novel is active, oppositional and heteroglossic and allows fragmented, multiple views. Traditional forms are reviewed and opposed, giving way to multiple voices and different perceptions. These diverse interpretations are 'off-the-centre', as Derrida claims, as there is no centre, or any transcendental or universal entity to which we can refer or appeal.<sup>89</sup>

Margaret Atwood's work reflects Bakhtin and Kristeva's theory of the novel as free, open and subversive in a world of language that is a mosaic of texts that are interconnected to each other – a structure in progress, a continuous becoming. It involves a metafictional postmodern practice of storytelling in which the novel has parodic intent to 'unmask dead conventions' and expose obsolete interpretations.<sup>90</sup> From an intertextual perspective, this does not merely mean the destruction of the past; instead it is an exploration in progress that looks for a new synthesis where the reader has an active role participating in the creation of the text's world of language.<sup>91</sup> The reader is active and responsible and is invited to take a stand.<sup>92</sup> Readers have a responsibility 'toward the novelistic world [they are] creating through the accumulated fictive referents of literary language'.<sup>93</sup> The hermeneutic activity becomes a semiotic intertextual analysis that decodes the text through connections with and references to other texts to which the author refers in a more or less explicit way. The reader may or may not know about or be aware of these references. In fact, the awareness of the intertextual relations depends on the social and cultural context. This means that on the one hand there is a constant reworking of the text, which reading might change in time and which varies with the perspective of different readers; on the other hand, the author gives precise clues in the text itself that guide the reader to adopt certain interpretations.<sup>94</sup> In this sense, as Riffaterre claims, intertextuality 'is the perception that our reading of the text cannot be complete or satisfactory without going through the intertext'.<sup>95</sup> The reader gets the maximum pleasure possible from the text by solving the riddle, that is, completing the author's work in a comprehensive creation that

envisages a world of language, a heterocosm.<sup>96</sup> Language itself is the preferred tool to explore, decipher, play with and use to create 'reality'. For this reason, fiction is a 'vital human function', a way of coming 'to terms with experience'.<sup>97</sup> This deprives the text of a totally independent meaning because the intertextual network leads to certain interpretations. Nevertheless, in the swift, unpredictable changes of the modern world, there is not an original voice, genuine freedom or stable structure; everything is in flux, a process that explores more than it affirms. It is a displaced control where the acknowledgement of loss is equal to the acquisition of identity. The power exerted by the novel through the intertexts is, therefore, double; it might lead to certain conclusions but also allows different multi-layered interpretations that coexist.

Linda Hutcheon, however, introduces another viewpoint on Atwood's work. In her studies on intertextuality and postmodernism, she combines the two terms in the broader notion of metafiction (historiographic metafiction),<sup>98</sup> that is, fiction about fiction, a phenomenon that goes back to *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* and expresses the self-reflexive condition of the novel.<sup>99</sup> As noted earlier, the reader acquires new responsibilities: as co-producer and creative accomplice, they are asked to accept and be involved in the artifice of storytelling and to include it in their life experience.<sup>100</sup> The novel's parodic intent and intertextual essence expose obsolete roles and patterns 'by mirroring them',<sup>101</sup> and parody is intended in its etymological sense as 'near' but also 'against' the text; it legitimises and is complicit with what it subverts; it is 'an exploration of difference and similarity'.<sup>102</sup> Parody is not only 'mockery, ridicule or mere destruction'; it is a way to create a new form, which is 'just as serious and valid, as a synthesis, as the form it dialectically attempts to surpass'.<sup>103</sup> It is 'an ironic form of intertextuality' that deconstructs the 'male-dominant culture', revealing 'the hidden gender encoding'.<sup>104</sup> Reading becomes more demanding and less comfortable as it requires the recognition of a new code that implies parody, and readers are forced to organise the new system and interpret it. The reader needs to make sense of the world of the text in the same way they make sense of their own experiences.<sup>105</sup> The place where this happens is in the language of the texts, as Barthes claims in 'The Death of the Author';<sup>106</sup> this place is a 'reality' which is unreal or hyperreal, as Baudrillard suggests.<sup>107</sup> What the reader does is fictionalise their own life, as making fiction is a natural and vital human function, according to Hutcheon. This act of fictionalisation is an attempt to control their own and others' lives; nevertheless, it is a displaced control,

a fabrication, or an act of manipulation. The world of language constructs a heterocosm that is experienced by the reader, and this helps them to come to terms with life.<sup>108</sup> In fact, 'the act of reading becomes one of ordering as well as imagining, sense-making as well as world-building'.<sup>109</sup> As Hutcheon remarks, 'we are heroes of our own life'. One of John Barth's characters says in his novel *The End of the Road*: 'fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes in life'.<sup>110</sup> The way a reader reads is fundamental to understanding the world of language, and might change over time. Consequently, the reader's interpretations are multiple and non-permanent;<sup>111</sup> they are temporary and imply creativity by involving the reader in a process of transformation.<sup>112</sup>

According to Hutcheon, irony is 'a doubled or split discourse which has the potential to subvert from within'.<sup>113</sup> It is 'a double talking, forked-tongued mode of address, [which] becomes a popular rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time'.<sup>114</sup> This concept overlaps with some characteristics of postmodern texts and postcolonial and neocolonial ones, as Hutcheon amply demonstrates in "'Circling the Downspout of Empire": Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism'. In Atwood's work, this concept is present as a rethinking and readdressing of history, which gives a voice and space to local and marginalised categories such as women. They are 'at the periphery of culture', at the same time in it and 'outside it, alien and critical [...] appropriating and rejecting the dominant discourse'.<sup>115</sup> This duplicity is connected with historical, postmodern, postcolonial and neocolonial texts that overlap in novels such as *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*, and in her seminal book *Survival*, all of which pay specific attention to Canada, where a 'double sense of post-colonialism' is present as well as a cultural colonisation by 'American mass media'.<sup>116</sup> This doubleness is established by enforcing 'cultural sameness' and, at the same time, 'producing differentiations and discriminations'.<sup>117</sup> The ambivalence is in the tension between the internalisation of the dominant culture and the revolt against it that is both 'destructive and creative'.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, postcolonial ethics 'question assumptions of European hegemony, to rethink the relation between self and other'.<sup>119</sup> In this sense, the use of irony and parody in Atwood's work is complicit, self-reflexive and double; it shows unresolved contradictions but also points toward possible alternatives regarding social change.<sup>120</sup> In the open-ended closures, for example, in *The Edible Woman* and

*Surfacing*, the heroines achieve a certain knowledge of their position in the world and a certain understanding of their identities at the end of each story, but have to go back into a society that has not changed and that will not allow them a complete transformation.

Some of the recurring signs in Atwood's novels are indicators of transformations that occur in a 'process of resignification' that indicates 'shifting interpretations of the same sight [...] depict[s] amended abductions' and denotes 'the narrator's growing awareness'.<sup>121</sup> Recurring signs and texts in Atwood's work are, for example, the heron in *Surfacing*, the Moose Beer commercial in *The Edible Woman* and the cat's eye marble in *Cat's Eye*. These signs become 'a vehicle of symbolism', as Riffaterre claims, and enable the reader to evolve a deeper, layered interpretation throughout the text.<sup>122</sup>

Therefore, the intertextual references in Atwood's oeuvre work at different levels: genre, themes, structure, plot, language and techniques.<sup>123</sup> Her intertextual strategies are multiple, in flux, flexible and difficult to frame in a set of fixed rules, such as those of Genette.<sup>124</sup> She guides the reader through a complex net of extra-textual references that are interwoven with the main text using parodic and ironic techniques that generate opposition and reversal of traditional codes.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, her work is characterised by multiple perspectives that acknowledge simultaneous, oppositional interpretations and also warn of factors that endanger the human condition. In this sense, intertextuality is self-reflexive because it considers and investigates the human condition in a world of language where texts are in constant dynamic dialogue. Consequently, storytelling is not a simple fictional creation but becomes an important ontological component of being human; it creates knowledge and the tools to decipher the interwoven texts.

For this reason, the role of the active reader, who responds dynamically to the text, is important in the intertextual reading. The reader attains satisfaction, pleasure and knowledge from the intertextual reading, but it also serves a vital function, which is the creation of a sense of the self and of the world around it. It is an ontological function: 'I tell, therefore you are'.<sup>126</sup> This reveals a process of redefinition of the self in dialogue with the Other through storytelling, which implies intertextual relations. Offred's

statement ironises and reverses Descartes's *Cogito, ergo sum*, indicating a different view that accentuates dialogue. As Howells claims, '[s]he resists the self-enclosure of Descartes' definition of humanness, and rejects his insistence on the absolute separation between thought and body'.<sup>127</sup> Regarding the subversive quality of the novel, as stated by Bakhtin and Kristeva, the emphasis is on the multiplicity and shifting of the narrative function, which decentres patriarchal discourses and comprehends multiple viewpoints.<sup>128</sup> Since the past cannot be erased because its destruction implies silence (the silence of the blank page and the annihilating anarchy of the avant-garde), it needs to be revisited, modified and transformed.<sup>129</sup> Its total erasure would result in oppression, emptiness and a void. The revisitation, instead, challenges and fragments the past in an ironic way, proposing alternative possible positions or different points of view, which is precisely what Atwood does in her work.

From this multiple perspective, Atwood's intertextual connections not only refer to published texts and to visual products, such as pictures, films, videos, songs and advertisements present in the existent world, but also to texts created within the main text itself. According to Riffaterre, intertextuality has a broad meaning; it embraces various kinds of text types, not only literary texts or 'found' texts:

We must be clear that intertext does not signify a collection of literary works that may have influenced the text or that the text may have imitated. Similarly, it is neither a context that may explain the text or its effects on readers, nor one that may be used as a basis of comparison to point out the author's originality. An intertext is a corpus of texts, textual fragments, or textlike segments of the sociolect that shares a lexicon and, to a lesser extent, a syntax with the text we are reading (directly or indirectly) in the form of synonyms or, even conversely, in the form of antonyms. In addition, each member of this corpus is a structural homologue of the text: the depiction of a stormy night may serve as an intertext for a tableau of a peaceful day; crossing the trackless sands of the desert may be the intertext of furrowing the briny deep.

In contrast, intertextuality is not just a perception of homologues or the cultivated reader's apprehension of sameness or difference. Intertextuality is not a felicitous surplus, the privilege of a good

memory or a classical education. The term indeed refers to an operation of the reader's mind, but it is an obligatory one, necessary to any textual decoding. Intertextuality necessarily complements our experience of textuality. It is the perception that our reading of the text cannot be complete or satisfactory without going through the intertext, that the text does not signify unless as a function of a complementary or contradictory intertextual homologue.<sup>130</sup>

The emphasis is on the function of the intertext in decoding the main text that produces a perceptive reading. For this reason, I argue that the created intertexts in Atwood's novels function as plausible intertexts in the structure of her work and operate effectively in the intertextual dialogue. A similar view is highlighted in Barthes's thought, as Culler highlights:

The study of intertextuality is thus not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts. Barthes warns that from the perspective of intertextuality 'the quotations of which a text is made are anonymous, untraceable, and nevertheless *already read*.' Julia Kristeva also defines intertextuality as the sum of knowledge that makes it possible for texts to have meaning: once we think of the meaning of a text as dependent upon other texts that it absorbs and transforms, she writes, 'in place of the notion of intersubjectivity is installed that of intertextuality.'<sup>131</sup>

In a world of language, the factual references are in any case constructed and connected both to the fictional world and to the 'real' world in the dialogical intertextual network created by author, reader and text/s. For this reason, this constructed reality might be changeable: the novel can transform the narratives.<sup>132</sup> Atwood's novels contemplate possible changes to traditional roles and patterns in society in the dialogue with the reader and in the intertexts within the world of the main text; they do this by using parodic and ironic techniques and reversing, subverting and rewriting past stories, exposing their obsolete and contradictory narratives and evoking potential alternatives.



In an intertextual reading, this is also linked to Genette's etymology of the word *parôdia* (parody) when he says that *ôdè* means ode or song and *para* means beside, so the original meaning was 'singing beside', that is, singing out of tune, or counterpoint. It could, however, mean singing a different tune to distort, or reverse, a melody, or it could refer to the modification of a traditional song (making small changes to register, for example) in order to produce ridicule.<sup>133</sup> Genette defines a palimpsest as a text that is superimposed on another one which has been partially erased but is still visible beneath, on the same parchment. According to Genette, the extensive use of pastiche and parody requires a reading of a text as a palimpsest, a *lecture palimpsestueuse* (palimpsest reading). What he intends as hypertext (that is, the past text/s a text refers to) is necessarily a palimpsest. Thus, interpreting a text also means enjoying more than one text at the same time.<sup>134</sup> This again establishes the active role of the reader in decoding the significance of the text in an exchange with other texts. Furthermore, the palimpsestic tendency accentuates progress in the narrative, which is similar to what Kristeva claims, that is, 'a *becoming* – in opposition to the level of continuity and substance, both of which obey the logic of being and are thus monological'.<sup>135</sup> This also allows the development and coexistence of multiple layers of meaning and diverse interpretations as well as a process of understanding. Therefore, in Margaret Atwood's work, the recurring signs, besides sharing the dialogic intertextual function mentioned above, allow further reflections that work at multiple levels and may be linked to a *lecture palimpsestueuse* in some of the novels analysed in this thesis. The tension is in the process that adds significance and grants gradual transformation. It is a learning process within the text that becomes a 'transformative', metamorphic reading both in the journey of the characters, especially the female characters, and in the engagement of the reader.<sup>136</sup> This process has regenerative potential that produces new meanings, instigates change and develops ontological knowledge.

Another important addition to understanding and analysing Atwood's intertextual strategies is Michel Foucault's concept of intertext. He stresses the importance of existing networks of power that are connected to a text and which both constrain the text and produce ideology. His idea dismisses Barthes's concept of the isolation of the text from history and ideology and moves closer to Riffaterre's view that the reader is guided (in Foucault's case 'subjected') to forming certain textual meanings.<sup>137</sup> In both cases it is the reader who activates the range of texts – the 'horizon of expectations' –

that triggers intertextual literary reading.<sup>138</sup> There is an evident relationship of power between the reader and the text/s in which constraints, or guidance, and freedom coexist and may vary in time and space. In fact, Atwood does not just invite the reader to participate in a dialogue that implies responsibility; this engagement calls for an involvement that is 'political, moral; public, personal'.<sup>139</sup>

My interpretation of intertextual references in Atwood's work is in dialogue with that of previous critics and demonstrates the way in which these theorists can be used to produce fresh readings. These readings enhance and expand the dialogue between texts, that is, a dialogue with the Other where identities are redefined and stories are rewritten, suggesting different possible visions with ontological implications that reconsider power relations. As Riffaterre claims, past narratives are hard to change, though a rewriting or 're-visioning', as Adrienne Rich suggests from a female point of view, necessarily generates a fresh reading of traditional texts.<sup>140</sup> Atwood challenges the incongruities of past and present narratives, addressing and critically scrutinising them throughout her work by way of a dialogical use of intertexts with a parodic and ironic intent. There is a dynamic tension that does not suppress meaning but expands it and opens it up to multiple perspectives, allowing various interpretations to coexist.

### ***Écriture féminine: the deconstruction of the body of the text***

Write yourself. Your body must be heard.

Hélène Cixous, *Sortie*<sup>141</sup>, 1975

Intertextual dialogue between texts generates disruption and suggests alternative views. *Écriture féminine* works in a similar mode in Margaret Atwood's novels, as will be seen in this section. She develops an alternative language, or languages, that refers to and is in line with what the main theorists of *écriture féminine* have claimed, such as Woolf, Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray.<sup>142</sup> They urge female writers to write starting from their body because language is linked to the bodies of women as well as connected to the mother in a pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal approach. According to Cixous,

To write. An act which not only "realizes" the decentred relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures,

her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; ... A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter ... We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman.<sup>143</sup>

*Écriture féminine* is therefore a powerful tool that connects a woman's body, a woman's language and her sexuality in a process of reappropriation. It represents her rescue from a marginalised position that has forced her to be voiceless. Finding her voice through *écriture féminine* can give her wholeness and therefore power.

This new or alternative language is disruptive and defiant regarding phallogentrism and denies dichotomous views, instead pointing to multiplicity and fluidity. In this sense, *écriture féminine* works in a similar way to the transgressive function of the novel. In Atwood's novels it operates in parallel to this disruptive function in the intertextual dialogue; it emphasises the 'semiotic heterogeneity' that Kristeva claims occurs at a linguistic level. This engenders fluidity and alternative views that oppose the dominant society, the symbolic function, in a revolutionary perspective.

The linguistic disruption is linked to societal disruption in a revolutionary attempt to change the narratives of the dominant society in order to write a new history – a women's story – that is, a new human view. While phallogentric society tends to repeat the signs to reaffirm and maintain its power,<sup>144</sup> the new female perspective disrupts these signs, which are arbitrary and therefore changeable, and proposes different views. From this viewpoint, *écriture féminine* cannot be defined because it is always in process and encompasses different, sometimes opposite, visions that coexist. It resists the dominant culture in its subversive and excessive expression that is always in motion and elsewhere, compared to male culture. This is not meant to be an evasion and does not describe a state of confusion; on the contrary, it states a different vision that opens up to a freer and encompassing way of being human that challenges traditional codes. From their marginal position in society and because of the centrality of their bodies, women have a different perspective that allows them to criticise and expose the flaws of the dominant society. The criticism and disruption first occur in language, that is, in the intertextual dialogue with the narratives of the dominant society, in order to expose

the constructed roles and obsolete discourses and therefore generate different alternative meanings, that is, new narratives. This is a work in progress, a 'becoming' that does not have a final point but is always open to new views. This new vision is positioned in the future, according to the main theorists of *écriture féminine*, when women and female writers will be able to express their feelings and emotions, starting from the body. In this sense, the female body becomes 'the direct source of female writing, [...] to write from the body is to recreate [the world]'.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the body is linked to the mother and to female sexual impulses in an encompassing vision.

This new revolutionary view will open women to all professions and all kinds of writing that will disrupt the dominant society. It is a disruption of the social practices that rewrites them from a marginalised position, which might be seen as a weakness but, at the same time, gives a different alternative angle. Margaret Atwood's view is in line with that of these theorists and her work is inscribed in the canon of female writers delineated by Woolf and Gilbert and Gubar.<sup>146</sup> Her female protagonists are in search of their identity, and Atwood, as a female writer, adopts the practice of *écriture féminine*, as will be seen later in this chapter. Her intertextual approach is ironic and parodic and proposes alternative views that disrupt the male narratives. Her discourse is not in total opposition to the traditional narratives but affirms and denies them at the same time. She acknowledges their power in a dynamic intertextual dialogue, a 'dialogic thought' as Bakhtin states,<sup>147</sup> that questions their validity by comparing them with, reversing and re-mythologising traditional discourses. Therefore, the intertextual dialogue occurs at a linguistic level that is connected to the maternal language, as Kristeva claims, and means to rewrite and revise traditional narratives. It is a coming-and-going movement that involves the reader in an intertextual network that challenges the narratives of the contemporary society. It suggests alternative writings and readings that are fluid and pervading in form and encompass different coexisting views; it is a process that is in constant development and that is open to different possible perspectives. Margaret Atwood's work explores and expresses this vision that feminist theorists envisaged in a future time for women, in a hundred or two hundred years, according to Woolf and Cixous. Atwood's work occurs in the present time and engages with the social and political issues of our time. In Atwood's novels, as well as in her poetry and critical work, her vision is realistic and idealistic at the same time, especially in her latest novels. Therefore, Atwood proposes a new vision for women but is aware that women

live in a male world where they still have a marginalised position, though this situation is improving over time. As Adrienne Rich claims, women need to look back and read old texts 'with fresh eyes', that is, in a critical way. This is not only considered a good critical practice, but also an 'act of survival' that implies change.<sup>148</sup> It can be painful and frustrating as women have been depicted only by men in the past and female writings are formed from male writings and therefore influenced by men's vision.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, women's journey towards self-expression and self-definition is long and unstable; it implies failures but also renewal and unpredictable transformations.

Nevertheless, there are not equal opportunities and equal pay for women even in the more open and protected Western countries, and in some countries around the world women are still treated like inferior beings, traded and used like animals. Atwood is well aware of this condition; her approach therefore proposes a new vision but at the same time acknowledges a world of language where this vision cannot be completely fulfilled. Her heroines live in a world where the female view is still marginal and women comment and battle against the dominant view. For this reason, their identities cannot be completely developed and their wholeness remains unattained; they are incomplete figures that need to compromise with the contemporary context around them in a constant quest that is open and in process – it is a quest in language. There is hope, especially in her last novel, *The Testaments*, that women's voices, their vision and their language will be heard and understood now and in the future. In a global crisis, which is the crisis of the dominant society, these voices can be the alternative to the failures of our society, the possible solution, that is, a new view of being human which is multiple, fluid and comprehensive.

Cixous was the first woman theorist who named and conceptualised women's writing as *écriture féminine* in her seminal work *Le Rire de la Méduse* in 1975, and subsequently in *Sorties* and *La Venue à l'écriture*. These theories are described *in nuce* in Virginia Woolf's work when she speaks of intense emotions that strike her as 'a sudden violent shock' or 'a blow', 'a revelation of some order' in *Moments of Being* as well as in *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>150</sup> Women need to find their own words to give voice to their emotions. They cannot use 'sentence[s] made by men' as they are 'too pompous' in their form and their perspective is different – women 'make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important'.<sup>151</sup> It is a different

kind of writing that opens up to new views 'of our destiny and the meaning of life'<sup>152</sup> – to a new ontological vision. Some successful writers, such as Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë and George Eliot, already achieve this new kind of writing, but the complete attainment of this wholeness is positioned in a future time when women will attain a professional fulfilment that will make them independent and whole. Nevertheless, Woolf points out another important issue in 'Professions for Women': the female writer needs to kill 'The Angel in the House', which is painful and hard but eventually attainable, and define herself as a woman. The latter is the most difficult problem as women have always been described and defined by men so they do not know who they are. Furthermore, in this search for identity, they should speak about their passions, about their experience 'as a body', which is impossible for women because if they did so they would shock men, that is, they would disrupt the conventions imposed by the male-dominant society.<sup>153</sup> According to Woolf, the condition needed for a woman to attain this is 'a room of her own and five hundred a year' and the opportunity to speak her mind.<sup>154</sup> In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf also speaks of the egocentric masculine 'I', 'a straight dark bar' that blurs and obscures female characters. In fiction as in life, the function of women is to serve 'as looking-glasses [...] reflecting the figure of man twice its natural size',<sup>155</sup> a function that women need to erase or reverse to attain a more independent self. In this perspective, the exploration of a new kind of writing, a female writing or *écriture féminine*, operates in parallel with the reference to and critique of past texts. Woolf is considered a precursor of this thought by various critics.<sup>156</sup> She expressed a predisposition to differentiate female writing from male writing in an attempt to define the self, to express woman's passion and the freedom of the imagination. Nevertheless, Cixous' work operates in a more radical way than Woolf's intuitions. The French author lived in a different time and different social context and therefore could express her thoughts about *écriture féminine* in a more explicit and disengaged way, as will be seen in this section.

A similar quest for self-definition is highlighted in *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar, in which the marginalisation and diminishment of female writers, whose creative energy is considered 'unfeminine',<sup>157</sup> is opposed to the search for self-identity, which is a 'quest for self-definition [...] [that] makes herself whole'.<sup>158</sup> Female writings have been considered secondary and the work women produced weak compared with male authors' masterpieces.<sup>159</sup> The 'anxiety of authorship' that Gilbert

and Gubar claim is therefore the consequence of historical and social influences that are 'overwhelmingly male' and affect female writers and their production at psychological, literary and social levels.<sup>160</sup> Therefore, 'she cannot create' as she cannot measure up to men's literary achievements.<sup>161</sup> She experiences 'disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust that compromise her writings both in structure and style.'<sup>162</sup> In opposition to this issue, Atwood reverses the definition and role of women in the dominant society, making the female protagonists of her novels take part in a quest for self-identity that implies, in a final stage, that they are a 'creative non-victim'.<sup>163</sup> Although the protagonists of her novels do not attain a complete wholeness because they need to live in a society that has barely changed its attitudes towards women, the novels propose a deconstruction of the prescribed roles through the intertextual dialogue. This dialogue starts from the body – the body of the text/s. Speaking from the body is the starting point and the *a priori* assumption that is used for the redefinition of the female self. Thus, writing is the expression of the self through the body that leads to the subsequent subversion of the societal rules; these are the concepts at the heart of Cixous' work as well. According to Cixous, women must write and speak from their body because their bodies speak the truth, that is, the truth about their emotions, in a quest to define their selves.<sup>164</sup> In this search for identity, according to Cixous, women need to go back to the mother–daughter relationship in a pre-linguistic and pre-Oedipal relationship that connects women to the cycle of reproduction and nourishment and is described as *l'écriture à l'encre blanche*, which is reminiscent of milk and the vital relationship between mother and child.<sup>165</sup> Similarly to Rimbaud's seer, Cixous describes female writing as a derangement of the senses (*dérèglement des sens*) in a reappropriation of the body that involves female sexuality:<sup>166</sup>

When the endless enslavement of woman will be broken, when she will live for and by herself, man – despicable till now – having released her, she will be a poet, too! The woman will find the unknown! Will her world of ideas be different from ours? – she will find strange, unfathomable, repulsive, delicious things; we will take them up, we will understand them.<sup>167</sup>

While masculine writing is described as egocentric, female writing has a giving force that expands through physical contact, touching, just like in the mother–infant

relationship. This differentiates Cixous from Woolf as the English writer could not name the source of female writing or describe women's passions.

The possible change in women's condition that leads towards liberation therefore occurs through language, that is, through writing.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, in *Sorties*, Cixous envisages a future change in social relationships and a historical revolution that starts from *écriture féminine*.<sup>169</sup> Although in *Le Rire de la Méduse* she claims that *écriture féminine* cannot be defined as it is always evolving and therefore cannot be coded,<sup>170</sup> she gives a definition of sorts, describing it as a free expression of the body's sensations that encompasses both sexes, male and female; it is a bisexuality that is the 'non-exclusion of the difference'.<sup>171</sup> This concept is repeated and developed in *Sorties*, where Cixous highlights a homosexual component as 'Men or women [are] complex beings, mobile, open',<sup>172</sup> and, for this reason, there is a non-exclusion of the differences. *Écriture féminine* comes from the inside of a woman's body and encompasses a thousand languages, that is, multiple views.<sup>173</sup> It is fluid and diffused and reflects women's sexuality, which is not concentrated only on the sexual organ, as in men, but is situated all over the body.<sup>174</sup> Cixous is in and out of her body like Woolf is in and out of her room, positioning these writers in relation to the outer world and, at the same time, they are focused on their selves, that is, on their bodies. The threshold gives them a freer, wider and deeper perspective. It is an open view, a comprehensive overview that is in-between and in constant relation with the Other. This relates their position and *écriture féminine* to the 'dialogic thought'; it is a writing that engenders an identity in flux and that is both nourishment for others and self-nourishment.

Some critics have highlighted the essentialism inherent in Cixous' thought. She has been especially attacked by American feminists such as Braidotti and Grosz, who consider Cixous' ideas to be too focused on the experience of middle-class white women and to exclude, for example, Black women and women from low-income countries.<sup>175</sup> Besides, the essential separation between men's and women's experiences does not give space to diverse orientations of being a woman or to the fact that the concept of 'woman' needs to be continually negotiated in society. Cixous' thought has even been considered conservative and 'fundamentally dangerous to feminist political change'.<sup>176</sup> This is based on the accusation that she neglects social and political realities and that her writing contains idealism and utopianism.<sup>177</sup> According to Ann Aneja,



'[w]hat is questioned here is whether when "slipping" from the feminine to the female, Cixous commits an inadvertent but dangerous error [...] or whether the shifting locus of femininity emphasises gender differences induced by culture'.<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, Aneja also claims that for Cixous 'a slippage [...] is already evident in culture', and that, according to the French author, '*écriture féminine* wants to posit certain feminine attributes as positive avenues that women can explore for their own benefit, and avenues that are available to all'.<sup>179</sup> In addition, she encourages an exploration of women's powers and, at the same time, rejects the kind of power that exists within the political structures of the establishment, which, on the contrary, is seen by some feminists as one of their goals.<sup>180</sup> Therefore, Cixous distinguishes patriarchal power as 'un pouvoir sur autres' (power over others) from 'pouvoir sur soi' (power over oneself), which should be the main goal and which is linked to the relationship with the body.<sup>181</sup> According to her critics, putting this concept into practice would cause a slowdown of political changes and risk ignoring political realities. In her emphasis on sensuality, Cixous therefore prefers a tactical approach and the 'predilection of the poetic over the political'.<sup>182</sup> She focuses instead on the possibilities of change and transformation that *écriture féminine* allows to women, and not only to them. Eventually, this will cause the transformation of cultural and social structures. Thus, political changes 'can be generated through a work of language', that is, through *écriture féminine*.<sup>183</sup> Women live the disadvantage of being marginal but, because of this position, they are freer than men to question and rebel against the patriarchal encoded rules. They live in an 'in-between space', which is 'a state of becoming that upsets the phallogentrism of fixed systems' and starts a new language.<sup>184</sup> In conclusion, Cixous envisages in writing 'the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures'.<sup>185</sup> This emphasis on language is a paramount point in Atwood's novels as well, where the narratives explore diverse possibilities of language connected to the body that override dichotomies and encompass mind and body. This concept of language works in parallel with the intertextual dialogue in questioning and revising the narratives of the dominant society. Therefore, this critique occurs at a linguistic level in Atwood's work, both in the intertextual references and in the practice of *écriture féminine*.

The coexistence of different views connects *écriture féminine* to the function of the novel, according to Bakhtin and Kristeva's concept of multiple interpretations, and the consequent disruptive function of the novel where different multiple views coexist in an intertextual dialogue within the text. *Écriture féminine* and intertextuality are connected at a linguistic level in the disruptive function that occurs both in form and in content in Atwood's work, as will be seen in detail in the analysis of the novels. In this context, a woman is the most typical victim, a marginalisation that encompasses all social classes as well as all times and spaces and overflows into dystopic possible worlds, which inevitably imply a connection with present-day ideologies. Hence, Atwood reveals the material and carnal essence of being human, a reality that, though constructed in language, clearly refers to abuses and misconduct that are dramatically present in our everyday life. She addresses these issues in her work (together with environmental and postcolonial problems) without giving a definite solution, presenting the problem and leaving the conclusion open in a shifting and ever-changing perspective.

*Le Rire de la Méduse* is a manifesto whose revolutionary message is only in part present in Atwood's work. Atwood's novels are subtler in expressing the disruptive quality of *écriture féminine* in all its force in the intertextual dialogue, which denies and reaffirms, at the same time, the power of traditional texts. The body and its pre-linguistic elements are in the foreground in the novels, as will be seen in the intertextual analysis in the different chapters. Marian's body in *The Edible Woman* rebels against the prescribed roles and rules of modern society, refusing food and opposing the consumerist and cannibalistic relations that erase the self. In *Surfacing*, the female protagonist's quest for a more satisfying credible self passes through *écriture féminine* in the sense of the derangement of sense. In *Surfacing*, the woman's voice becomes a poetic voice in her attempt to express herself through the body and create an alternative encompassing vision that is connected to the mother's *chora*. Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the storyteller whose petite histoire imposes her vision on a male-dominant oppressive world. Her voice has emerged from the dystopic Gileadean experiment of 'the city upon the hill' that turned into nightmarish dictatorship.<sup>186</sup> Her body speaks of her anxieties, desires and emotions and acquires knowledge and therefore power via a physical experience of the world around her that she encounters through her senses; this sensual understanding positions her bodily experience, expressed in *écriture féminine*, in opposition to the narratives of the oppressive regime.

*Écriture féminine* and the intertextual references allow Offred to reconstruct her shattered self, though only provisionally, and rewrite the narratives of Gilead in a discourse that starts from the body and in an intertextual dialogue that exposes the contradictory and corrupted narratives of Gilead. A visual perspective that encompasses art, language and science is envisaged in *Cat's Eye*, in which *écriture féminine* and intertextuality point to an encompassing human vision that implies a female view. This seems to accomplish what the theories of female writers and feminist theorists have envisaged in the past. It is a new vision projected towards a hopeful future, both for women's writing and for the attainment of women's rights. This would be achieved via more equal treatment of women all over the world thanks to a bond between women that is sealed with love but which also implies sacrifice. It is a struggle between the self and the Other that is generated and developed in the intertextual dialogue and refers to the social context.

From a similar position, Luce Irigaray highlights the disadvantaged situation of a women in Western society in which she is defined as 'deprived of', 'lacking in', and 'jealous of' what is considered the symbol of the power of the dominant society, that is, the phallus.<sup>187</sup> A woman has 'no sex/organ'; she has 'No thing'; 'she functions as a hole'; she is incomplete.<sup>188</sup> However, for these reasons she has the opportunity to be 'both one and the other' in a 'simultaneous co-existence of opposites' that define her 'decay and growth'.<sup>189</sup> In this position, women can develop a 'theological onto-logical perspective' that Irigaray connects to the language of the mystics and to *jouissance*, a place where Western women had the opportunity to make their voices heard.<sup>190</sup> Similarly to Cixous, Irigaray connects *écriture féminine* to a woman's sexuality, which is characterised by her capacity to feel 'pleasure almost everywhere in her body'.<sup>191</sup> Therefore, her sex and her writing resist a final definition and are characterised by 'nearness, proximity';<sup>192</sup> her syntax denies any form of appropriation and can 'best be deciphered [...] in the gestural code of women's bodies' that is expressed in suffering and in their laughing, that is, in body language.<sup>193</sup> This reappropriation of the body is fluid and ever-changing; it is never rigid and has no fixed borders. Therefore, the characteristic of *écriture féminine* is disruptive both in content and in form and deconstructs the narratives of the patriarchy starting from the body, speaking from the body,<sup>194</sup> that is, speaking the passion that Woolf claimed she could not voice.

Some critics have considered Irigaray's thought to be essentialist and heterosexist. According to them, she celebrates women's specificity and the concept of being 'eternally feminine' that does not allow real change.<sup>195</sup> Therefore, she 'reproduces and affirms this traditional division and associates woman exclusively with embodiment and emotionality and the activities of reproduction and nursing'.<sup>196</sup> However, according to Lehtinen, Irigaray explores the female being from philosophical and spiritual points of view and emphasises woman's potential. She 'examines and attacks the hierarchical order and the fixed and stable notion of Woman, and in so doing opens up a space to reconsider and transform the sense of feminine being'.<sup>197</sup> In a similar mode, a deconstructive reading positions woman in 'the constitutive "outside" of discourse [...] a systemic lack [that] is inversed and transformed into a sign of becoming' which is not fixed and is ungraspable.<sup>198</sup> According to Irigaray, women's potential is eventually fulfilled in the production of writing.<sup>199</sup> This concept of potential in the female being is connected to Atwood's idea of the 'creative non-victim' that she develops in her novels. The female protagonists' quest for identity passes through language, that is, through the intertextual dialogue, which generates awareness, knowledge and therefore power. It is a process that is never concluded and occurs at a linguistic level.

Kristeva connects the disruptive practice of *écriture féminine* to political revolution in an intertextual dialogue that implies transformation.<sup>200</sup> This transformation cannot happen without the relation with the other where the body is written in a new perspective, which is a 'revolutionary act'.<sup>201</sup> Body language and intertextuality are the keys to this disruption that introduces a social and historical revolution in language and therefore in society, which is envisaged in Cixous' writings as well. Thus, a new identity for a woman starts from language, that is, from writing, in *écriture féminine*. It is a rewriting of the form and content of the linguistic structures and envisages a newly born woman. This vision is both material and ideal and is projected into the future. If sex is produced via a performative act and reiterated in a set of norms,<sup>202</sup> these norms can be changed and rewritten, exposing and acknowledging their illegitimacy, which is similar to what occurs in the intertextual dialogue.<sup>203</sup> A new style is therefore born with *écriture féminine* that is characterised by more freedom: women have the right to speak their difference and their connection to the maternal voice and to their body,<sup>204</sup> that is, to their passions, as Woolf claims, and to their sexual impulses, to their *jouissance*, as

Cixous and Kristeva remark. Therefore, in an intertextual dialogue within the main text, *écriture féminine* plays an important role in emphasising a female vision.

Both Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva analyse women's position within language and are more interested in the social relationships in which women should have the opportunity to speak as an 'I' and not as the 'other' in a dynamic tension that allows them multiple views. From this view, Kristeva's *chora*, a term she borrows from Plato, has provisional and dynamic characteristics.<sup>205</sup> It is uncertain and undetermined, like *écriture féminine*. It is a receptacle that is connected with maternity and nourishment.<sup>206</sup> In this dimension, the linguistic sign is not articulated as the absence of the object, that is, as a distinction between real and symbolic; instead it is a pre-verbal function, a semiotic function, which Kristeva calls 'antérieure à la position du signe':<sup>207</sup>

The *functions* that organise the semiotic *chora* might find a correct genetic clarification only inside a theory of the subject that does not reduce it to understanding but opens it up to the other scene of pre-symbolic functions. [...] It concerns pre-Oedipal semiotic functions, that is, some discharging of energy that links and directs the body in relation to the mother. [...] We'll say therefore that it is this maternal body that mediates the symbolic law, which organises the social relationships and that becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, on the way to destruction, of aggression and of death.<sup>208</sup>

Therefore, *écriture féminine* originates from a pre-linguistic status that is connected to the relationship with the body of the mother. It is semiotic and pre-symbolic and mediates with the social relationships of the dominant society. The linguistic category of social products is constructed and historically imposed, according to Kristeva;<sup>209</sup> thus, the pre-linguistic characteristics of the semiotic function are by definition disruptive and destabilise the symbolic law of the social roles. Throughout Margaret Atwood's work, *écriture féminine* is expressed as a continuous subversion and an unsettling of the patriarchal discourse. Her deconstruction of the traditional dichotomies is linked to the theories of feminist writers. Her women characters are the main protagonists; they are the targeted victims of the prejudices and conventions of the patriarchal society at social, political and linguistic levels. Atwood deconstructs the

conventions of the symbolic patriarchal law in a 'dialogic thought' that is an attempt to delineate an alternative view that is multifaceted; it includes different views that coexist in an encompassing vision.

Hence, *écriture féminine* and intertextuality interweave in this process. As Kristeva claims, women should write from their *chora* to express in a poetic language the deconstruction of the patriarchal system.<sup>210</sup> This is preparation for a revolutionary change that starts in language, that is, in the intertextual dialogue between texts. It is a form of 'sisterhood in language'<sup>211</sup> and is not just an overflow of emotions but 'a conscious response to social realities'.<sup>212</sup> Thus, *écriture féminine* is both revolutionary and political; it affects social and historical conditions and might lead to transformations of the self and changes in human relationships.<sup>213</sup>

In Atwood's novels, these characteristics are fully developed in both form and content in a parodic and ironic discourse that engages a constant dynamic dialogue with the intertexts and proposes alternative visions in a search for identity that is fluid and in constant transformation. This gives voice to marginal views, such as women's views, that have acquired more relevance in the course of the 20th century, as feminist theorists remark, and are now more prominent in the political, social and literary worlds. In her work, Margaret Atwood testifies to this change in perspective in a contemporary world that allows more space for women's voices despite risks of backlash.

### **The engaged reader**

Respect the page. It's all you've got.

Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, 2002

But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have?

Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 2000

The response of the reader is an important element in Margaret Atwood's novels and is connected with intertextuality and with language, that is, with *écriture féminine*. The reader has an active role; they decode the text and are challenged by the vision of the story. They resist, adapt to or change their perspective during the reading; they 'bring different expectations, experiences, knowledge' to the text and consequently 'different

responses result'.<sup>214</sup> As will be seen in this section, the reader's function in Atwood's novels combines and develops different theories that have emerged in modern times since Virginia Woolf and then been developed by theorists such as Barthes, Foucault, Riffaterre and Eco. These theories imply the death of the author, according to Barthes, who formulated this concept for the first time, or the effacement of the writer in favour of the reader. The reader becomes the interpreter of the text in dialogue with the intertexts present in the main text. Both reader and writer are functions, as Atwood remarks in *Negotiating with the Dead*, that meet in the text at the apex of an upside down V without any link between each other.<sup>215</sup> The text makes them an 'ideal reader', who is an accomplice and a spy, and gives them a writer function; they are not the author but an alter ego – the 'other', as well as a witness.<sup>216</sup> Quoting Emily Dickinson, Atwood remarks that "'Nobody" is the writer, and the reader is also Nobody', and so all the books are anonymous.<sup>217</sup> This is a thought-provoking statement that implies an absence, a loss, and emphasises the role of the text. At the same time, Atwood posits an interesting question about the death of the author without giving a definite answer. She asks: 'And who is it that does the killing?' The easiest answer would be that it is the reader, but she is probably suggesting that the text kills the author in the first place to revive the author as a function, as will be seen in this section.

The text as a source of pleasure where the reader dissolves their identity and reconstructs it is explored by Barthes's *Le Plaisir du Texte*. Nevertheless, the intuition that this process exists is present in some of the writings of Virginia Woolf, though she did not develop a theoretical framework about the role of the reader. Woolf gave some indications of this concept in 'Fishing', 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play' and 'How Should One read a Book?' and in her notes on the reader in 'Anon' and 'The Reader', which were published after her death.<sup>218</sup> In these works, Woolf reflects both on the writer and on the reader. She posits that the writer is influenced by 'the complex of economic, political, cultural, and personal forces'.<sup>219</sup> The emergence of the modern reader has such a deep effect upon literature that their distraction can cause the writer to stop writing.<sup>220</sup> The reader is a 'fellow worker', an accomplice of the writer, because 'one should read it as if one were writing it [the text]'.<sup>221</sup> According to Woolf, reading is 'a disembodied trance-like intense rapture ... the complete elimination of the *ego*; and it's the ego that erects itself like another part of the body I don't dare to name'.<sup>222</sup> Thus, the reader is actively involved in a physical pleasure that encompasses mind and

body, as it is in Barthes's theory that is expressed in *Le Plaisir du Texte*, as will be seen later in this section. The sexual pleasure triggered by the text implies a loss of identity, a dissolution of the reader's self whose world of language is challenged and, at the same time, the reader reconstructs their confidence and individuality while experiencing the text.<sup>223</sup> In Atwood's novels, the reader is engaged in an intertextual dialogue within a text that questions their world of language and in part effaces their certainties, that is, their identities, triggering possible alternative views. This implies involvement, interest and pleasure in the act of reading, as Atwood claims in her interviews.<sup>224</sup>

In a similar way, Barthes in *Le Plaisir du Texte* remarks that between the text and the reader there is an erotic relationship of sorts that culminates in pleasure and *jouissance* and implies a loss. It is 'le lieu d'une perte' where the multiple languages of the text reveal a happy Babel (Babel heureuse).<sup>225</sup> The sense of the text will therefore be unstable, reversible and revocable, and there is a reciprocal exchange of desire between the text and the reader. In this world of language that Barthes calls the 'logosphère',<sup>226</sup> meanings are multiple and redundant and do not have a final interpretation<sup>227</sup> in an intertextual exchange that takes place in the network of quotations created by the text itself.<sup>228</sup> Thus, it is impossible to live 'out of the infinite text [...] the book makes sense, the sense makes life'<sup>229</sup> and therefore the fictional lives of the readers are reconstructed within the text in a world of language that allows them intense pleasure and chances for transformation. Therefore, according to Barthes, the intertextual dialogue produced by the text involves the reader and triggers pleasure and multiple interpretations. It is an exchange in which the reader as a function becomes the protagonist and, at the same time, emphasises the value of the text. For this reason, the writer needs the reader to develop their discourse in an exchange with the other that, according to Bakhtin, generates identity in the 'dialogic thought'. Therefore, the text is produced in this exchange, in a communication that cannot be an isolated act but necessitates the existence of the other to take place and develop. From a Foucaultian, and Atwoodian, point of view, this dialogue generates power relationships, as will be seen in this section.

Another interesting point is made in Umberto Eco's *Lector in Fabula*. He proposes the notion of 'movimenti cooperativi' (co-operative movements) that produce the pleasure



experienced when reading the text.<sup>230</sup> This cooperation activates the reader's intertextual competence which is generated by the author.<sup>231</sup> The reader is active and develops a series of interpretations, which are indefinite but not infinite and are triggered by the text itself.<sup>232</sup> The language of the text creates literary devices and connects to intertexts which need to be contextualised and understood by the reader, the 'ideal reader', within the text.<sup>233</sup> Therefore, the 'ideal reader' should uncover all the clues and fill the gaps in the text that are suggested by the text itself.<sup>234</sup> According to Eco, the text constructs this 'ideal reader' and contributes to create their competence.<sup>235</sup> Hence, both reader and writer are strategic functions created by the text. It is necessary to create a reader as a function that will give the text its best interpretation and the best connection to the network of intertexts contained within the text itself. Examples of the 'ideal reader' are found in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in *The Testaments*. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred addresses the *Dear Reader* she hopes will hear her voice and consequently become aware of the oppressive and threatening narratives of Gilead. In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia describes the 'ideal reader' at the end of the novel.<sup>236</sup> This engenders a dialogue between the writer function and the reader function within the main text, as Atwood remarks in *Negotiating with the Dead*. This dialogue shapes new interpretations and contributes to the revolutionary function of the novel.

Similar conclusions are reached in Riffaterre's theories where he claims that the reader imagines the author in the text, which means that the author is a 'by-product of the text'; the author is an 'author in words'.<sup>237</sup> According to Riffaterre, the text controls 'its own decoding through its style, that is, through syntax, phonology, and language'.<sup>238</sup> In this way, the text creates a fictional truth that 'holds the interest of the reader' because it is consistent with the social context.<sup>239</sup> The reader follows the clues given by the text in order to decode it, that is, they follow the ungrammaticalities or references to intertexts.<sup>240</sup> In this way, the text guides the reader's interpretation, and, as long as the signs are plausible, 'the readers react to a story as if it were true'.<sup>241</sup> According to Riffaterre, 'these signs constitute the system of verisimilitude' which is created in the language of the text.<sup>242</sup> Hence, intertextual references are paramount in the decoding of the text and in the reader function in the story that engenders fresh interpretations and a revision of traditional narratives.

Foucault gives a more open and interesting view of the reader which is even more useful for analysing Atwood's work. At a conference and then in an essay, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?',<sup>243</sup> he speaks of an 'ouverture d'un espace où le sujet écrivain ne cesse de disparaître', where writing is linked to death. This death is not only the death of the author claimed by Barthes, but goes further as the text becomes the place where the sacrifice occurs, that is, the text itself kills the author. In the text there is an absence, a loss, which needs to be located, according to Foucault. He seems to suggest that the empty space left by the effacement of the author should be reappropriated or replaced within the text. He therefore proposes the concept of the author as a function with a 'pluralité d'ego', an alter ego of the writer who 'revient au texte même' and appears in writing. In this sense, the text can only be analysed in its particular structure or form and the reader is guided by the writing itself. Foucault concludes his essay with the quotation by Samuel Beckett he mentions at the beginning of his argument: 'Qu'importe qui parle?' As the text is the place where interpretation occurs and both the reader and the writer are functions, the text is the place where the intertextual dialogue and the analysis take place between an 'ideal reader' and a by-product writer with multiple egos. Therefore, the writer as a function that is created within the text needs the reader, who is a function as well, to produce a meaningful text that will survive and generate an alternative critical reading in the intertextual dialogue.

Drawing from all these concepts, which are reflected in Atwood's work, as will be seen later in my thesis, it is clear that the text is at the centre of the critical analysis which needs to focus on its structure and on its language. The intertextual dialogue occurs in the text and generates multiple readings.<sup>244</sup> It is a 'dialogic thought', according to Bakhtin,<sup>245</sup> that generates meaning and is 'always open to interpretation'.<sup>246</sup> It is contextual and inclusive and implies that the text cannot stand alone but is necessarily connected with other texts in a world of language.<sup>247</sup> Atwood, speaking about the writer in *Negotiating with the Dead*, claims the duplicity of the writer, who is both a witness and a manipulator.<sup>248</sup> The reader is free to create 'fresh meaning',<sup>249</sup> but, at the same time, 'the power of the narratives is immense, especially when combined with artistic power'.<sup>250</sup> Thus, the writer is a function created by the text, but also an eyewitness who guides and manipulates the reader.<sup>251</sup> According to Atwood, the reader is 'You', the *Dear Reader* and the 'ideal reader', who is explicitly addressed in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in *The Testaments*. The active reader is the element that grants the survival of

the story in their process of interpretation that looks for clues and experiences loss of identity but also transformations in the intertextual dialogue within the text. Referring to Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction',<sup>252</sup> Atwood suggests that texts and artistic products in general have lost their 'aura', as Benjamin claims. They are no longer unique or transcendent in the mass movement and mass production that allows a 'plurality of copies'.<sup>253</sup> Thus, in a world of consumers that form the market, the ritual quality of the artistic product acquires different functions and is instead based on the practice of politics.<sup>254</sup> The text is no longer absolute either in form or in content, that is, in its structure and meaning, but reversible, interpretable and unstable. It is subject to the requirements of the public in a sociopolitical context that is changeable as well. This refers to what Woolf proposed and to what Eco and Foucault state. In Atwood's work, the political implications of the modern text have lost an absolute transcendent power, the 'aura' – as Benjamin remarks, and the author is dead. Nevertheless, the author still exerts power as a function that influences the reader through language or style, as Riffaterre claims, guiding the reader through the intertextual exchange in a dialogic dynamic way, as Bakhtin remarks. According to Atwood, both writing and reading are processes that engender experiences of meaning;<sup>255</sup> this influences the reader, guiding and/or manipulating them:

Maybe the writer *expresses*; but *evocation*, calling up, is what writing does for the reader. Writing is also a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling. It is a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word. It's also a witnessing. Come with me, the writer is saying to the reader. *There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know.* The writer is both an eye-witness and a I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer *bears witness*. Bearing witness is not the same as self-expression.<sup>256</sup>

Writing overpowers the reader, entraps them in the story, as in 'The Ancient Mariner',<sup>257</sup> if the story is interesting enough and, as Riffaterre claims, is consistent with the social context. There is therefore a duplicity in the writer's function that is expressed and exerted through language and is reflected in the double effect that the

text has on the reader, that is, freedom of interpretation but, at the same time, the reader is bound to the text by the language of the text itself. Thus, everything occurs at a linguistic level, as it does with intertextuality and *écriture féminine*. The intertextual dialogue is therefore open, disruptive and dynamic, as Bakhtin and Kristeva claim, in a tension that engenders new possible visions and always challenges the narratives of modern society though remains consistent with its context. Atwood claims that 'fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community [...] one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects'.<sup>258</sup> She therefore acknowledges the power of societal narratives and simultaneously questions them in the intertextual dialogue present in the main text where the reader is the protagonist.

Therefore, Atwood attempts to play freely in an ambiguous game of giving and taking in which the writer function, or 'other' writer, exerts a displaced power over the reader and simultaneously claims its absence, leaving the text in the hands of the reader.<sup>259</sup> However, the reader is guided in their 'freedom' by the language of the text in an intertextual dynamic dialogue that engenders multiple interpretations that are open and changeable in time and space, though they are not infinite. The reader's vision is questioned by the text in a 'dialogic thought' that suggests new possible visions of being human which are inclusive and encompass different views that coexist. Hence, the concept of the reader in Atwood's work is connected with the disruptive concept of the novel described by Kristeva and Bakhtin through intertextual connections that propose a new vision in a plausible contextualised world of language, as Riffaterre claims. This exploration of language operates in parallel with the concept of *écriture féminine* in the world of language of the novels, emphasising alternative perspectives. In this sense, the text is experienced by the reader as a political product that challenges their vision and suggests a re-reading and rewriting, that is, a revision of the narratives of modern society. From this view, a new ontological vision is envisaged in which different views coexist without any final or absolute interpretation. The text acquires its power only if there is interest and a response from the reader, the active reader, who interprets the ungrammaticalities, is open to possible different interpretations and might take a stand.

In *The Edible Woman*, the intertextual exchange with the commercials of the consumerist world and with literary texts and fairy tales creates a dialogue that highlights the rebellious characteristic of the non-verbal language of the body that refers to *écriture féminine*. The protagonist explores alternative possible paths in conversation with the intertextual network engendered in the main text, revealing the complex and disruptive effects of the interconnections.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tout texte se construit comme une mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> I libri parlano sempre di altri libri e ogni storia racconta una storia già raccontata. My translation.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood's *Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, ed. by Sharon R., Wilson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text', in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 36. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 114.

<sup>6</sup> *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Michael Worton and Judith Still, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 1. Worton and Still refer to Rousseau's work but I claim that this idea can be applied more widely to intertextuality and postmodernism.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmodern. Rapport sur le Savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Connor remarks that contemporary life is a 'society of the spectacle', Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel,' in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 66. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of intertextuality, see: María Jesús Martínez Alfaro, 'Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept', in *Atlantis. Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies*, XVIII (1996), pp. 268-85, available at:

<<http://faculty.weber.edu/cbergeson/quixote/martinez.pdf>> [accessed 20 March 2017]; and the 'Introduction', in Worton and Still.

<sup>11</sup> See Martínez Alfaro, p. 269 and Worton and Still, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Martínez Alfaro, p. 269 and Worton and Still, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Eliot claims that art aims at 'ordering the chaos of the mind and modernity into the hardened form of art'. It is 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'. T.S. Eliot, *Ulysses, Order, and Myth*, 1923, available at: <<http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/eliotulysses.htm>> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>15</sup> Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, p. 21. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Connor speaks of modernism in literature, expressing the concept of 'less and more', that is, it condensates the world into a reduced time (a single day in *Ulysses* and Mrs *Dalloway*) and at the same time lets the content of the world overflow in its accumulation of allusions and intertextual connections. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Steven Connor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*. (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 1980), pp. 88-89.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Alice Jardine, *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*, ed by Mari Ruti (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 81. See also Martínez Alfaro, pp. 272-73.

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 65.

- <sup>21</sup> The quotation is in Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary Canadian Fiction* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 154.
- <sup>22</sup> Martínez Alfaro, p. 273.
- <sup>23</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 24.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.
- <sup>25</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 66.
- <sup>26</sup> 'Toute trace écrite se précipite comme un élément chimique d'abord transparent, innocent et neutre, dans lequel la simple durée fait peu à peu apparaître tout un passé en suspension, tout un cryptographie de plus en plus dense.' Roland Barthes, *Le Degré Zéro de L'écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), p. 20. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 17.
- <sup>27</sup> Worton and Still, p. 21.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. See also Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. Literature in the Second Degree* (1982; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 1.
- <sup>29</sup> See: Martínez Alfaro, pp. 280-81, and Genette, pp. 1-5.
- <sup>30</sup> Allen, p. 105.
- <sup>31</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. xv and xviii.
- <sup>32</sup> Worton and Still, p. 28.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>34</sup> See: Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 224, and Martínez Alfaro, p. 282.
- <sup>35</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', p. 68.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>37</sup> Kristeva, 'From one to Another', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 132.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134 and 136.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- <sup>41</sup> Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi).
- <sup>42</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, 2005), and Coral Ann Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale: York Notes Advanced* (London: York Press, 2003). Jane Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993). Arnold E., Davidson, *Seeing in the Dark: Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye* (Toronto, ECW Press, 1997). Madeleine McMurry-Kavanagh, *Cat's Eye: York Notes Advanced* (London: Longman York Press, 2000). Bruce Stewart, *Cat's Eye: York Notes* (Beirut: York Press, 1996).
- <sup>43</sup> Bouson, p. 7.
- <sup>44</sup> Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of her Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 9.
- <sup>46</sup> Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. 6.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>50</sup> Sharon R. Wilson, 'Atwood's Intertextual and Sexual politics', in ed. by Sharon Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen, *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996), pp. 55-62, (p. 56).
- <sup>51</sup> '[I]n any intercultural/interracial dialogue between established interests and minority interests, shifts in power are a major part of what is being negotiated.' Coral Ann Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Redefining Identities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 20-21.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>53</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988; Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 157.
- <sup>54</sup> 'Irony is both questioning and elitist, both disruptive of norms and constructive of higher ideals.' Claire Colenbrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 153.
- <sup>55</sup> '[P]arody is one of the many forms of intertextual allusion out of which texts are produced.' Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 6.
- <sup>56</sup> '[T]his is the paradox of art as both product and process, as both artifact and part of life.' Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 157.

- <sup>57</sup> Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 120.
- <sup>58</sup> Sherrill Grace, 'Gender and Genre: Atwood's autobiographical 'I'', in *Margaret Atwood Writing and Subjectivity: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Colin Nicholson, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 189-203 (p. 200).
- <sup>59</sup> Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 188.
- <sup>60</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. 2.
- <sup>61</sup> Michel Riffaterre, 'The Intertextual Unconscious', in *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Winter 1987), the University of Chicago Press, pp. 371-85, (p. 375).
- <sup>62</sup> Riffaterre claims that ungrammaticalities 'signal that the subtext's meaning does not derive from the chain of events of the surrounding narrative, but from references to an intertext'. Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. xviii.
- <sup>63</sup> According to Colenbrook, in postmodern irony the fact that 'everything is somehow quoted or simulated relies on a lost sense of the truly valuable or original'. Colenbrook, p. 3.
- <sup>64</sup> '[S]ubtexts, [are] texts within the text that are neither subplots nor themes but diegetic pieces whose sole function is to be vehicles of symbolism.' Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. XVII.
- <sup>65</sup> Riffaterre, 'The Intertextual Unconscious', p. 380.
- <sup>66</sup> Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. 2.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 10, 14 and 111.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiv, 13 and 19.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- <sup>72</sup> See Margaret Atwood's poem 'Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written' in Margaret Atwood, *True Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), pp. 65-70; and Jennifer M. Hoofard, "'It Is Her Body, Silent/ and Fingerless, Writing this Poem": Margaret Atwood's Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written', *Atlantis* 30.3 (2006) pp. 86-96. Available at <<http://journals.msvu.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/view/827/814>> [accessed 26 June 2019].
- <sup>73</sup> Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. XIV.
- <sup>74</sup> Atwood kept newspaper cuttings and files with articles in them about abuses in totalitarian regimes. Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 7.
- <sup>75</sup> Atwood speaks of 'speculative fiction ... a logical extension of where we are'. Brooks Bouson, p. 136. The quotation is from 'Writing Utopia', in Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, personal Prose 1983-2005* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005), pp. 92-93. See also her poems 'A Woman's Issue' and 'Christmas Carols' in Atwood, *True Stories*, pp. 54-57.
- <sup>76</sup> Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. XII. See also Hoofard, who quotes Hilda Hollis: 'Hollis contends that Atwood "undermines deconstruction's imperative in a truly deconstructive or subversive gesture ... Atwood shows that while a single, all-determining truth may not be found, this does not preclude the existence of true stories that testify to the inhumanity of humanity ... A single true story is constantly subverted by other true stories"; and in an interview, Atwood remarks, "There may not be one Truth – there may be several truths – but saying that is not to say that reality doesn't exist"', p. 90. Hoofard concludes that 'the only alternative is silence and hence complicity with torture'.
- <sup>77</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language*. The remark is in the introduction by Leon S. Roudiez, p. 4.
- <sup>78</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 65.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>80</sup> 'But the novel is not possible unless the disjunction between two terms can be denied while all the time being there, confirmed, and approved.' Kristeva, 'The Bounded text', in Kristeva, p. 48.
- <sup>81</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), p. 27.
- <sup>82</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel', p. 75.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>85</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972; London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 7.
- <sup>86</sup> Kristeva, 'The Bounded text', p. 51; Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel', p. 66.
- <sup>87</sup> As Kristeva remarks, for Bakhtin the novel is 'polyphonic' and its narrative structure indicates 'a becoming', Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel', p. 71.
- <sup>88</sup> '[T]he word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object', in *The Bakhtin Reader, Selected Writings by Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, ed. by Pam Morris (London: Arnold Publishers, 1994), p. 76. Also see Allen about Bakhtin: 'The polyphonic novel presents a world in which no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse; all discourses are interpretations of the world, responses to

and calls to other discourses.' Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>89</sup> According to Derrida, the text exists only in the network of texts it refers to, as he states, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte', that is, a text needs to be read in relation to other texts without any transcendent reference away from it. Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), p. 220.

<sup>90</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), p.18.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 25 and 26. Hutcheon highlights how the reader is encouraged to act and participate in the pleasure of the creative process; in fact, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'the reader was [...] forced to control, to organize, to interpret', p. 26. See also Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 27. Furthermore, the reader 'is asked to participate in the creation of worlds and of meaning, through language', p. 30.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>94</sup> 'The author lets the reader complete the 'open' work but he still, obviously, retains some control... The reader never really creates meaning freely; there are codes and rules and conventions that underlie its production.' *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Riffaterre, 'Intertextual Representation: on Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Sept., 1984), The University of Chicago Press, pp. 141-62 (p. 142).

<sup>96</sup> 'The heterocosm is constructed in and through language, and both author and reader share the responsibility for this work.' Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 90.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>98</sup> 'The term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it "historiographic metafiction.' Linda Hutcheon, *Historiographic Metafiction. Parody and the Intertextuality of History*. [pdf], 1989, available at:

<<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/10252>> [accessed 20 April 2017].

<sup>99</sup> 'All texts are fiction about fiction. As such "metafiction" is merely a more self-conscious staging of a relationship that has always existed.' Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 9.

<sup>100</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 90.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>102</sup> Linda Hutcheon, 'The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History' in *Cultural Critique* (Winter, 1986-1987), pp. 179-207, (pp. 185-86).

<sup>103</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 25.

<sup>104</sup> Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 110.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20, 25, 26 and 27.

<sup>106</sup> '[I]t is language which speaks, not the author'; 'language ... ceaselessly calls into question all origins', and 'a text is not a line of word releasing a single "theological" meaning..., but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash'. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Steven Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 143 and 146.

<sup>107</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981; Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> '[T]he heterocosm is constructed in and through language, and both author and reader share the responsibility for this work.' Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 90.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>111</sup> Hutcheon quotes Maurice Blanchot: 'Dans le roman l'acte de lire n'est pas changé, mais l'attitude de celui qui lit le rend différent.' (In the novel the act of reading does not change, but the attitude of the person who reads makes it different). My translation. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>112</sup> '[The reader] is caught in that paradoxical position of being forced by the text to acknowledge the fictionality of the world he too is creating, yet his very participation involves him intellectually, creatively, and perhaps even affectively in a human act that is very real, in fact, a kind of metaphor of his daily effort to "make sense" of experience.' Hutcheon, *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>113</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire": Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism' *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 20.4 (1989), pp. 149-75, p.154. [pdf] available at: <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10262/1/TSpace0171.pdf>>

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.



- <sup>115</sup> Eleonora Rao, 'Language, sexuality, displacement: Surfacing, Bluebeard's Egg, Life before Man', in *Margaret Atwood: The Shape-shifter*, ed. by Coomi S. Vevaina and Coral Ann Howells, (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998), pp. 44-55 (p. 49).
- <sup>116</sup> Hutcheon, 'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism', pp. 159-60.
- <sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.
- <sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- <sup>119</sup> Jane Middleston, *Understanding Postcolonialism* (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2009), p. 98.
- <sup>120</sup> 'Irony is [...] a way of resisting and yet acknowledging the power of the dominant. It may not go to the next step – to suggest something new – but it certainly makes that step possible.' Hutcheon, 'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism', p. 163.
- <sup>121</sup> Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 30-31.
- <sup>122</sup> Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. XVII.
- <sup>123</sup> See Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, pp. 31-33.
- <sup>124</sup> Genette divides intertextuality into five subcategories. These categories tend to overlap and can be redundant in practical criticism but they highlight the complexity of the phenomenon of intertextuality. They are as follows: intertextuality: the presence of one text in another; paratextuality: the relation between the body of the text and its title, subtitle, illustrations, notes, etc; metatextuality: commentary that links one text to another; architextuality: a generic category a text belongs to; and hypertextuality: every text (hypertext) derives from a previous one by means of direct or indirect transformation, though there may be no explicit reference to it. Martínez Alfaro, pp. 280-81. See also Genette, pp. 1-5.
- <sup>125</sup> '[H]er novels challenge her readers to see more by seeing differently'; 'Atwood's novels are criss-crossed with allusions to other texts, signalling her literary inheritance while at the same time marking significant differences from her predecessors.' Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 3, 9. Also see p. 8 on intertextuality.
- <sup>126</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 279.
- <sup>127</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 63.
- <sup>128</sup> Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 3.
- <sup>129</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Postille a 'Il Nome della Rosa'' in Umberto Eco, *Il Nome della Rosa* (1983; Bologna: Bompiani, 2006), pp. 507-33, (p. 529).
- <sup>130</sup> Michael Riffaterre, 'Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretative Discourse', in *Critical Inquiry* (Sept., 1984), pp. 141-62 (pp. 142-43).
- <sup>131</sup> Culler, p. 114. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>132</sup> Bakhtin and Kristeva insist on the polyphonic and dialogic quality of the novel that is characterised by transgression and transformation: 'Dialogism replaces these concepts by absorbing them within the concept of relation. It does not strive towards transcendence but rather towards harmony, all the while implying and idea of rupture (of opposition and analogy) as a modality of transformation.' Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel', p. 89.
- <sup>133</sup> Genette, p. 10.
- <sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398-99.
- <sup>135</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 71-72. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>136</sup> Carol L. Beran, 'Strangers within the Gates: Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*', in *Margaret Atwood* ed. by Harold Bloom (1992; New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp. 67-78 (p. 76).
- <sup>137</sup> '[T]he mimetic lexicon is weighted so as to dictate value and judgments to the reader and to lead him inescapably to specific conclusions', Riffaterre, 'Intertextual Representations', p. 153.
- <sup>138</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 224, and Martínez Alfaro, p. 282.
- <sup>139</sup> Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 156.
- <sup>140</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as a Re-Vision', in *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 1, *Women, Writing and Teaching* (Oct. 1972), pp. 18-30 (p. 18), available at : <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/375215?seq=1>> [accessed 3 June 2020].
- <sup>141</sup> 'Écrit-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre'. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* (Summer 1976), pp. 875-93 (p. 880).
- <sup>142</sup> As will be seen later in this section, I will refer to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, *Moments of Being*, and 'Professions for women'; Julia Kristeva's *La révolution du Langage Poétique*; Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex which is not One*; and Hélène Cixous' *Le rire de la Méduse*, *Sorties* and *La Venue à l'écriture*.

<sup>143</sup> Écrire, acte qui non seulement 'réalisera' le rapport dé-censuré de la femme à sa sexualité, à son être-femme, lui rendant accès à ses propres forces; qui lui rendra ses biens, ses plaisirs, ses organes, ses immenses territoires corporels tenus sous scellés [...] Une femme sans corps, une muette, une aveugle, ne peut pas être une bonne combattante. [...] Il faut tuer la fausse femme qui empêche la vivante de respirer. Inscire la souffle de la femme entière. Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), p. 45-46. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Cohen and Cohen, (p. 880).

<sup>144</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 2, 9-10 and 12.

<sup>145</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of "L'Écriture Féminine"', *Feminist Studies*, 7 (Summer, 1981), pp. 247-63 (p. 252).

<sup>146</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Women Novelists', in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 129-31 (p. 134). Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>147</sup> Dennis Cutchins, 'Bakhtin, Intertextuality and Adaptation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. by Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-16 (p. 3).

<sup>148</sup> Rich, p. 18.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>150</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (1972; London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 84-85. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; London: Granada, 1977), pp. 63, 67.

<sup>151</sup> Woolf, 'Women and Fiction', in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, pp. 132-39 (p. 136).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>153</sup> Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in Woolf, *Selected Essays*, pp. 140-45 (p. 144).

<sup>154</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 90.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>156</sup> See Frédéric Regard's introductory essay to Cixous' text. Frédéric Regard, 'AA!', in Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies*, pp. 9-22 (p. 9), and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), p. XVI.

<sup>157</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 10.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>159</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 8.

<sup>160</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 47.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>163</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972; Toronto: Anansi Press, 2012), pp. 32-35.

<sup>164</sup> Cixous, p. 45.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>166</sup> Speaking about *écriture féminine* in the works of Cixous, Frédéric Regard refers to Rimbaud's seer. In 'Lettre à Paul Demeny', Rimbaud writes: 'Le Poète se fait voyant par un long,/ immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens.' Arthur Rimbaud, 'Lettre à Paul Demeny du 15 Mai 1871'. Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettres du Voyant*. Paris: Librairie Minard; Genève: Librairie Droz, 1975), p. 137. Regard, p. 16. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>167</sup> Ces poètes seront! Quand sera brisé l'infini servage de la femme, quand elle vivra pour elle et par elle, l'homme,- jusqu'ici abominable, - lui ayant donné son renvoi, elle sera poète, elle aussi! La femme trouvera de l'inconnu! Ses mondes d'idées différeront-ils des nôtres? – Elle trouvera des choses étranges, insondables, repoussantes, délicieuses; nous les prendrons, nous les comprendrons. Rimbaud, pp. 137 and 141. My translation.

<sup>168</sup> Cixous, pp. 43-44.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>171</sup> non-exclusion de la différence. My translation. Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>172</sup> Hommes ou femmes [sont] êtres complexes, mobile, ouverts. My translation. Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-19.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>175</sup> Sissel Lie, 'Life Makes Text from My Body: A Reading of Hélène Cixous' *La Venue à l'écriture*', in *Hélène Cixous: Critical Impressions*, ed. by Lee A. Jacobus and Regina Barreca (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1999), pp. 1-22 (p. 17).

<sup>176</sup> Ann Aneja, 'The Medusa's Slip: Hélène Cixous and the Underpinning of *écriture féminine*', in Jacobus and Barreca, pp. 58-75 (p. 61).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

- <sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 63.
- <sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 64.
- <sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 64.
- <sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 64.
- <sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 65.
- <sup>184</sup> Pamela Ann Turner, 'Hélène Cixous: A Space Between – Women and (Their) language', in Jacobus and Barreca, pp. 187-200 (p. 193).
- <sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 198.
- <sup>186</sup> For the definition of ustopia, a made-up word to describe a concept Atwood developed in some of her novels, see Margaret Atwood, 'Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia', in Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago Press, 2011), pp. 66-96.
- <sup>187</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974; Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.
- <sup>188</sup> Ibid., pp. 48, 71.
- <sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 165. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 191.
- <sup>191</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 28.
- <sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 26.
- <sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 134.
- <sup>194</sup> Amy S. Crawford, 'Dis/Eruption: Hélène Cixous's *Écriture Féminine* and the rhetoric of material idealism' (June 2006), pp. 41-56, available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/39435176\\_DisEruption\\_Helene\\_Cixous%27s\\_Ecriture\\_Feminine\\_and\\_the\\_rhetoric\\_of\\_material\\_idealism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/39435176_DisEruption_Helene_Cixous%27s_Ecriture_Feminine_and_the_rhetoric_of_material_idealism) > [accessed 10 April 2020].
- <sup>195</sup> Virpi Lehtinen, *Luce Irigaray's Phenomenology of Feminine Being* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), p. 7.
- <sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 9.
- <sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 10.
- <sup>200</sup> Crawford, p. 46.
- <sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 46.
- <sup>202</sup> Butler, p. 12.
- <sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 14.
- <sup>204</sup> Béatrice Didier, *L'écriture-femme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), pp. 30-32.
- <sup>205</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), p. 23.
- <sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 25.
- <sup>207</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-26.
- <sup>208</sup> Les fonctions qui organisent la *chora* sémiotique pourront trouver un éclairage génétique juste, seulement à l'intérieur d'une théorie du sujet qui ne la réduit pas à celui de l'entendement, mais ouvre, en lui, l'autre scène des fonctions pré-symboliques. [...] Il s'agit donc de fonctions sémiotiques pré-œdipiennes, de décharges d'énergie qui lient et orientent le corps par rapport à la mère. [...] On dira donc que c'est ce corps maternel qui médiate la loi symbolique organisatrice des rapports sociaux, et qui devient le principe d'ordonnement de la *chora* sémiotique, sur la voie de la destruction, de l'agressivité et de la mort. Ibid., pp. 26-27. Emphasis in the original. My translation.
- <sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 29.
- <sup>210</sup> Seda Peksen, 'Feminine Writing as an Alternative to the Patriarchal Language', *MP: An Online Feminist Journal* (2005), p. 5, available at [http://academinist.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/03/010201Peksen\\_Feminine.pdf](http://academinist.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/03/010201Peksen_Feminine.pdf) > [accessed 10 April 2020].
- <sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 3.
- <sup>212</sup> Jones, p. 260.
- <sup>213</sup> Peksen, p. 9.
- <sup>214</sup> Tolan, p. 6.
- <sup>215</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* (London: Virago Press, 2003), p. 113.
- <sup>216</sup> Ibid., pp. 30, 46.
- <sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 120.
- <sup>218</sup> See Brenda R. Silver, '“Anon” and “The Reader”: Virginia Woolf's Last Essays', *Twentieth Century Literature* (Autumn - Winter, 1979), pp. 356-441, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/441326> > [accessed 15 May 2020]; Kate Flint, 'Reading Uncommonly:

Virginia Woolf and the Practice of Reading', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, (1996), pp. 187-98, available at <[10.2307/3508657](https://doi.org/10.2307/3508657)> [accessed 15 May 2020].

<sup>219</sup> Silver, p. 360.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

<sup>221</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'How Should One Read a Book?', in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 63-73 (p. 64).

<sup>222</sup> Flint, p. 187.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>224</sup> See: the *Authors Guild*, 'Celebrating Literary Icons: Margaret Atwood and Judy Bloom', (26 May 2020), available at <[https://www.authorsguild.org/who-we-are/the-authors-guild-foundation/celebrating-literary-icons-margaret-atwood-and-judy-blume/?fbclid=IwAR1B\\_nx68uUXfJz9wxYHdV\\_oGpc-sQQ15ZGVuP91RTPPII\\_h7j7Phrx8L6c](https://www.authorsguild.org/who-we-are/the-authors-guild-foundation/celebrating-literary-icons-margaret-atwood-and-judy-blume/?fbclid=IwAR1B_nx68uUXfJz9wxYHdV_oGpc-sQQ15ZGVuP91RTPPII_h7j7Phrx8L6c)> [accessed 27 May 2020].

<sup>225</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 10.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>228</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 146.

<sup>229</sup> 'hors du texte infini [...] le livre fait le sens, le sens fait la vie'. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte*, p. 51.

My translation.

<sup>230</sup> Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: La Cooperazione Interpretativa nei Testi Narrativi* (Milano: Bompiani, 2016), p. 5.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51-52.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>236</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), p. 403.

<sup>237</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 5.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>239</sup> Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. XII.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XVIII.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>243</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce qu' un auteur?' *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* (juillet-septembre 1969), pp. 73-104, available at

<<http://libertaire.free.fr/MFoucault349.html>> [Accessed 23 December 2018]. See the English translation here: Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?', available at

<[https://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/pluginfile.php/624849/mod\\_resource/content/1/a840\\_1\\_michel\\_foucault.pdf](https://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/pluginfile.php/624849/mod_resource/content/1/a840_1_michel_foucault.pdf)> [accessed 15 May 2020].

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9 and 14.

<sup>248</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002; London: Virago Press, 2003), pp. 45, 101, and 104.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>251</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'At the End of the Audience', in Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 348.

<sup>252</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 44.

<sup>253</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 217-51 (p. 221).

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224-225. See also Hutcheon when she speaks of a 'distinct moral and political point of view' in Atwood's work. Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>255</sup> Atwood, 'At the End of the Audience', pp. 344-345.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>259</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (2000; London: Virago Press, 2009), p. 637.

## Chapter 2

### Negotiating with the body: *The Edible Woman*

Mankind cannot bear too much unreality.

Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*,  
1969

In my analysis of *The Edible Woman*, the process of the deconstruction and reconstruction of the narratives of the main text through the intertextual dialogue challenges the discourse of the consumerist society and shows the disruptive quality of the novel. For this reason, I will mainly investigate how and why Atwood refers to the world of commercials and advertisements in the consumerist society of the 1960s and the cannibalistic theme expressed in the intertext of the *Decameron* and in *Titus Andronicus*. As will be seen, the intertextual references expose the incongruities and contradictions of the consumerist world and the constructed forced roles implemented by the patriarchal society. Rebelling against these rules and roles is a means of survival that Marian expresses unconsciously through her body. This entails a process that reshapes the self through the body, expressing it in a non-verbal language that is related to *écriture féminine*. Notably, in the introduction to *The Canlit Foodbook*, Atwood notes the significant number of texts about cannibalism in Canadian literature; they refer to a metaphorical level of eating and to everyday level as well, and position the act of eating as 'our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language'. She claims that '[w]e eat before we talk'<sup>1</sup> and therefore that eating is a pre-language act which is linked to survival and which permeated human beings before there was any constructed societal influence. In Chapter 9, Atwood includes the extract from *The Edible Woman* in which Marian makes the woman-shaped cake.<sup>2</sup>

The intertextual references question the certainties of the consumerist society and disrupt its rules in an ironic mode that reveals its discrepancies. At the same time, the dialogue between texts creates new possibilities or alternatives that are never definite or closed in the novel. At the end of the novel, the protagonist is open to an uncertain future that in part confirms the status quo. Therefore, the use of the intertexts is disruptive and also confirms the power of the subtexts and of the patriarchal discourse behind it. The novel attempts to rewrite the narratives, though partially and

provisionally, in an endless process of revision that suggests different interpretations and possible alternatives. As Bakhtin states, different influences between texts have a dialogic quality; diverse interpretations and multiple readings coexist and are always open and deny any 'absolute meaning'.<sup>3</sup> This implies a dialogue and a negotiation between the reader and the texts within the main text that allow different interpretations.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the dialogue between texts creates different views in which the conclusion is always shifting and the final result is never attained. This reflects what Bakhtin and Kristeva say about the novel – that it opens up to a world of language in an intertextual dynamic dialogue that is transgressive and polyphonic and in continuous progress. It unveils obsolete conventions and proposes different multiple interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

### **The shaping of the body**

The body speaks a distinctive language in *The Edible Woman*, taking control of the protagonist's actions and leading her to an awakening, self-discovery and alternative identities to the stereotyped female roles that surround her. Her body speaks an ideological truth that opposes the roles assigned to her while her mind keeps aligning to the rules of society. The body voices rebellion and subversion; it takes action by running away, refusing food and vomiting, or, on the contrary, searching for renewal in a sexual exploration that encompasses sexual self-pleasure, cleaning, cooking and eating food, exploring the wilderness and connecting to the maternal *chora*. In this context, Marian's symbolic eating disorder reshapes her body, entailing possible alternatives that are in opposition to the roles dictated by the consumerist society. The final act of cannibalism (eating the woman-shaped cake) is a reappropriation of the body and the dissolution of the enemy via digestion: the woman-shaped cake is like a submissive glossy doll. The protagonist's search for a modelled female identity is indefinite at the end of the novel but needs to go beyond the examples of women she has around her, maybe to a distant past where no one will tell her 'you're just rejecting your femininity'.<sup>6</sup>

The story is an anti-comedy and a romance that is stretched until it becomes grotesque in its essentially anti-romantic characters and anti-heroic implications.<sup>7</sup> Jackie Shead claims that Atwood interrogates art forms to 'open them up to new ideas [...] expand

the brackets, surprise the reader'.<sup>8</sup> She does not discard tradition but uses it in a subversive way while looking for alternative possible paths. The novel includes comical scenes but also surreal and Gothic romance nuances; it is funny and uncanny alternately, subverting the realistic discourse but also referring to it in a world of consumers and consumed items that reflect the consumerist society of the 1960s (and not only the 1960s), its mesmerising commercials and artificial, cheap hedonism.

The allusions and intertexts work as citations and pastiche in an intentionally self-reflexive discourse and expose the parodic significance of the story.<sup>9</sup> They are a critical tool that Atwood offers to decode the implications of the text, exposing the intertexts to the events in an inverted, oppositional way. Thus, she reveals the artificiality, incongruities and contradictions present in the consumerist world and the contrived construction of woman's (and man's) role in society. These roles alienate the individual and threaten their integrity to the point of destruction; this is highlighted by the cannibalistic undertones present in the intertexts that question the concept of individuality and the possibility of reconstructing an independent self.

It is for these reasons that intertexts are frequently used and are relevant to the 'dialogic thought' that criticises the consumerist society and engenders fresh interpretations, that is, the revision of traditional narratives and consequently the roles imposed by society. This is revealed through references to fairy tales with cannibalistic undertones such as 'Little Red Cap', 'Snow White', 'The Robber Bridegroom' and 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'.<sup>10</sup> It is also highlighted in the reference to the theme of the eaten heart that is linked to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Fourth Day, first and ninth stories) and to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. The narrative explicitly mentions *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll and refers to commercials and advertisements of the 1960s. Wilson highlights that 'Marian in *The Edible Woman* consumer-product-tests a society in which everyone and everything, including nature, is product and consumer'. She also remarks that 'The Robber Bridegroom' is one of the central intertexts of the novel where the different motifs of the fairy tale are repeated in a parodic key.<sup>11</sup> This underlines the critique that the novel argues against the constructed and constrictive roles imposed by society, as will be seen in this chapter.

Therefore, the cannibalistic nature inherent in the consumerist society is highlighted by the intertexts and allusions in the novel. Atwood exposes the artificiality and

incongruities of modern society, which hide a logic aimed at profit under the apparently harmless world of advertisements. It is a logic that is disconnected from rational discourses and is linked instead to postcolonial strategies. Atwood's approach is critical; she questions the status quo, exploring possible alternative paths, but does not give a final solution. The open ending envisages uncertain alternatives without defining what will come afterwards and emphasises the necessity of a creative reshaping that encompasses a cultural re-embodiment in a new ontological vision that could become a reality. This does not deny a consumer/consumed relationship and implies that a more conscious way of consuming is possible.

The allusions and intertexts work as citations and pastiche in an intentional self-reflexive discourse and expose the parodic significance of the story. Becker notes that for Atwood 'irony – like parody – presupposes a certain complicity with that which it contests, and that paradox remains unresolved'.<sup>12</sup> The novel's parodic intent and intertextual essence expose obsolete roles and patterns 'by mirroring them',<sup>13</sup> and parody is intended in its etymological sense as 'near' but also 'against' the text; it legitimises and is complicit with what it subverts – it is 'an exploration of difference and similarity'.<sup>14</sup> Parody is not only 'mockery, ridicule or mere destruction'; it is a way to create a new form, which is 'just as serious and valid, as a synthesis, as the form it dialectically attempts to surpass'.<sup>15</sup> It is 'an ironic form of intertextuality' that deconstructs the 'male-dominant culture', revealing 'the hidden gender encoding'.<sup>16</sup> Irony and parody are, therefore, critical tools Atwood offers to decode the implications of the text, presenting the intertexts and the events in an inverted oppositional way. Thus, she reveals the artificiality, incongruities and contradictions of the consumerist world and the contrived construction of women's (and men's) roles in society. Furthermore, according to a postmodern view, they 'are never separate from political [concerns]' and from power implications.<sup>17</sup> There is a hiatus between the apparently logical discourses of modern society and the disruptive narrative of the novel that prompts irony, whereas parody is an imitation that entails ridicule and defies traditional discourses. They both reveal intertextual references and allusions that, in this case, criticise the consumerist society, emphasising the cannibalistic undertones of its narratives.<sup>18</sup>



Some critics and researchers highlight parallels between Sylvia Plath's work and that of Margaret Atwood. In my study, the connections are mainly with *The Edible Woman*, though some critics have pointed out links with other novels as well.<sup>19</sup> Margaret Atwood has never mentioned *The Bell Jar* in interviews and has reviewed only one of Sylvia Plath's works, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, a collection of short stories, essays and journal entries published posthumously in 1977.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, just before Atwood started to write *The Edible Woman*, and both works refer to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; they anticipate second-wave feminism and show that women must aim to have a life that is not limited to being a wife and to procreating. The main character in both novels is depicted as a split self because of the contradictory roles proposed by society which cause the loss of selfhood. However, Atwood's novel is an anti-comedy,<sup>21</sup> 'an imaginative transformation of a social problem into comic satire',<sup>22</sup> while Plath's novel is a comedy with dramatic and even tragic implications.<sup>23</sup> According to Ted Hughes, 'even while the plot celebrates a belief in sublimation and rebirth, it never fully sheds the traumatic knowledge that the protagonist Esther Greenwood's anguish cannot be healed because traces of clandestine madness will always haunt her'.<sup>24</sup>

Esther Greenwood and Marian McAlpin feel inadequate and are engaged in a quest for alternative female models; they question and resist the female roles proposed by society. The traditional path of becoming a wife and mother seems menacing and diminishes their expectations, causing anxiety and frustration. The promises of the 1950s and 1960s and the pre-war conquests of feminist movements suggested a new equality which was not achieved in the social context. Choices that were initially mentioned as being available to women in articles in magazines such as *Mademoiselle* were described later on in the articles as unobtainable, and they discouraged exploration outside the private domestic world.<sup>25</sup>

However, Esther cannot make up her mind and struggles to combine her creative side with her yearning to have a family, as society suggests to her that the two things exclude each other.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Marian seems to look for alternatives that do not necessarily imply a traditional relationship, and she does not have any particular aspirations, at least not creative or artistic ambitions. Therefore, though both novels have open endings, the view in Atwood's novel is more open to multiple options and

the emphasis is on the consumerist angle that reduces women, though not only women, to commodities rather than on a wider existential question about what being a woman means, which *The Bell Jar* addresses.

Both novels are political but take different perspectives. *The Edible Woman* satirises the consumerist society, exposing how the manipulation of images controls social roles. Plath's vision refers to Cold War-related issues, setting the historical context from the beginning.<sup>27</sup> The explicit reference to the execution by electrocution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for espionage in 1953 can be read as 'a counterdiscourse to the official ideology of privacy in the Cold War' which was meant to be in contrast with the totalitarian Soviet regime, where the state controlled human activity.<sup>28</sup> The novel discloses how American 'cold war patriarchal society' is constraining and controls the individual as well, though apparently claims to offer freedom and multiple options.<sup>29</sup>

Plath's novel is focused on the sexual and career-related choices that women need to experience making to reach true liberation and wholeness, while in Atwood's novel this is not so relevant, though both protagonists have breakdowns they recover from eventually. Esther's depression causes her to try to commit suicide and leads to hospitalisation, but Marian does not experience these extremes. In the novels, the protagonists' relationship with their bodies and with food is in the foreground, though Esther's action of depriving herself of food and sleep, which is caused by her refusal to play a woman's usual role, is not the same as Marian's apparent 'starvation', which does not cause a loss of weight or depression. Though they are both alienated from their own bodies and horrified by pregnant bodies and ageing women, they express their anxiety and uneasiness in different ways.<sup>30</sup> Marian's sexual life is rather free compared to Esther's, though it is not always satisfactory. Moreover, Marian does not attempt to kill herself; on the contrary, survival is her main aim and is in conflict with her own body's refusal to eat.

Eventually, Esther looks for a compromise or a better way to combine the different roles in order to free herself and reconstruct her split self. Marian does not seem to have such a goal; she challenges and questions the status quo and is open to alternatives which are never attained or defined. At the end of the novel, Esther steps into the room where she will have her exit interview and hopefully be released from the clinic. We do

not know what will happen but we know she is determined to go back to normal life and attend college. For the reasons mentioned above, I will not consider *The Bell Jar* as an intertext but as a reference point. Other critics have found connections between *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as with *Surfacing*. According to my analysis, these links are not relevant or should only be studied as thematic connections, such as the themes of madness and recovery, and blood and sexuality, which are not sufficient for a detailed intertextual analysis.

Most critics highlight the centrality of the female body in the narrative and how it voices the protagonist's protest against the constrictive and exploitative roles and rules of the male-dominant society, which in part coincides with the consumerist society.<sup>31</sup> Howells remarks that Marian's body 'becomes the site of victimisation, internal conflict and rebellion',<sup>32</sup> and Rigney states that it 'is subject to sudden metamorphoses, transformations which are symbolic of her mental state'.<sup>33</sup> Marian's refusal of food is interpreted as a rejection of the roles and identities proposed by society, and her prescribed destiny is revealed in both the Pension Plan of the market company she works for and the models of wife and mother proposed in the narrative, as Wisker claims.<sup>34</sup> According to Davies, her 'loss of appetite marks a resistance to pre-designated roles as both consumed and consumer'.<sup>35</sup> The body becomes 'a figurative text'<sup>36</sup> that is written and rewritten, resignified in a palimpsestic approach,<sup>37</sup> in an attempt to shape an alternative identity. Her powerlessness is silently acknowledged and leads to a split between body and mind, a crisis and displacement in which the body's self-cannibalism blackmails the mind, as Palumbo notes.<sup>38</sup> It speaks a non-verbal or pre-verbal language, a concept pointed out by several critics regarding Marian but also other characters, such as Duncan in relation to his ironing obsession.<sup>39</sup> As Greene and Wilson argue, in the final performative action of making a woman-shaped cake, Marian creates an edible substitute, a sacrifice for the market of the consumerist society in which she was traded as a commodity,<sup>40</sup> affirming that 'she is not food'.<sup>41</sup> Simultaneously, by eating the cake, Marian becomes a consumer again, which entails 'empowerment [...] aggression and participation in the status quo',<sup>42</sup> as Sceats remarks, denoting 'the impossibility of transcending the "system"', according to Greene.<sup>43</sup> Power shifts: the objectified woman is hungry again and therefore powerful. Bouson underlines the 'female protest and revenge in the final – and controversial – cake-woman scene'<sup>44</sup> as a 'way out' from 'the traditional romantic and novelistic ideology that insists on marriage as the end point of

the story of female maturation'.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the reduction of people to objects to be traded in the consumerist market exposes the objectification of women (but of men too, who need to comply with certain roles and are forced to consume) – their diminishment and complicity. The control exercised by the consumerist society through alluring advertisements induces accumulation and forced consumption.

In this context, the relation with food permeates the whole narrative. Testing and tasting food are part of Marian's job, obsessions that reveal her symbolic eating disorder. In 'An Introduction to *The Edible Woman*', Atwood also claims that she was 'speculating for some time about symbolic cannibalism',<sup>46</sup> which clarifies the allusive references to food and consumption and the opposite of this: the refusal of food. Marian is constantly hungry in the first part of the novel, anorexic in the second (her body starts to refuse food but she feels it is alive, until it cuts itself off) and seems to reach a balance in the last chapter. Her alienated, or split, self is also stressed by the shift from the first-person narrative in the first part of the novel to the third-person narrative in the second part, then the return to the first-person narrative in the last chapter. At the narrative level, this highlights an attempt to reappropriate the self at the end of the novel where the transformation has been enacted by body language in a reshaping that is both physical and mental. Therefore, her relationship with food defines 'the main characters' growth and development', according to McWilliams.<sup>47</sup> It is 'an ideological weapon' that implements a political protest in power relations where eating and not eating mark the difference between authority and subject and where the body is the battlefield.<sup>48</sup> At the end of the novel, the protagonist 'operates' on the cake, pulling, scooping, nipping and decorating it in a metaphorical repetition of the painful and diminishing process she has undergone. Sanchez-Grant argues that eating the cake, Marian cannibalises the female stereotype she was trapped in, which underlines the impossibility of avoiding a cannibalistic reciprocity in the consumerist society.<sup>49</sup> It also envisages a possible alternative in refusing to be totally moulded by the consumerist society in a more conscious and disciplined relationship with the products, which implies creativity. Asquer observes that Consumption becomes 'a passion that needs to be tamed into accepted, rational forms of capitalization or self-improvement'.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the body needs 'to be controlled and restrained, but also had to be transformed, modified, and expanded by the self'.<sup>51</sup> A reshaping of the body and the self in a more conscious

consumer perspective entails creative potential and, at the same time, aims to avoid addictions and manipulations.<sup>52</sup>

### **Consumerism as cannibalism: a threatening perspective**

The influence of advertisements and commercials is aggressively present in every part of the characters' lives. Of course, the purpose of the commercials is to improve sales, which is the reason why Seymour Surveys exists, but also to dictate gender roles.<sup>53</sup>

Their targets are mainly women, who do the daily or weekly shopping and provide the household not only with food but also with cleaning products, clothes, tools and appliances. Though the main case study of the story is Moose Beer, which is targeted at men, women, as the main shoppers, are the tasters and buyers of food. As Becker claims, Atwood's protagonists 'resist and refuse representation without forgetting the seductiveness of media images of women'.<sup>54</sup> In the novel, women are seduced and cherish the products displayed in the supermarket aisles and are soothed by 'gentle music', like cows who give 'more milk when sweet music [is] played to them' (213), as Marian notices:

The music swung into a tinkly waltz; she proceeded down the aisle, trying to concentrate on her list. She resented the music because she knew why it was there: it was supposed to lull you into a euphoric trance, lower your sales resistance to the point at which all things are desirable. Every time she walked into the supermarket and heard the lilting sounds coming from the concealed loudspeakers she remembered an article she had read about cows who gave more milk when sweet music was played to them. But just because she knew what they were up to didn't mean she was immune. These days, if she wasn't careful, she found herself pushing the cart like a somnambulist, eyes fixed, swaying slightly, her hands twitching with the impulse to reach out and grab anything with a bright label. She had begun to defend herself with lists, which she printed in block letters before setting out, willing herself to buy nothing, however deceptively-priced or subliminally-packaged, except what was written there. When she was feeling unusually susceptible she would tick the things off the list with a pencil as an additional counter-charm.

The paragraph reveals the alluring and deceitful strategies adopted by the consumerist society to induce people to buy and consume. The manipulative techniques confirm the fact that people are reduced to pure consumers, alienated from their desires and real necessities. The integrity of the self is endangered as each person acts like 'a somnambulist' in 'a euphoric trance'; people are exploited to give 'more milk', that is, produce and consume more. Marian's senses are deceived by the 'tinkly waltz' and the 'bright label'. Although she tries to defend herself by adopting counter-strategies, such as sticking to her list, choosing brands at random and ticking the things off her list, she is not 'immune'; she has to buy something eventually – she is complicit. The strategies implemented by the consumerist society therefore invade important parts of the self; they cannibalise the subject, depriving them of vital autonomy.<sup>55</sup> This empties the self of the possibility of being independent and thinking independently of the roles implemented by modern society that guide people's behaviours and actions. The mind seems to be subdued or hardly defends itself, but Marian's body rebels by defending itself in the act of refusing food, that is, refusing to consume. Marian's body therefore guides her, expressing its rebellious attitude that is connected to *écriture féminine*. Writing from the body means rebelling against the rules of the dominant society by setting different rules that propose different paths. The passage also highlights the ambiguity of the situation in which alternating sensations of pleasure are linked to abandoning any resistance, and there is emphasis on the hyphenated descriptions, such as 'deceptively-priced', 'subliminally-packaged' and 'sexiest-looking', which highlight the deceitful strategy behind the behaviours dictated by modern society. Significantly, she writes the list in block letters to counter-attack the alluring enchantment of the supermarket atmosphere and of the products. The block letters are like a scream that warns Marian of the dangers of the consumerist society. Furthermore, the use of passive voices in the passage emphasise the passivity that the docile consumer should impersonate, like cows submitted to the rules dictated by their master.

Therefore, advertisements are ambivalent shifting signs, 'figure[s] of dissimulation', as Kristeva states, with non-disjunctive characteristics; they mock and reaffirm, allure and deceive, and allow multiple interpretations.<sup>56</sup> In the consumerist society, they threaten the integrity of the self, alienating it through constructed roles. Reconstructing an independent identity is therefore an illusion as nobody is 'immune' and '[y]ou had to buy something sometimes' (213). In this way, the novel exposes the frightening quality

of the strategies of the consumerist society expressed in the intertext by referring to the advertisements of the 1960s. They endanger the self, manipulating its inner parts and alienating people. The novel highlights this situation through the intertexts to expose and deconstruct the status quo and to envisage possible alternatives. These alternatives are in progress; they are a process that never attains a conclusion. The emphasis is on the evolution and development of possible configurations in which there is a tension between the tendency towards renovation and the conservative maintenance of the conventionalities dictated by society. For Marian, there is no conclusion or solution at the end of the process but only an attempt to reconstruct a more conscious self, though this is revealed as an illusion in a society that has not changed.

Thus, commercials train and force people to consume, as Baudrillard argues, without giving them real satisfaction or enjoyment. Baudrillard claims that '[c]onsumption is forced upon us, something institutionalized, not as a right or a pleasure, but as the *duty* of the citizen'.<sup>57</sup> He also argues that '[t]he whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference'<sup>58</sup> and that '[t]he generalized consumption of images, of facts, of information aims also to *conjure away the real with the signs of the real*'.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, 'Advertising is the reign of the pseudo-event *par excellence*. It turns the object into an event. In fact, it constructs it as such by eliminating its objective characteristics. It constructs it as a *model*, as a spectacular news item.'<sup>60</sup> Thus, people are trapped and guided in a simulated 'reality' that momentarily grants them satisfaction, depriving them of real possession and engendering never-ending desires. Marian consciously stops herself adopting this mentality, 'willing herself to buy nothing' (213) except what is on her list, which might lead her to become a more conscious and creative consumer. Nevertheless, she feels attracted by advertisements and by the apparently self-assuring role they grant; she wishes to comply with them eventually, to be sensible.

The Moose Beer commercial is an intertext Atwood creates in the narrative that refers to the commercials of the 1960s, such as Canada Dry ginger ale commercials, in which 'a girl and a Canada Dry' are all a man needs to be pleased, and women's role is to pour the drink (as Marian does repeatedly for Peter) or show off in a bikini or in a

pretty outfit.<sup>61</sup> In her interview with Margaret Kaminski (1975), Atwood spoke of advertisements as ‘images rather than documents [...] the ads in the novel are obviously chosen for the fact that the words that they contain resonate with other words in the book’. Regarding the Moose Beer commercial, she says she saw a beer called Moose Head beer when she went to New Brunswick once, and makes the significant comment that ‘truth and fiction are not always that different’, which points to the blurred overlap between reality and fiction.<sup>62</sup> For this reason, the Moose Beer commercial functions as an intertext in the intertextual dialogue within the text. It reiterates and criticises the performatively constructed essence of male and female roles and insists on the toughness of the ‘real man’, whose main hobbies are hunting and fishing in the wilderness:

*Moose, Moose,  
From the land of pine and spruce,  
Tingly, heady, rough-and-ready...*

*Any real man, on a real man's holiday – hunting, fishing, or just plain old-fashioned relaxing – needs a beer with a healthy, hearty taste, a deep-down manly flavour. The first long cool swallow will tell you that Moose Beer is just what you've always wanted from true beer enjoyment. Put the tang of the wilderness in YOUR life today with a big satisfying glass of sturdy Moose Beer.*

*Tingly, heady,  
Rough-and-ready,  
Moose, Moose, Moose, Moose, BEER!!!*

The simplistic emphasis on Canadian stereotypes and symbols is evident in the list of outdoor activities and the reference to the wilderness and the moose. The repetition of ‘man’ in the commercial discourse stresses the constructed role he has to impersonate which is repeatedly parodied in the narration. Confronted with the men’s figures in the story, the advertisement’s discourse reveals itself as parodic and comical but also threatening. In fact, Peter is a hunter – he has a display of his guns, rifles, knives and cameras in his room. Shooting an animal and ‘shooting’ a photo become synonymous in the course of the narrative; it is ‘an issue of power’, as Davies points out.<sup>63</sup> Wisker remarks that ‘Peter’s fascination with “shots”, both by camera and gun, suggest death



and imprisonment to Marian, who feels Peter will trap her in this role, this performance'.<sup>64</sup> Davies also connects the 'predatory' use of the camera to Sontag's interpretation of photography, in which 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed'.<sup>65</sup> This suggests that surveillance is control, and therefore power. Sontag also points out that '[t]here is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera', which implies an observation that looks like 'sexual voyeurism'. She considers a camera 'as a predatory weapon'; therefore, 'to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed'.<sup>66</sup> For this reason, Marian leaves Peter's party at the end of the novel; she refuses to be photographed, that is, to be possessed and frozen in the traditional roles.

This is threatening but it is also emptied of a definite significance and therefore of absolute power in a world of simulated images. Power is delegated to an indefinite displaced identity that seems to control by proxy. It is a performance apparently void of any real danger, or it can be dangerous only if acknowledged – only if Marian abandons herself to it, which seems eventually unavoidable. Besides, Peter lacks the real 'tang of wilderness' as he is always well groomed and smells of soap, so he is more similar to a man in an advertisement than a 'stout-hearted fellow'; he is becoming a product of a commercial, a simulacrum, and even a copy of a copy, as Baudrillard claims.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Peter is often compared to advertisements in the course of the narrative, directly – cigarette (69), deodorant (95) and Moose Beer (184) – and indirectly as a neat, attractive man (105, 179). In an inverted romance scene at the end of the novel (345), Marian imagines him to be the Underwear Man, a disturbed, deluded individual victim of advertisement who cannot obtain what the commercials promise. Peter is losing his integrity and identity, like Marian, though, being a man, he seems to be in control by exercising power over her. On the other hand, Marian's loss of power and control can be fatal, as will be seen later, to the integrity of her self and consequently to her personal survival.

The Moose Beer commercial comes to Marian's attention again at the restaurant while she observes Peter's 'capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressure [...] and yet it was a violent action, cutting' (184):

He was almost finished. She watched the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressure. How skilfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action, cutting; and violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her. Like the Moose Beer commercials, which had begun to appear everywhere, in the subway trains, on hoardings, in magazines. Because she had worked on the pre-marketing survey she felt partially responsible for them; not that they were doing any harm.

The aggressive, cannibalistic and violent quality of the apparently innocent advertisement is therefore revealed. Marian is complicit; she feels 'partially responsible' and denies, but unconsciously affirms, its harmfulness. It is a violent passage that highlights the apparently innocent artificiality of the commercials where fish are unreal and the man is well groomed, 'his hands bloodless'. Nevertheless, a bloody scene follows in the report about a shooting by a young boy 'who had gone berserk' (184), and his violence is referred to as 'remote violence [...] a violence of the mind' (184). The connection reveals that the simulation of the advertisements is violent and dangerous; it causes death. The blood that was carefully removed from posters is now revealed in the killing as well as in the perverted violence evoked in Peter's cutting and slicing. The 'violence of the mind' is connected to the violence of the commercials, which are seemingly harmless, but actually damage the individual.

This renewed attentiveness to the Moose Beer commercial has a palimpsestic quality.<sup>68</sup> It is a recurring sign, a 'process of resignification', that indicates 'shifting interpretations of the same sight ... depict[s] amended abductions' and denotes 'the narrator's growing awareness'.<sup>69</sup> It operates as a bricolage where different suggestions construct a fragmented scenario Marian tries to navigate. The protagonist has different interpretations of the Moose Beer commercial, which eventually form a map that guides her to an increasing understanding of the controlling and frightening quality of the advertisements and consequently of the consumerist society to the point of cannibalism and murder.

Thus, the advertisement intertexts are produced using a parodic technique that highlights the artificial, frustrating and destructive quality of the roles assigned by society in both a comic and a disturbing way. They expose patent incongruities that engender confusion and fear in the participants. Avoiding the rules is unsettling but sticking to them can be frightening. As Hutcheon claims, the parodic, subversive quality of the trope of irony reaffirms and negates the power structures and attempts to change the sign from within to create an alternative.<sup>70</sup> The reader is questioned and challenged by the narrative of the novel in the intertextual dialogue and is encouraged to produce fresh interpretations. In this context, Marian's body opposes her refusal; it tries to break the circle, resisting the game of alienation and self-destruction imposed by the advertisements.<sup>71</sup> She attempts to find an alternative path to reshaping her body through starvation to assert a different self; her body speaks a pre-language that is connected to *écriture féminine*, disrupting the narrative of the dominant society. This attempt is a process rather than a conclusion and allows only a temporary and partial reconstruction of identity as it is highlighted by the intertextual references.

Hence, by using parodic techniques that involve juxtaposition, reversion and contradiction in *The Edible Woman*, the world of consumerism and the romance plot are demystified and revealed as very different from what is depicted in the jolly, easy-going commercials. They are a glossy layer that covers a grubby society whose relationships are based on constructed, enforced rules that engender confrontational and threatening behaviours. Men are predators disguised as rescuers (but are also manipulated in their turn) and women are objectified entities at their disposal, potential victims (but also self-victimised) who nurture 'fantasies of power and revenge' and try to find their voices.<sup>72</sup>

In opposition to this consumerist world, the protagonist's eating disorder can be interpreted as an act of self-cannibalism, a 'symbolic (self-) destructiveness' that exposes a 'failure to achieve autonomy' in a society that does not allow self-determination.<sup>73</sup> Sceats links food to motherhood, sexual desire and self-identity, claiming that 'eating disorders indicate insecurity about embodiment, the nature of being and the boundaries between the self and the world'.<sup>74</sup> According to Hobgood, Food also means survival and dieting is a way to control the body image and consequently the body itself, from a social, cultural and political point of view.

Simultaneously, it reveals a creative attitude that reshapes the self in a 'ritual of eating [that] becomes metamorphosed into a creative expression' and exposes different visions of being human.<sup>75</sup> The body becomes capable of resistance and expresses subjectivity through powerlessness, overcoming the dictated mind/body split.<sup>76</sup> The novel proposes a re-reading of the female body that 'dismantles the culturally-encoded concept of femininity [...] women must re-embody themselves and consequently re-embody culture', as Sanchez-Grant argues.<sup>77</sup> As Cixous claims about *écriture féminine*, this possible new ontological vision rewrites and revises the traditional narratives through the body that is resisting the conventions and the consequent danger of becoming edible.

The dichotomy between mind and body is revealed as menacing, contradictory and aiming at controlling women's behaviour. Simultaneously, Marian's marginal position allows her to develop a different vision that is more fluid, flexible and always in process. As Howells claims, this vision is 'possibly multiple' and 'in constant transformation'.<sup>78</sup> It is a logic of becoming, a process connected to experience that is expressed in actions and body language to affirm their existence. In this sense, 'the anorexic is the victim of representation, trapped in embodiment through stereotypical and alienating images – but at the same time ... only a realistic, nonrepressive and less regulative form of representation will allow women to see themselves as autonomous subjects'.<sup>79</sup> In this context, eating disorders are a way of opening a woman's body to other possibilities, 'in terms of bodily activity rather than in terms of a repressed or negated "normal" body'.<sup>80</sup> They are a way of 'thinking-through-the-body and of establishing the corporeal ground of intelligence'<sup>81</sup> in a process of 'self-formation' that is both 'forms of critique' and 'the production of a "being otherwise"'.<sup>82</sup> Howells states that Marian's eating disorder is not clinical anorexia nervosa but 'a pathological condition of self division' where the mind and body act against each other and where the body rebels against the female institutionalised roles that surround her. Hobgood remarks that '[i]n Marian's case, her body rejects foods that have the quality of vitality' and that 'critics have read Marian's anorexia as a resistance to consumerism or to preformed models of femininity'.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, Marian, through her 'symbolic form of anorexia', as Sceats argues,<sup>84</sup> not only defies the consumerist society and rejects the women's roles forced on her but also reshapes her body and consequently her identity. She creates possible alternatives that go beyond dichotomous views and point to

multiplicity and transformation. In this view, according to Mancini, anorexia nervosa is linked to 'body construction and relationships' and self-identity.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, refusing food implies a protest and signals the autonomy of the person. It is an 'extreme way to affirm oneself', to modify the body by 'not wanting to be the one whom a person *is*'. The image the anorexic person conveys is both weak and strong in a game of 'consumption and destruction' where the woman's body is 'deconstructed and rebuilt'.<sup>86</sup>

From this perspective, cannibalism has a double significance; it is predatory in the consumerist dominant society, and, in an anorexic view, it allows a new vision that reshapes the body and mind in a re-embodiment of culture, suggesting possible alternatives. The intertextual connections emphasise this progress in the protagonist's journey in search of her identity, which is both personal and national. Nevertheless, as Tolan claims, Canada is in an ambiguous position; it is a colony of settlers that exploited the new land and assimilated indigenous people, dispossessing them of their territories, and it is a colony itself, exploited by Britain and influenced by the US.<sup>87</sup> Tolan remarks that in Atwood's work, 'the examination of women's power is frequently employed as a metaphor for Canada's experience as a postcolonial nation'. Consequently, the concept of identity is shifting and 'the boundary between self and the other – between colonizer and colonized – is fluid and uncertain'. At the same time, Canadian society is also an 'invader-settler society' that is complicit with domination.<sup>88</sup> According to Tolan, Atwood's message is that the duality of the Canadian postcolonial discourse should be accepted. Though Atwood seems to suggest that Canada and women share a similar role of victim in modern society and that the emancipation of Canada is linked to that of Canadian women,<sup>89</sup> Canada can also be seen as a victim that colludes with the victimiser. Similarly, 'women collude in their oppression (in being edible), through passivity and the assumption of innocence'.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, they need to abandon the victim position and reshape their identity both at a cultural and a personal level to move towards a more disengaged autonomous vision.

From this angle, consumption is linked to different interpretations of cannibalism. It is considered 'a product of European imagination [...] a tool of Empire' and a white man's fabrication denoting a voyeuristic attitude.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, it is also a practice testified to by ancient and modern texts and interpreted as a way of 'making

sense of human life' and coping with death.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, cannibalism is considered a different conception of being human, as Montaigne points out in his seminal essay.<sup>93</sup> It is a complex concept that 'at some level tells us what it means to be human, on another level it separates the human from the bestial'.<sup>94</sup> Eater and eaten are, therefore, intertwined, exposing the irrational construction of a civilised world endangered by a savage Other traditionally identified as indigenous peoples heretics or women.<sup>95</sup> Simultaneously, consumption cannot be avoided, though it needs to be tamed.

This ambiguous meaning of cannibalism is reflected in the consumerist world of *The Edible Woman*, disguised in symbolic consumption that upholds profiteering.<sup>96</sup> This generates behaviour that 'is perceived as normal human behaviour'<sup>97</sup> and exposes 'the disturbing underside of a violent relationship between the sexes that is only thinly disguised as civilization'.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, consumerism feeds on the subjects, transforming them into objects, commodities to be traded in the production-selling chain where they are, simultaneously, cannibalistic consumers forced to stuff themselves. In this context, the implicit cannibalism of the consumerist society is evident in the desire for an absolute and unlimited consumption that needs to deplete the increasing mass production by over-accumulation. As Jerry Phillips claims, consumerism is linked to the Marxian concept of 'primitive accumulation' in which capitalism is cannibalism, a vampire that thrives 'on the blood of the living'.<sup>99</sup> Marian's body's resistance to this tendency through starvation is evidence of her rebellion against the current consumer role. Therefore, as Federici claims, capitalism is not progress but 'has created more brutal and insidious forms of enslavement', increasing woman's dependence on men and their 'invisibility as workers'. A woman's body is reduced to 'a tool', her emotions and passion are mechanised and repressed and her sexual activity is transformed into work that is 'a service to men, and procreation'.<sup>100</sup> In this way, society itself is the symbolic coloniser that 'deceives the consumer through mimicry', forcing individuals into roles that control and exploit their behaviour.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, being a consumer, and therefore a cannibal, seems to be part of being human and therefore cannot be avoided in the context of the novel.

*Écriture féminine* is present in the connection with the female body throughout the novel and is linked to Alice's story. As Duncan remarks, Marian's body is 'rebellious against the system' through the 'digestive system' (236), a rebellion that Marian is

unconscious of, even irritated by (219), but she has to come to terms with it eventually. Food is an element which is omnipresent in the novel from the beginning. The testing practices of Seymour Survey emphasise this fixation, from the canned rice puddings to the tomato juice and Moose Beer and to the abundance of food present at the Christmas party. This is clearly connected to the methods of the consumerist society; through advertisements it forces people to buy and consume, stuffs them with unrequired items, in order to sell the surplus produced by the capitalist enterprises. Marian opposes her 'thin' body (277) to this overflowing of products; her body refuses to be shaped by the dooming rules of the consumerist society. Therefore, her body speaks a disruptive language that overrides the laws of society, annihilating them in the act of refusal and operating in parallel with the parodic and reversed use of the intertexts in the narrative. In this sense, her body language is linked to *Alice in Wonderland's* story, which is commented on by Fischer in Chapter 22. Marian unconsciously refuses to refer to the female body in her description of Clara's pregnancy. According to Marian, Clara looks 'like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon' (30) and 'a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and a tiny pale-yellow flower' (31). Clara is reduced to a passive object; the functions of her body, that is, her pregnancy, lingers in her mind. She is described in a similar way in the aftermath of the birth in hospital. She is exhausted, thin and pale (155) and is more fragile than ever. Nevertheless, Clara claims that it was 'marvellous' (156); the baby was a 'Christmas present' though 'it hurts like hell' (157). Marian is afraid of becoming like Clara and she knows that this will be her destiny if she marries Peter. She is also afraid of resembling, in the course of her life, the women at the office Christmas party, who are ripe, overripe or shrivelled, 'in various stages of growth and decay' (205-206). Their 'roll of fat', 'the ham-like bulge of thigh', the 'varicose veins' draw her attention. Their 'fluidity' is worrying and their identities are in flux (205-206). She refuses this state; she describes it as a 'thick sargasso-sea of femininity' (206), anonymous and uncertain. Eventually she concludes that she needs a man and must 'hold onto him to keep from being sucked down' (206). It is a 'liquid amorphous other' (206) that reveals the state of woman in society, an entity in flux that Marian is afraid of and, at the same time, she is aware she belongs to them – she is part of the 'otherness'. Therefore, her refusal of the body starts from the female body itself, from its physicality, which has a symbolic value in the novel; it is objectified and reduced to flesh that can be traded and manipulated like animal flesh. It is devalued by Marian intentionally exposing her fears

about her condition as a woman in a society that does not grant her autonomous views, protection or well-being. She eventually needs to regain the notion of her body complying with its needs and demands, accepting the maternal *chora* that implies physicality as well.

Thus, Marian refuses to accept her body as she sees it reflected in the women's bodies that surround her. Women's bodies are used and abused by the enforced roles of consumerist society: they are induced to consume, to get pregnant, to produce, to renounce jobs and careers and eventually to be reduced to drab, passive and silent beings like the housewives watching the demonstration of the grater at the supermarket (264-65). In the intertextual dialogue within the text, Marian is connected to Alice in her experience of the body as it is highlighted in the interpretation given by Fischer:

Of course everybody knows *Alice* is a sexual-identity-crisis book, that's old stuff, it's been around for a long time, I'd like to go into it a little deeper though. What we have here, if you only look at it closely, this is the little girl descending into the very suggestive rabbit-burrow, becoming as if were pre-natal, trying to find her role, ... her role as a Woman. Yes, well that's clear enough. These patterns emerge. Patterns emerge. One sexual role after another is presented to her but she seems unable to accept any of them. I mean she's really blocked. She rejects Maternity when the baby she's been nursing turns into a pig, nor does she respond positively to the dominating-female role of the Queen and her castration cries of 'Off with his head!' and when the Duchess makes a cleverly concealed lesbian pass at her, sometimes you wonder how *conscious* old Lewis was, anyway she's neither aware nor interested; and right after that you'll recall she goes to talk with the Mock-Turtle, enclosed in his shell and his self-piety, a definitely pre-adolescent character; then there are those most suggestive scenes, most suggestive, the one where her neck becomes elongated and she is accused of being a serpent, hostile to eggs, you'll remember, a rather destructively-phallic identity she indignantly rejects; and her negative reaction to the dictatorial Caterpillar, just six inches high, importantly perched on the all-too-female mushroom



which is perfectly round but which has the power to make you either smaller or larger than normal, I find that particularly interesting. And of course there is the obsession with time, clearly a cyclical rather than a linear obsession. 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. She does much better though in *Through The Looking Glass*, where, as you'll remember ... (240-41)<sup>102</sup>

The intertextual reference highlights the transgressive role of the Marian–Alice figure. Both Alice and Marian reject the female body and maternity and experience a state of fluidity. The body grows and shrinks in a continuous reshaping that suggests new possibilities but is also troublesome. The intertextual reference therefore points out the problematic relationship that arises when Marian's body opposes the roles of the consumerist society and embarks on a quest for alternative routes. It is an endless process that is cyclical and unresolved, as Fischer points out. Alice's story is interpreted in a psychological perspective influenced by Freudian theories. It is simplistic and linear and denotes a male point of view. Nevertheless, Alice's journey reflects Marian's journey in terms of her excruciating search for different paths and her attempts to come to terms with her rebelling body. Duncan might be associated with the Mock-Turtle and the Caterpillar in the phallogocentric society Marian has to live in. The mushroom represents the maternal element that is powerful but submits to the male-dominant view. The cyclical quality of time highlighted by Fischer is reminiscent of Atwood's comment on *The Edible Woman* in her interview with Linda Sandler (1976). Atwood said that the novel's tone is 'lighthearted, 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.'<sup>103</sup> Hill Rigney is certainly right to argue that at the end of the story Marian has acquired more knowledge and self-awareness than she has at the beginning,<sup>104</sup> though the majority of the characters in the story confirm their alignment with the consumerist society, thus validating the 'circle' metaphor. Therefore, the intertextual reference clarifies Marian's position, underlining her fluidity, her split self and her attempts to find alternatives to the roles proposed by society in her disruptive body language that is connected with *écriture féminine*.

Commenting on the Moose Beer commercial, Duncan points out its connections, citing the *Decameron*, two Grimm Brothers' fairy tales and *Titus Andronicus* (58). He refers to the first and ninth stories in Fourth Day in the *Decameron*. Both stories are about the killing of the male lover (by the father in the first story and by the husband in the ninth). The hearts of the dead lovers are offered to the unfortunate female lover in each story, who eventually commits suicide. The Grimm Brothers' stories about cannibalism are 'The Robber Bridegroom' and 'Snow White'. *Titus Andronicus* has a notoriously violent sanguinary plot involving multiple murders, rapes and cannibalism. All the stories involve cannibalism, in the specific offering and possibly eating of the lover's (or the enemy's) heart, or of other parts of the body. The heart is also ironically and metaphorically evoked in the Valentine's Day heart-shaped cake that Marian buys and offers to Peter. Significantly, he eats the cake after making love, a performance in which Marian is guided and objectified, but Marian spits out the cake, feeling it spongy against her tongue 'like the bursting of thousands of tiny lungs' (258). It seems alive to Marian, warning her about the cannibalistic implication of her love story, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Cannibalism has a powerful social significance in the stories from the *Decameron*. The murders are ordered and perpetrated by the father and the husband respectively of the two women to punish their transgressions. In both cases the women's reaction is suicide, which has a double meaning: a refusal to carry on living without the loved one, according to the conventions of courtly love, and revenge against the jealous father, who sees his reputation ruined, and the jealous husband, who is banished at the end of the story. Both pairs of lovers are buried in the same tomb to stress the importance of romance in medieval society, where femininity could be fulfilled only by accomplishing love, which was both physical and intellectual. In the intertextual dialogue within the novel, this wholeness is denied in the split quality of Marian's situation. Her body and mind are separated by the contradictory narratives of the dominant society that do not allow an autonomous view. Differently from Marian, in the *Decameron* (the first story of the Fourth Day), the protagonist, Ghismunda, speaks her voice; she blames her father, Tancredi, for having left her unmarried after the death of her husband and claims the right to have a lover to satisfy her desires, which are both physical and emotional:

stoutely and couragiously, not a teare appearing in her eye, or her soule any way to be perturbed, thus she spake to her Father. Tancredi, to denie what I have done, or to entreate any favour from you, is now no part of my disposition: for as the one can little availe me, so shall not the other any way advantage me. Moreover, I covet not that you should extend any clemency or kindnesse to me, but by my voluntary confession of the truth do intend (first of all) to defend mine honour, with reasons sound, good, and substantiall, and then vertuously pursue to full effect, the greatnesse of my minde and constant resolution. True it is, that I have loved, and still do, honourable Guiscardo, purposing the like so long as I shall live, which will be but a small while: but if it be possible to continue the same affection after death, it is for ever vowed to him onely. Nor did mine owne womanish weaknesse so much thereto induce me, as the matchlesse vertues shining clearly in Guiscardo, and the little respect you had of marrying me againe. Why royall Father, you cannot be ignorant, that you being composed of flesh and blood, have begotten a Daughter of the selfe same composition, and not made of stone or iron. Moreover, you ought to remember (although now you are farre stept in yeeres) what the Lawes of youth are, and with what difficulty they are to be contradicted.<sup>105</sup>

Ghismunda is heroic both in her attitude and in her words. She defies her father's jealousy and patriarchal rules that forced her to be confined without a husband even though she is still young. Marian, however, is mostly silent. She does not articulate her rebellion in words. She apparently complies with Peter and with the role society proposes for her in an effort to look 'normal' and to adjust. On the contrary, Ghismunda's discourse is an example of honesty and dignity that subverts and endangers Tancredi's authority as well as his aristocratic status, as Guiscardo belonged to an inferior social class. For this reason, Ghismunda is perversely punished; her beloved father sends her Guiscardo's heart in a golden goblet with the words: 'Thy Father hath sent thee this present, to comfort thee with that thing which most of all thou affectest, even as thou hast comforted him with that which he most hated.'<sup>106</sup> It is an eye-for-an-eye perspective that eventually prompts Ghismunda's suicide. On the other

hand, Marian aims to survive, which, in the context of the novel, means to deny and reaffirm the rules and roles she is subjected to. Marian's transgression is not radical, as that would cause her dissolution. Nevertheless, passively accepting the role assigned to her by society would result in the effacement of the self. Therefore, she needs to find different paths in a reinterpretation of traditional narratives which starts from the reshaping of the body.

Hence, Ghismunda's wholeness and determination are lost in Marian's postmodern world, where people are commodities and their position is in flux, constantly changing and ambivalent. The objectification of the consumer society denies her an absolute value, which Ghismunda had in Boccaccio's world, even though it gave her a vicarious position. The consumerist world is deprived of genuine spontaneous relationships and a woman 'is consigned to the performance of proxy "services"'<sup>107</sup> which deprive her of integrity. Nevertheless, the perverted side of the story is still present in the intertextual reference of the novel, though parodied. Blood is present as well: the heart bleeds, though metaphorically. It is a stale cake with a glossy artificial pink glaze, still alive, that beats under Marian's tongue like 'tiny lungs'. This is uncanny and disturbing but it also demystifies Ghismunda's heroic performance in Boccaccio's world and points to a simulated 'reality' that leaves no space for grand narratives or heroic acts but only for basic survival, ordinariness. However, the reference to the eaten heart, which Peter devours, is still a menace that haunts the story and unveils once more the cannibalistic undertones of commercials.

Moreover, the women in all these intertextual stories have horrible deaths, like Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* (who is violently raped, her tongue and hands are cut off and she is then executed). At the apex of the story, in act V, scene II, Titus accomplishes the cannibalistic rituals by killing Chiron and Demetrius, who raped his daughter and murdered her husband:

You know your mother means to feast with me,  
And calls herself Revenge, and thinks me mad:  
Hark, villains! I will grind your bones to dust  
And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,  
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,  
And make two pasties of your shameful heads;

And bid that trumpet, your unhallow'd dam,  
Like to the earth, swallow her own increase.

This is the feast that I have bid her to,  
And this is the banquet she shall surfeit on;<sup>108</sup>

The shocking scene highlights the brutality of the murderous act and consequently of the preparation of the cannibalistic banquet. The intertextual reference therefore underlines the appalling implications hidden behind the apparently bloodless advertisements and, at the same time, empties them of the heroic, though depraved, passions present in Shakespeare's text. The scene is barely hinted at by Duncan; it is not described or explained. The intertext maintains its power but it functions as a proxy, a simulacrum that has lost its barbaric core though it still damages the individual; it influences the characters' behaviours, such as Peter's killing practices. Thus, in the dialogue between texts, the novel points to the debased function that past texts have acquired in modern society, though their importance is confirmed. The parodic interpretation does not deny their value in a dynamic tension with a simulated 'reality' that invades the inner parts of the self and engenders alienation. Traditional narratives are still powerful but need to be revised in the 'dialogic thought' within the text. The reader therefore assumes an active role that engenders new possible interpretations, fresh readings that compare the narratives of the dominant society and traditional texts. Their importance is reaffirmed though their value is debased in the consumerist context that does not allow autonomous views or heroic conclusions.

In a similar way, the girl in 'The Robber Bridegroom' is raped, cut into pieces and eaten by the robber. Snow White is momentarily saved, and the huntsman takes an animal's heart instead of her heart to the queen, a metaphorical cannibalistic act. Significantly, the only woman who ends up alive and free is the robber's bride, who witnesses the murder and keeps the severed finger of the dead girl to prove her story:

'The old woman hid me behind a large barrel, and no sooner was I hidden than the robbers returned home, dragging a maiden with them. They gave her all sorts of wine to drink, white, red, and yellow, and her heart burst into two.

(My dear, it was only a dream.)

‘One of the robbers saw that a gold ring was still on her finger, and since he had trouble pulling it off, he took a hatchet and chopped it off. The finger sprang into the air, over the barrel, and right into my lap. And here’s the finger with the ring!’<sup>109</sup>

Significantly, the bride is helped by a mentor, the old woman, who awakens her and warns her, as Duncan does with Marian. Similarly to *Titus Andronicus*, the scene described in the fairy tale is cruel though the dreamlike quality of the story is reiterated, which is analogous to the simulated characteristic of the commercials in *The Edible Woman*. Nevertheless, the story becomes ‘real’ when the bride produces the evidence of the severed finger with the ring on it. This highlights her increased awareness that makes her a non-victim who can consciously act in her own self-defence, as Marian does at the end of the novel by shaping and dissecting the woman-shaped cake. This also connects with Peter’s dissecting and chopping actions in the scene at the restaurant and highlights once more the violence of the apparently innocuous commercials as well as problematising gender relationships. The male and female roles dictated by the commercials are not only artificial but also dangerous for the integrity of the individual. They cause damage in both men and women and invade the inner parts of the self, causing alienation.

Thus, the intertextual references to women’s violent deaths are a warning for Marian, whose love life is in crisis and whose failure to attain love may lead to real or symbolic death in the form of starvation or self-effacement. Contrary to what happens in Boccaccio’s story, in which Ghismunda delivers a speech that fits with the logic of rhetoric, it is Marian’s body that awakens her. Duncan functions as a mentor who warns her through intertextual references and unsettling remarks. Tolan speaks of Duncan as ‘an embodiment of Marian’s subconscious’, while Bromberg states that Duncan has an important role but does not wish to rescue her; on the contrary, he establishes a relationship of ‘otherness and separateness’ which seems more genuine than the traditional romance.<sup>110</sup> However, Duncan is a character rather than used purely to carry out a function (though he accomplishes some functions in Marian’s search for identity), and he has a fundamental role in Marian’s self-discovery. He suggests and anticipates her decisions, gives her clues about her anxieties and relentlessly dismantles the rules and roles of the consumerist society. He also foresees and reflects Marian’s lack of eating in his ‘emaciated figure’ (53); in this sense, he functions as her alter ego or

double.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, he maintains the quality of a character that behaves independently from Marian. Therefore, the intertextual link made by Duncan between advertisements and violent stories of women's murders is a metaphorical anticipation of what is going to happen to Marian when she chooses to marry Peter in accordance with the conventions of the modern fairy tale and the fake romance in the commercials. This is her fate, unless she becomes aware of her state and keeps a record of what is happening, like the robber's bride. She needs to progress from being a victim to being a non-victim position to survive.<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, Marian's progress is continuously mystified in the novel in a constant tension between complicity and rebellion in which her body attempts to reshape a more conscious alternative self.

Cannibalism emerges again when Duncan calls Florence Nightingale a cannibal, as 'hunger is more basic than love' (120). This reveals 'all-consuming female hunger', an aspect of Marian's self she is not aware of, and reverses the selflessness inherent in the nurse figure.<sup>113</sup> This is stressed even more by the quotation in the advertisement, GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE (121), in a sinister suggestion that highlights the wish of the woman to be in control and to subdue the invalid male, presenting herself as a saviour.<sup>114</sup> Once again the reference to the advertisement inverts expectations and problematises gender roles. It shows a complicit and ambiguous attitude according to which Marian is a cannibal but also risks being cannibalised. The traditional role of the selfless woman is revealed as self-consuming, and is illustrated in what happens to her friend Clara, but also as aggressive and manipulative, as in Ainsley's situation. This not only confirms and reinforces the confined roles of women that are assigned by society and mirrored in the narrative of the text, but also exposes the striking contradiction between the constructed world of the advertisements and ordinary people's lives. In this way, the rules are enforced (for example, pregnant and married women cannot keep jobs) and the roles are far from being ideal and satisfying. Marian's friend Clara is worn out by pregnancies, and Marian sees drab and sceptical housewives at the department store after she has been 'operated' on at the beauty parlour for Peter's party, a masquerade she does not enjoy but cannot avoid.<sup>115</sup>

In this context, Marian's split role is reiterated in her uncanny experience of getting dressed for Peter's party and seeing the reflection of the two dolls in the mirror that she wishes to dispose of in her new married life. The blonde one looks like Marian dressed

up for the party; the other one is older, with an open mouth and a 'red felt tongue inside and two china teeth' (125), which is reminiscent of Marian's cannibalistic hungry side. They are 'two overlapping images; drawing further and further away from each other; the centre [...] would soon be quite empty [...] they were trying to pull her apart' (275). However, neither of them seems to represent the role Marian wishes to acquire in her search for an alternative self and in the reshaping of her body.

In the progress along her 'corkscrew path',<sup>116</sup> Marian runs away from Peter's party. He, threateningly, wishes to freeze her in a doll-like photograph in an 'aesthetic consumerism', as Susan Sontag states, and wants to imprison her, to make her 'stand still' in her dolly image.<sup>117</sup> She repudiates the masquerade of the glossy party doll and her objectification implemented at the beauty parlour where they beautified her head 'like a cake' (261), 'an operation' (262) Marian undergoes rather than chooses.

Though Marian does not seem to know her definite route, the effects of the episodes of awakening and self-awareness she experiences throughout the narrative in dialogue with the intertexts, both consciously and unconsciously, take her to the final production of the woman-shaped cake and to the breaking of her engagement to Peter. In this search, she is guided by her body, which speaks a pre-linguistic code that is connected with *écriture féminine* and that acts instead of her mind, which is too constructed by the dominant roles and is distracted by the charm of consumerism.

After Marian's rejection of the simulated world of advertisements and in her search for an alternative identity, her immersion in the ravine, a womb-like cavity but also the wilderness, at the end of the story, is 'close to absolute zero' (333). She needs to connect to the maternal *chora*, a pre-symbolic status that challenges the father's rules. Her being 'as near as possible to nothing' (333) suggests a wish to start from zero, from a prehistoric past – a reappropriation that is also an inevitable misplacement. Looking for a safety net, Marian retries playing the usual role of damsel in distress, asking Duncan to speak with Peter, but this role is rejected in Duncan's discourse and she finds herself climbing up the path alone. This confirms the protagonist's complicity in her role of victim and objectified doll but also her attempt to find alternatives to the traditional roles.



Marian's rejection of the narratives of the consumerist society and of its dictated roles entails the need to efface ancient and materialist myths and go back to a prehistoric, pre-amphibian past connected to the Canadian wilderness and to the maternal *chora*, a concept that Atwood develops further in *Survival* and *Surfacing*. The ending of *The Edible Woman* is ambiguous and fragmented. Marian regains her appetite and devours the woman-shaped cake, cannibalising the glossy doll that Peter and the consumerist patriarchal society wished to transform her into, as is highlighted in the intertexts. Nevertheless, in her act of eating, she affirms her complicity, becoming a consumer again, though for survival and pleasure. From this perspective, fiction itself becomes consumable;<sup>118</sup> it is cannibalised in a disseminated world where, as in Atwood's poem 'A place: fragments', 'there is no centre;/the centres/travel with us unseen' and where 'identity:/something too huge and simple/for us to see'.<sup>119</sup> As Baudrillard and Derrida state, there is no referent, no centre and a loss of the centre.<sup>120</sup> The novel is confirmed as polyphonic, multileveled and multi-vocal when expressed in the intertextual dialogue and in the body, in a pre-language that starts from the body itself. It criticises the consumerist society, which only apparently grants safe roles; its signs are shifting, ambivalent and menacing. Its binary power structures devalue human beings, reducing them to advertisements, which exert power and aim to sell more and to dictate roles.

At the end of the novel, the preparation of the woman-shaped cake Marian was supposed to personify is Marian's performative pre-language and body-language response to all the attempts at assimilation she has endured. It is an offering mainly conceived for Peter but also for the other characters in the story as an edible substitute that should satiate their consumerist hunger and grant her freedom and survival.<sup>121</sup>

Marian clearly operates on the cake as she was operated on herself:

Then she began to operate. With the two forks she pulled it in half through the middle. One half she placed flat side down on the platter. She scooped out part of it and made a head with the section she had taken out. Then she nipped in a waist at the sides. The other half she pulled into strips for the arms and legs. The spongy cake was pliable, easy to mould. She stuck all the separate members together with white icing, and used the rest of the icing to cover the shape she had constructed. It was bumpy

in places and had too many crumbs in the skin, but it would do.  
She reinforced the feet and ankles with tooth pics. (341)

The passage is symbolic; it highlights the violent constraining actions she performs with verbs such as 'pulled in half through the middle', 'scooped out', 'nipped in' and 'pulled into'. The expression that the cake 'was pliable, easy to mould' clearly alludes to the submissive role assigned to women; they are eager to 'adjust', as Marion was at the beginning.<sup>122</sup> Significantly, the 'blank white body' acquires an 'identity' or 'personality' only once it is dressed, and she dresses it up as she herself was dressed for Peter's party, a masquerade, as Duncan remarked (301). The following passage lingers on the detailed description of the bright pink icing dress with 'a row of ruffles around the neckline, and more ruffles at the hem' (341). The outfit seems to be the only thing that really matters, while the 'eyes were still blank' (342). Eventually '[h]er creation gazes up at her, its face doll-like and vacant except for the small silver glitter of intelligence in each green eye' (342). Marian finally comments that the lady-cake looks 'delicious', which will trigger her hunger. In this way, she confirms her cannibalistic side and her complicity with the consumerist society: the doll-like cake looks appetising and therefore deserves to be eaten. At the same time, in the act of serving it and eventually eating it, she affirms her wish to destroy this image, a process that envisages possible different alternatives that the novel has developed in the 'dialogic thought' throughout the narrative.

In the end, no one seems to appreciate the cake except Marian and Duncan. In a final act of cannibalism that negates and reaffirms the roles of consumer and consumed, Marian eats the body of the cake and Duncan, significantly, eats the severed head. This is an act of reappropriation and consumption to ensure the enemy is definitely destroyed and, simultaneously, assimilated. Duncan's final remarks communicate the multiple views in which the 'so-called reality' can be interpreted. Misquoting 'Burnt Norton' as 'mankind cannot bear too much unreality' (352), he unbalances the quality of the quotation and alludes subversively and ironically to the metanarratives of the whole story. They confirm the power of traditional narratives and, at the same time, reveal the need to revise them, to find fresh interpretations that might grant a safer survival. Suggestively, he ends the novel with the word 'delicious', an appropriate conclusion that, though open-ended and unresolved, seems to grant that at least two

people from the story are going to attempt a different path in an endless process of cultural re-embodiment. This is not just a point of departure for Marian and Duncan,<sup>123</sup> who end with an uncertain future, having no roommates, no jobs and living in an unchanged society, but a question mark that once more problematises the whole story. The emphasis is on the dynamic dialogue between transgression and confirmation of the status quo expressed in the intertexts. This is underlined by Duncan's multiple final interpretations:

'Maybe Peter was trying to destroy me, or maybe I was trying to destroy him, or we were both trying to destroy each other, how's that? What does it matter, you're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer.' (353)

Hence, contradictory interpretations coexist in an unlimited process of signification and resignification in a world of simulacra and shifting signs, as Kristeva states:

The meaning is precisely this unlimited and never closed engendering, this never-ending operation of impulses towards, in and through language, towards, in and through the exchange and its protagonists: the subject and its institutions.<sup>124</sup>

Consequently, the novel exposes the artificial world of consumerism that threatens the integrity of the individual to the point of cannibalism and self-cannibalism. It is a self-victimisation, a destruction prompted by the strategies of the consumerist society. The alternative is a total rebellion that starts from the body in a reappropriation that is vital; it leads to survival and to a more open, multiple vision of being a woman and being human. It is a new possible ontological vision that is never definite but in progress and a place where different possibilities and interpretations coexist. The dialogue between texts does not give a definite solution but creates a tension, a dialectic process in which the self is momentarily reshaped but never attains a certain status.

In Marian's negotiation with the body (her body, which is marked by starvation, manipulation and objectification), she finally compromises in a search for wholeness that entails domesticity and acceptance of the basic rule of survival: eating. She is still a consumer but a more conscious one who is not so easily deceived by advertisements.

The final acceptance of her female body and the reshaping of her self through starvation have prompted a transformation that envisages a more conscious way of being a consumer. Simultaneously, the parodic use of intertexts reveals and exposes the dangerous cannibalistic implications of the consumerist society that entail defending oneself from its alluring and threatening roles. Marian resists conventions in her progress towards self-affirmation and attempts to find a different path at personal, national and ontological levels. The nature of being a woman in an hostile environment is further explored in *Surfacing* where the language used in the novel, which can be described as a style that sits between prose and poetry, and the rewriting and re-mythologizing of myths and fairy tales suggest a different view that is linked to women's writing and to the Canadian identity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Canlit Foodbook* (Toronto: Totem Books, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Cutchins, 'Bakhtin, Intertextuality and Adaptation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. by Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-16 (pp. 2-3).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4 and 6.

<sup>5</sup> As Kristeva remarks, for Bakhtin the novel is 'polyphonic' and its narrative structure indicates 'a becoming', Julia Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel', in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> The statement is repeated twice in the book, the first time by Peter and the second time by Ainsley at the end of the story. Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969; London: Virago Press, 2009), pp. 95 and 345. Further references to this text will be placed in parentheses following quotations. Hill Rigney argues that Marian 'never truly grows up, partly because she rejects and denies her own feminine powers of procreation which [...] are symbolic of her potential for artistic creativity'. Barbara Hill Rigney, *Women Writers. Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1987), p. 5. However, Marian creates the cake at the end of the novel and she acquires a more mature self-awareness after rejecting the 'feminine mystique'.

<sup>7</sup> In her interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood defined *The Edible Woman* as an anti-comedy because the protagonist is engaged to the wrong person so 'the comedy solution would be a tragic solution for Marian', Margaret Atwood, *Conversations* (1978; London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 12. In another interview, with Linda Sandler, Atwood said that the book is 'an example of realism verging on caricature', *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Becker points out that for Atwood, 'irony – like parody – presupposes a certain complicity with that which it contexts, and that paradox remains unresolved'. Susanne Becker, 'Celebrity or a Disneyland of the Soul: Margaret Atwood and the Media', in *Margaret Atwood works and impact*, ed. by Reingard Nischik, (New York: Camden House, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 82-83.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64 and 87-88.

<sup>12</sup> Becker, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative, the Metafictional Paradox* (1980; Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), p. 10.

- <sup>14</sup> Linda Hutcheon, 'The politics of postmodernism: Parody and history', in *Cultural Critique*, 5, *Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism* (1986–1987), pp. 179-207 (pp. 185-86).
- <sup>15</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 25.
- <sup>16</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern. A study of contemporary Canadian fiction*. (1988; Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.110.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- <sup>18</sup> Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), p.6.
- <sup>19</sup> See Zoya Jamil Chaudhary and Dr Khurshid Alam, 'Comparative Study of Feminist Voice: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Bell Jar*', *Journal of Research (Humanities)*, LV (Issue 1, 2019), pp. 164-183, available at <<https://tehqeecat.com/english/articleDetails/3989>> [accessed 20 October 2020]; Pamela Cooper, "'A Body Story with a Vengeance": Anatomy and Struggle in *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Women's Studies*, 26 (Issue 1, 1997), pp. 89-123, available at <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00497878.1997.9979152>> [accessed 20 October 2020]; Stephanie de Villiers, "'Divinest Sense": The Construction of Female Madness and the Negotiation of Female Agency in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*' (unpublished master's dissertation, 2017), available at <<https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/62672>> [accessed 20 October 2020]; G. Sankar and M. Kalai Nathiyal, 'A Comparative Study in Female Quest for Self-identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*', *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 2 (Issue 1, 2014), available at <[https://www.academia.edu/33831841/A\\_COMPARATIVE\\_STUDY\\_IN\\_FEMALE\\_QUEST\\_FOR\\_SELF\\_IDENTITY\\_IN\\_MARGARET\\_ATWOODS\\_SURFACING\\_AND\\_SYLVIA\\_PLATHS\\_THE\\_BELL\\_JAR](https://www.academia.edu/33831841/A_COMPARATIVE_STUDY_IN_FEMALE_QUEST_FOR_SELF_IDENTITY_IN_MARGARET_ATWOODS_SURFACING_AND_SYLVIA_PLATHS_THE_BELL_JAR)> [accessed 20 October 2020]; Karolina Kitanoska, "'I Was My Own Woman": Breakdown and Recovery in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*' (unpublished degree essay in English Literature, 2013), available at <<https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lup/publication/3938749>> [accessed 20 October 2020]; Kerry B. Nickell, 'The Struggle For Women's Liberation in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*' (unpublished master's dissertation, 2017), available at <<http://wagner.radford.edu/317/>> [accessed 20 October 2020]; Jennifer Michelle Hoofard, 'Flesh Wounds: Reading the Scar as Text in the Works of Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison' (unpublished doctoral thesis, 2006), available at <<http://www.sylviaplath.info/dissertationsaboutsp.html>> [accessed 20 October 2020].
- <sup>20</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 316-319.
- <sup>21</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 12.
- <sup>22</sup> Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 20.
- <sup>23</sup> Deborah Nelson, 'Plath, History and Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 21–35 (p. 24).
- <sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath* (Tevistock: North Cote House, 2004), p. 114. At the end of the novel, Esther wonders if 'someday [...] the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?' Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 230.
- <sup>25</sup> Caroline J. Smith, "'Feeding of Young Women": Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, *Mademoiselle Magazine*, and the Domestic Ideal', *College Literature*, 37 (Fall 2010), pp. 1-22. (p. 7).
- <sup>26</sup> Janet Badia, 'The Bell Jar and Other Prose', in Jo Gill, pp. 124–38 (p. 133). According to Nora Seller, the allegory of the fig tree suggests 'fragmentation and depersonalisation' rather than multiple options for women. Nora Seller, 'The Fig Tree and the Black Patent Leather Shoes: The Body and its representation in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 9 (Fall 2003), pp. 127-154 (p. 129).
- <sup>27</sup> Stephanie de Villiers, 'Metaphors of Madness: Sylvia Plath's Rejection of Patriarchal Language in *The Bell Jar*', *English Studies in Africa*, 62 (Issue 2, 2019), p. 3. See also Nelson, p. 24 and Luke Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A critical study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 101-102. The electrocution is also connected with Esther's experience of the electroshock, a trauma that, paradoxically, heals her.
- <sup>28</sup> Nelson, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> de Villiers, 'Metaphors of Madness', p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> The traumatic description of childbirth in Chapter Six of *The Bell Jar* and Clara's draining pregnancies in *The Edible Woman* highlight the problematic relationship that the protagonists have with motherhood. Furthermore, similar images are used to describe pregnant women in the two novels. See Azra Ghandeharion, F. Bozorgian and M.R.G. Sabbagh, 'Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: A Mirror of American Fifties', *K@ta*, 17 (2015), p. 65, available at <<http://kata.petra.ac.id/index.php/ing/article/view/18945>> and <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294720400\\_Sylvia\\_Plath%27s\\_The\\_Bell\\_Jar\\_a\\_Mirror\\_of\\_American\\_Fifties](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294720400_Sylvia_Plath%27s_The_Bell_Jar_a_Mirror_of_American_Fifties)> [accessed 20 October 2020].

<sup>31</sup> Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 20 and 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Rigney, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Madeleine Davies, 'Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 58-71 (p. 60).

<sup>36</sup> Davies, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> Alice Palumbo, 'On the Border: Margaret Atwood's novels', in Nischik, pp. 73-86 (p. 74).

<sup>39</sup> Gayle Greene, 'Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*: "Rebelling against the system"', in *Margaret Atwood. Essays on Her Works*, ed. by Branko Gorjup (Toronto, Buffalo, Chicago, Lancaster, UK: Guernica, 2008), pp. 11-41 (p. 31).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, p. 96.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 99.

<sup>43</sup> Greene, p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Jane Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> Atwood, *Second Words*, p. 369.

<sup>47</sup> Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Sofia Sanchez-Grant, 'The female body in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*' *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9 (2), *Politics, Sexualities, and New Feminist* (2008), pp. 77-92 (p.90).

<sup>50</sup> Enrica Asquer, 'Domesticity and Beyond: Gender, family and consumption in modern Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. by Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Atwood worked for Canadian Facts, a market research company in Toronto in 1963. Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes. Margaret Atwood starting out* (Toronto: HarperCollins books Canada, 1998), p. 141. The name 'Seymour' suggests 'see more', a pun that ironically comments on the pretentious claims of the company whose aims are merely commercial; 'see more' implies surveillance and some sort of clairvoyance but actually the company's only aim is to 'sell more'.

<sup>54</sup> Becker, p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> 'You let the thing in you that was supposed to respond to the labels just respond, whatever it was; maybe it had something to do with the pituitary gland' (214). The pituitary gland regulates vital body functions, and therefore the passage refers to a dangerous intrusion into people's minds.

<sup>56</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. (Los Angeles, London: Sage, 1998), pp. 80, 84.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures* (1970; London: Sage, 1998), p. 33. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127. Emphasis in the original.

- <sup>61</sup> Vintage fanatic, *Vintage old 1960's Canada Dry Ginger Ale Soda Commercial*. [video online], available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ozwZPDLs-s>> [accessed 25 January 2018]. Vintage fanatic, *Vintage Old 1960's Canada Dry Ginger Ale Commercial 2*. [video online], available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f86aeVNaK-A>> [accessed 25 January 2018].
- <sup>62</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, pp. 28-29.
- <sup>63</sup> Madeleine Davies, 'Self/image: Reading the visual in Atwood's fictive autobiographies' *Contemporary Women's Writing* (2017), pp. 373-90 (p. 386).
- <sup>64</sup> Wisker, p. 42.
- <sup>65</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977; England: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 4.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5, 7, 8, 12 and 14.
- <sup>67</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 87.
- <sup>68</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*. (1982; Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 339.
- <sup>69</sup> Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), pp. 30-31.
- <sup>70</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the downspout of empire": Post-colonialism and postmodernism', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 20 (4), 1989, pp. 149-75 (p. 154). Available at: <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10262/1/TSpace0171>> [accessed 10 September 2018].
- <sup>71</sup> Sheckels claims, quoting Foucault, that 'power cannot exist without dissent...and resistance'. Theodor Sheckels, *The Political in Margaret Atwood's Fiction. The Writing on the Wall of the Tent* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 5.
- <sup>72</sup> Brooks Bouson, p. 12.
- <sup>73</sup> Sceats, pp. 64-65.
- <sup>74</sup> Sceats, pp. 62-63.
- <sup>75</sup> Jennifer Hobgood, 'Anti-edibles: Capitalism and schizophrenia in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman' *Style*, 36 (1), *Time, Music, and Textuality* (2002), pp. 146-67 (p. 154). Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5325/style.36.1.146.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3d9f2a84158acea7b572864790acee87>> [accessed 15 March 2019].
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>77</sup> Sanchez-Grant, p. 79.
- <sup>78</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 20.
- <sup>79</sup> Abigail Bray, and Claire Colebrook, 'The haunted flesh: Corporeal feminism and the politics of (dis)embodiment', *Signs*, 24 (1), 1998, pp. 35-67 (p. 35). Available at: <[https://www.academia.edu/37623503/Abigail\\_Bray\\_and\\_Claire\\_Colebrook\\_The\\_Haunted\\_Flesh\\_Corporeal\\_Feminism\\_and\\_the\\_Politics\\_of\\_Dis\\_Embodiment](https://www.academia.edu/37623503/Abigail_Bray_and_Claire_Colebrook_The_Haunted_Flesh_Corporeal_Feminism_and_the_Politics_of_Dis_Embodiment)> [accessed 15 March 2019].
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- <sup>83</sup> See Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 27-28, and Hobgood, p. 155.
- <sup>84</sup> Sceats, p. 98. However, anorexia is never mentioned in the novel.
- <sup>85</sup> *Anorexia Nervosa: A Multi-disciplinary Approach*, ed. by Antonio Mancini, Silvia Daini, and Louis Caruana (New York: Nova Science Publishers Mancini, 2010), p. ix.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164 and 165-66. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>87</sup> Fiona Tolan, 'Situating Canada: The shifting perspective of the postcolonial other in Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride', in *Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Harold Bloom (1992; New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp. 143-58 (p. 143-144).
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144 and 149.
- <sup>89</sup> Ashraf Zidan, 'Postcolonial feminism in Margaret Atwood's fiction' *International Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 2 (3) (2013) pp. 11-28 (p. 13). Available at: <[https://www.academia.edu/34146156/Postcolonial\\_Feminism\\_in\\_Margaret\\_Atwoods\\_Fiction\\_Postcolonial\\_Feminism\\_in\\_Margaret\\_Atwoods\\_Fiction](https://www.academia.edu/34146156/Postcolonial_Feminism_in_Margaret_Atwoods_Fiction_Postcolonial_Feminism_in_Margaret_Atwoods_Fiction)> [accessed 15 March 2019].
- <sup>90</sup> Sceats, p. 98.
- <sup>91</sup> See: *Cannibalism and the colonial world*, ed. by Francis Barker, et alia, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3), and Merrall Llewelyn Price, *Consuming Passions: The uses of Cannibalism in late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. xviii.
- <sup>92</sup> Mikel Burley, 'Eating human beings: Varieties of cannibalism and the heterogeneity of human life' *Philosophy*, 91 (4) (2016), pp. 1-22. (p. 1), available at: <<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/100985/3/Eating%20Human%20Beings%28Philosophy1%29.pdf>> [accessed 15 March 2019].

- <sup>93</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essais, livre I* (1580; Paris: Flammarion, 1969), p. 254.
- <sup>94</sup> Price, p. 23.
- <sup>95</sup> Price, pp. 24-25.
- <sup>96</sup> Emma Parker, 'You are what you eat: The politics of eating in the novels of Margaret Atwood' *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41(1995), pp. 349-68 (p. 363).
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p. 363.
- <sup>99</sup> Jerry Phillips, 'Cannibalism qua Capitalism: the metaphors of accumulation in Marx, Conrad, Shakespeare, and Marlowe', in Francis Barker, p.186.
- <sup>100</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Automeia, 2004), pp. 64, 75, 139, 151 and 192.
- <sup>101</sup> Stevan Mijomanovic, 2016. 'Cannibalism, Fertility, and the Role of Food in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*', Original Scholarly Paper, Faculty of Medicine, University of Belgrade, Serbia (2016), p. 70, available at:  
<[https://www.academia.edu/31072433/Cannibalism\\_Fertility\\_and\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_Food\\_in\\_Margaret\\_Atwoods\\_The\\_Edible\\_Woman](https://www.academia.edu/31072433/Cannibalism_Fertility_and_the_Role_of_Food_in_Margaret_Atwoods_The_Edible_Woman)> [accessed 15 March 2019].
- <sup>102</sup> Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>103</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 45.
- <sup>104</sup> Hill Rigney, p. 34.
- <sup>105</sup> Ma come noncurante e valorosa, con asciutto viso ed aperto e a niuna parte turbato così al padre disse: — Tancredi, né a negare né a pregare son disposta per ciò che né ll'un mi varrebbe né l'altro voglio che mi vaglia; ed oltre a'ciò, in niuno atto intend di rendermi benivola la tua mansuetudine ed il tuo amore; ma il vero confessando, prima con vere ragioni defender la fama mia e poi con fatti fortissimamente seguire la grandezza dell'animo mio. Egli è il vero che io ho amato ed amo Guiscardo, e quanto io viverò, che sarà poco, l'amerò, e che appresso la morte s'ama, non mi rimarrò d'amarlo; ma a questo non m'indusse tanto la mia femminile fragilità, quanto la tua poca sollecitudine del maritarmi e la virtù di lui. Esserti dovè, Tancredi, manifesto, essendo tu di carne, aver generata, figliola di carne e non di pietra o di ferro! E ricordarti dovevi e déi, quantunque tu ora sie vecchio, chenti e quali e con che forza vengano le leggi della giovinezza. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, ed. by Aldo Rossi (Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1977), p. 223.  
Translation from <[https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/texts/florio/day04.php](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/florio/day04.php)> [accessed 20 October 2019].
- <sup>106</sup> 'Il tuo padre ti manda questo per consolarti di quella cosa che tu più ami, come tu hai lui consolato di ciò che egli più amava.' Boccaccio, pp. 224-25. Translation from <[https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/texts/florio/day04.php](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/florio/day04.php)> [accessed 20 October 2019].
- <sup>107</sup> Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, p. 97, 161.
- <sup>108</sup> *Titus Andronicus*, V. 2. 187-96.
- <sup>109</sup> *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. by Jack Zipes (New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 156.
- <sup>110</sup> See: Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 30, and Pamela Bromberg, 'The Two Faces of the Mirror in The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle', in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form*, ed. by Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 18-23 (pp.19-20). Available at: <[http://www.archive.org/stream/margaretatwoodvi00vansrich/margaretatwoodvi00vansrich\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/margaretatwoodvi00vansrich/margaretatwoodvi00vansrich_djvu.txt)> [accessed 5 March 2018].
- <sup>111</sup> Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1978), p. 93; Hill Rigney, pp. 29-31; Prantik Banerjee, Arpita Mukherjee, 2016. 'Surviving consumerism and eating disorders in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*', *OSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, 21 (8) (2016) Ver. 5, pp. 21-25 (p. 22), available at:  
<<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e341/d40b58418311ca415a85af3df1de40df37fa.pdf>> [accessed 15 March 2019].
- <sup>112</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972; Toronto: Anansi Press, 2012), pp. 32-35.
- <sup>113</sup> Brooks Bouson, p. 26.
- <sup>114</sup> Hill Rigney, p. 31.
- <sup>115</sup> Sanchez-Grant, p. 85.
- <sup>116</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871; London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 81.
- <sup>117</sup> Sontag, p. 163.
- <sup>118</sup> McWilliams, p. 76.
- <sup>119</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Circle Games* (1964; Toronto: Anansi Press, 2012), p. 87.



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<sup>120</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), p. 427.

<sup>121</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 15.

<sup>122</sup> The words 'adjust', 'adjustment' and 'compromise' are frequently repeated by Marian in an attempt to lecture herself, like Alice does, and also to physically adjust to the requirements of society, growing or diminishing according to the role expected.

<sup>123</sup> Sheard, p. 36.

<sup>124</sup> '[La] signification est précisément cet engendrement illimité et jamais clos, ce fonctionnement sans arrêt des pulsions vers, dans et à travers le langage, vers, dans et à travers l'échange et ses protagonistes: le sujet et ses institutions'. Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), p. 15. My translation.

## Chapter 3

### ***Surfacing*: transforming identities**

This above all, to refuse to be a victim.

Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, 1972

National and personal identity are related discourses that Atwood elaborates in *Survival* and *Surfacing* in the 1970s. The two texts are in a symbiotic relationship: *Survival* creates the 'critical context in which to read [Atwood's] own fiction'.<sup>1</sup> The text is halfway between poetry and prose and is written in an experimental language that is connected to *écriture féminine* and to the disruptive function of the novel. By using this kind of language, the novel opens up to non-dichotomous visions that envisage multiple views of being human and encompass good and evil in the Canadian cultural and environmental context.

In the preface to *Survival*, Atwood indicates that the book is 'a cross between a personal statement ... and a political manifesto'.<sup>2</sup> This places both books in border country, a liminal space that provides the opportunity to move more freely in between countries and cultures and to explore new perspectives. In both works she also anticipates environmental concerns (as she anticipated second-wave feminism in *The Edible Woman*), which will become tropes in her work and one of her main topics in her role as a Canadian spokeswoman. She identifies the risks of the exploitation of nature, the danger of pollution and a consequent possible destruction of the Canadian wilderness. In this context, the presence of indigenous peoples and their culture is marked by marginality and absence. They are a source of wisdom and power but are silenced and undermined – marginalised – similarly to the protagonist.

The protagonist of *Surfacing*, during her journey home, that is, to her family home, which she paradoxically defines as 'home ground' and 'foreign territory',<sup>3</sup> positions herself as an innocent victim at both national and personal levels. The story will be revealed as a construction, as will be seen in this chapter, a lie that exposes latent guilt for exploiting the land and expropriating indigenous resources. The protagonist is victim and victimiser and part of the Americanised dominant white society which she rejects at the end of the novel; she looks for alternatives but she cannot completely

avoid its influence. The ending is open: her journey is incomplete and probably envisages compromises at linguistic, personal and national levels.

## **Reinventing language and stories**

The intertexts are used in different ways. They highlight a diverse vision in a 'dialogic thought' that is in relation with the narratives of the main text. They parody traditional narratives in a thought-provoking perspective, proposing a different view that engages the protagonist and the reader in a quest at personal and national levels. The fairy tales are almost rejected and reversed or rewritten in a 'Canadian version';<sup>4</sup> they are parodied in order to expose their incongruence in the Canadian perspective and landscape. The stories about wendigos and werewolves, as well as stories related to human–animal beings, such as Napi the trickster and other indigenous legends, are considered to be the alternatives the protagonist suggests in the course of the narrative. Noticeably, Napi the trickster and the similar legendary figure of Old Man Coyote are destroyers and creators. They help men but also kill and rape other creatures. They are loners and outsiders but are described as human-like characters. In this way, they encompass both the good and the bad side of humanity but in a supernatural way.<sup>5</sup> Wilson speaks of Atwood's characters as tricksters as well. They are able to manipulate and create possibilities.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the animal beings encompass a wider vision of being human that comprehends good and bad sides, that is, humanity as it should be. Furthermore, according to Hammill, 'the trickster continually disrupts efforts to establish fixed identities based on race, sexuality or gender, religion or social class'.<sup>7</sup> This view questions and challenges the notion of identity in the Canadian context and suggests an alternative to the far-fetched roles the protagonist finds in the civilised society of the city that traumatised her. This is also clear in the protagonist's transformation into an animal being at the end of the novel and in her involvement with Joe, whom she refers to as a 'buffalo' or an animal that is covered with fur and that has little speech and is 'half-formed' (2, 186). In a similar but not exactly equal way, the classical myth involving Callisto and the Demeter and Persephone myth are rewritten in a universal view, exposing the diminished and debased role of women in a patriarchal society. In fact, the myths have a pre-patriarchal element that is positive and affirms women's right to self-determination. This element was changed and distorted in the course of the patriarchal narratives, as will be seen in this chapter.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, a new ontological

vision is proposed that in part revives the ancient meaning of the myths by exposing the traumatic experience inherent in the stories and revealing the possibility of rebirth. This rebirth necessitates overcoming trauma and acknowledging being a non-victim as well as a compromise with a society that has not changed and is hostile to women.

From this viewpoint, language is important in the negotiation with the roles and rules of society that the surfer refuses to comply with. As Hill Rigney claims, the novel is set in a 'border country' at different levels. The story occurs at the border between English and French Canada and the protagonist is in 'a precarious balance between truth and lies, between reality and fantasy'.<sup>9</sup> The language is 'halfway between poem and novel, theological treatise and political manifesto, myth and realism'.<sup>10</sup> Nathalie Cooke points out different intertextual connections, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. According to Cooke, these texts are examples of a female journey from nervous breakdown to self-awareness, an awakening that inspires the protagonists' creativity. Cooke also mentions Adrienne Rich's poem 'Diving into the Wreck' and Gwendolyn MacEwen's 'Dark Pines under Water' regarding 'the introspective quality of the Canadian wilderness'.<sup>11</sup> She also remarks that the ending is uncertain as we do not know if the surfer is going to leave the island. Atwood leaves her there 'before she makes her decision and before she has had the chance to use language and thereby reenter society.'<sup>12</sup> In this way, Cooke also links the surfer's state to the pioneer in Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and highlights the movement from prose to poetry and back to prose in Chapter Twenty-Four and Chapter Twenty-Five. There are slips to irregular punctuation to represent the protagonist's state of mind and her refusal of language 'as one of the trappings of civilization'.<sup>13</sup> In the interview 'Struggling With Your Angel' (1989), Atwood stated that '*Surfacing* ... is about language.' In addition, she revealed that the proofreader 'changed and regularized all the punctuation'. This did not fit with the author's intention, so Atwood had to 'go over those proofs with a magnifying glass, putting back all the little commas and all the semicolons' in order to characterise the language of the protagonist.<sup>14</sup> This emphasises the peculiar use of language in the novel that is linked to the narrator's breakdown and subsequent awakening. Her refusal of the language of civilisation, which entrapped her in far-fetched roles and consequently traumatised her, works in parallel with her awareness of the obsolete quality of traditional fairy tales, as the intertextual dialogue points out.

Therefore, a different kind of language is created in an attempt to merge alternative narratives and renewed language in order to convey a different vision of being human in the Canadian context. The language created in the novel is linked to what Cixous envisages *écriture féminine* to be: a derangement of the senses and an expression of the body in a free flow that aims to change the narratives of the male-dominant society. This is clear in the irregular use of punctuation, in the merging of prose and poetry and in the journey from breakdown to self-awareness, as pointed out by Cooke.

Nevertheless, the novel is also in 'border country', as Hill Rigney remarks. It is in between, both at the threshold and in a space that is physically and metaphorically uncertain. The rules and roles of civilisation are obsolete and traumatising but the new rules envisaged by the protagonist cannot be implemented, not in the city at least. The wilderness is a powerful alternative but can be a difficult and uncomfortable place to live in, as will be seen in this chapter. According to Hammill, there are two main categories of the myth of wilderness in Canadian literature. There is the myth of nature as hostile and treacherous and the myth of wilderness as the place of authenticity that 'provides healing, escape and self-knowledge'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Hammill also points out that these categories are too simplistic and imply contradictions and shifting views as well. For example, according to Frye, 'urbanisation had led to a kind of inversion of the garrison, so that wilderness was now within the city, apparently under control but still, in fact, threatening'.<sup>16</sup> Wilderness is therefore a construct that highlights the complex cultural code in the Canadian context and emphasises the 'dislocation of identity'.<sup>17</sup> This complexity of the concept of wilderness is present in *Surfacing* as a threatening place but also a healing place where the protagonist finds shelter and renewal. At the same time, it is a shifting sign; its placelessness is revealed at the end of the novel. It is a difficult place to live in and will probably not be the final choice of the surfer, but it still remains a powerful alternative.

For the surfer, going back to the city means compromising; therefore, the traditional narratives can only be partially rewritten. As the surfer claims:

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. The

language is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them. If the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm's or a frog's without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn't be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realize that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die. (70)

The connection between head and body emphasises the importance of the body and of a language that needs to acknowledge this. Thus, the encompassing new vision starts from the body or from a body that does not make the distinction between head and body, between rational and irrational, city and wilderness, that is, a vision where dichotomies are abolished or 'both of them will die'. The traumatising and destroying effect of the dichotomous perspective is therefore revealed, a concept that is present in the work of Cixous as well.<sup>18</sup>

The possible link with 'Dark Pines Under Water' by Gwendolyn MacEwen notably emphasises the connection with the wilderness where humans are turned into nature or merge with nature, as happens to the protagonist at the end of the novel:

This land like a mirror turns you inward  
And you become a forest in a furtive lake;  
The dark pines of your mind reach downward,  
You dream in the green of your time,  
Your memory is a row of sinking pines.<sup>19</sup>

It is an 'elementary world', as MacEwen claims at the end of the poem, that the lyric voice wishes to explore and that coincides with an inner subconscious self. This is linked to the final part of the surfer's journey, that is, her diving in the lake and unveiling of the unconscious secrets, as will be seen in this chapter. 'Diving into the Wreck' by Adrienne Rich describes the journey of the poet that starts, significantly, from 'the book of myths' and later she dives alone into a metaphorical ocean 'to explore the wreck'.<sup>20</sup> The ending is open in a comprehensive vision of the lyric voice in the line 'We are, I am, you are'. Thus, this view points out the intertextual connection both at the thematic and the linguistic level, as Bakhtin and Kristeva claim and as

explained in this thesis in Chapter 1. The 'dialogic thought' emphasises a multiple view, the novel has a polyphonic quality that denies dichotomies and a new revolutionary vision is proposed that subverts and revises the traditional narratives.

In *Surfacing* and *Survival*, Atwood aims to delineate the geography of Canada through a map of the country that is not only a physical space but also, above all, a mental state. Atwood claims that she is 'talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost [...] Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind.'<sup>21</sup> Just as the indigenous Indians traced their maps from memory and gave them to the explorers who asked for directions,<sup>22</sup> Atwood outlines a cultural map that has part of its roots in a colonial past and looks for a new departure in a present that needs to be firmly established on Canadian land. According to Fiamengo, the narrator's journey can be interpreted 'as a metaphor for Canada's journey from colony to nation'.<sup>23</sup> This highlights the quest present in the novel for more independent and alternative views both at national and personal levels that envisage a new possible vision. Canadian literature was not recognised as autonomous at the time when *Surfacing* and *Survival* were written. As Atwood remarks in *Survival*, real literature was supposed to come from the United States and from England, and, consequently, Canadian literature was not taught in schools and universities as 'many people assumed there wasn't any'.<sup>24</sup>

In this context of a search for cultural autonomy, the important intertexts I will analyse are the following Grimm Brothers' fairy tales: 'The Golden Phoenix', 'The Fountain of Youth', 'The Juniper Tree', 'The White Snake', 'Fitcher's Bird' and 'The Girl without Hands', which have been discussed by various critics, such as Sharon Wilson, Elizabeth Baer and Ronald Granofsky.<sup>25</sup> The protagonist also refers to Canadian folktales and legends such as those about the *loup-garou*, werewolf stories and stories about Wendigos. Ancient myths are evoked too, such as the myth of the Triple Goddess as well as the two myths involving Callisto and Demeter and Persephone respectively. indigenous art and culture are present in the form of pictographs.

In this quest for alternatives, the protagonist needs to acknowledge that she is both victim and victimiser. She looks for alternatives that cannot eventually deny her

Western background in her reintegration into the civilised world of the city. There is a final compromise that nevertheless implies a revaluation of the Canadian wilderness and indigenous culture without denying the role of victimiser. Therefore, the woman's journey is a lonely one, as Adrienne Rich remarks in her poem 'Diving into the Wreck', that envisages a new point of view and implies compromise but also autonomy.<sup>26</sup> Differently from Campbell's hero's journey, which follows 'the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return*', where the return is stressed as 'life-enhancing',<sup>27</sup> there is no reward, treasure or elixir for the heroine at the end of her experience.<sup>28</sup> The female hero present in *Surfacing* does not (and cannot) follow Campbell's pattern, that is, the pattern of traditional myths and fairy tales. Atwood reverses and subverts this pattern in the intertextual references, exposing the marginalisation of women in society, which is not a free choice or a temporary separation. The initiation into society is absent as the protagonist is excluded from the source of power and is reluctant to return to society. The other major difference is that all the stages of the journey are performed solitarily, and no external help is provided; the surfer needs to find her strength from within, as she claims in Chapter Twenty-Five: 'The power has deserted me, nothing is on my side, not even the sun' (179). Even her female ancestors are silent figures that left few traces; there is 'the smell of loss' of her mother's grey leather jacket (168). On the contrary, the male hero often receives the help of goddesses or female figures with magical powers. Moreover, the return of the surfer is not a triumph or a celebration but a compromise. In the city, she envisages that she will be tied 'to fences, doorknobs' (157) and that her relationship with Joe 'will probably fail, sooner or later' (186). Serenity Young interestingly remarks that the heroic female in the folklore and classical traditions is the 'passive maiden, self-sacrificing mother, or obedient and dutiful wife'.<sup>29</sup> While the male hero openly challenges conventions and experiences the unknown, coming back with a prize and renewed knowledge, the heroine 'often dies indoors and in secrecy, not publicly, without witnesses, and by her own hand'.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, the counter-heroine, as well as the counter-hero, does not adhere to the dominant culture; she violates it using magic powers. She is the dark-haired 'bad girl' who refuses the traditional female role; this kind of narrative refers to 'an earlier, non-patriarchal time and to non-patriarchal sources of knowledge'.<sup>31</sup> This is a way of asserting that there should be freedom from patriarchal constraints and stating that women are more diverse than the ideas projected on them by men might suggest. In this perspective, Cooke claims that 'the novel is itself an attack on imperialism and its tool,



the quest narrative. [...] The protagonist valorizes victims rather than victors.’<sup>32</sup> Pratt states that ‘her elixir is not only devalued but a threat to civilization’: her acquired final awareness of her condition and her provisional autonomy are certainly troublesome in modern society.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the story of the surfer points to a final unavoidable and unresolved compromise where the roles of victim and victimiser collude, and her return to civilisation involves a continuous negotiation with her partner and the role society assigns to her.

Consequently, the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* is engaged in a personal and national quest while on the verge of insanity, which mirrors her condition of having a split caused by a traumatic experience in the city and the negative influence of civilisation. It is not by chance that the protagonist of *Surfacing* is kept anonymous; she never names herself and is never named by the other characters. This underlines her sense of alienation and displacement, of course, but also emphasises her ‘everyman’ characteristic, in this case ‘everywoman’— that is, she is an example of a woman *and* a Canadian in search of identity. Moreover, as being a victim is, according to Atwood, the main recurring symbol in Canadian literature, the woman is identified as a victim of the patriarchal society, and, therefore, her refusal to be a victim and her search for identity are national and personal declarations.<sup>34</sup>

The binary opposition between nature and the wilderness and between the city and civilisation is emphasised by the antithesis between the USA (seen as the aggressive oppressor that replaced British rule) and Canada (the victim of American authority and exploitation). What Atwood suggests both in the novel and in the guide to Canadian literature is the acknowledgement of the existence of Canadian culture and identity, which is different from the British and American versions, and, finally, that Canada is chosen as the home country. In ‘Travels Back’, Atwood says that Canada ‘is a place you choose to live in’; she adds that she does not think Canada is better than other places but it is her place and refusing to acknowledge that would mean being amputated.<sup>35</sup> This entails a search for new myths and symbols that embrace the wilderness in its multiple aspects and the indigenous culture of Canada in its alternative identity, as this search is highlighted in the intertextual references. It also implies that oppositional dualities must be overcome in an inclusive acceptance of multiplicity. In fact, in the course of her transformation at the end of the novel, the surfer similarly

remarks that she 'multiplies' (162). In *Strange Things*, Atwood defines the wilderness not as a threatening, empty and cold space, which was how the European settlers described it, but as 'a repository of salvation and new life'; it gives people a chance to survive the greedy and exploitative methods of civilisation. Besides, 'for indigenous people the wilderness was not empty but full [...] of monsters', that is, spirits of the land, living creatures that were deeply connected to humans.<sup>36</sup> However, the myth of the wilderness as an idealised space needs to be revisited and rewritten so that it is opened up to a different relationship that is non-dichotomous, and this implies using a linguistic and artistic approach. Instead of fearing or glorifying the wilderness, the emphasis should be on 'the importance of nature to human survival'.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the dichotomy of the wilderness versus civilisation is a false construction in which right and wrong are questioned. People need to be aware that they are part of a natural world that is 'inextricably tied to the ecological systems that sustain their lives'.<sup>38</sup> This argument is not completely developed at this stage of Atwood's career, though *Surfacing* reveals concerns about environmental damage and implies complicity and the possibility of a different approach to the wild. As the novel suggests, this approach should include the narratives of the wilderness. Eventually the surfer will become aware of her place in the natural world, like her mother and father.<sup>39</sup> Gina Wisker claims that Atwood is concerned with the disasters that might occur if people ignore the importance of balance and harmony with nature. Nevertheless, the lost balance can be restored if people change their attitude and follow the example of the traditions of populations such as Canadian First Nations and Australian Aboriginal indigenous peoples.<sup>40</sup>

In this context, the strategies of colonial power are described as 'irony, mimicry, and repetition' by Homi Bhabha;<sup>41</sup> they appropriate and threaten the 'other' if they do not comply with the dictated roles. The colonised subject is defined as '*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*'.<sup>42</sup> This underlines ambivalence, a forked discourse where the subject is alienated and discriminated against by apparently logical and rational discourses. Therefore, according to Bhabha, the inherent contradiction of postcolonial theory violates the 'rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality', turning from mimicry to menace and triggering irony.<sup>43</sup> In *Surfacing*, the exploitation and ruthless, violent appropriation of the land is related to postcolonial forked discourses like those discussed by Bhabha and to the rape of

women, an act that recurs in the narrative. In the novel, the incident involving the 'Americans' (115), who eventually reveal themselves to be Canadian (122), is an exemplar of this misinterpretation of the narrative. This shows the protagonist's, and Canada's, collusion with colonisers:

The Americans had rounded the point, two of them in a silver canoe; they were barging towards us. I assessed them, their disguises: they weren't the bloated middle-aged kind, those would stick to powerboats and guides; they were younger, trimmer, with the candid, tanned astronaut finish valued by the magazines. When they were even with us their mouths curved open, showing duplicate sets of teeth, white and even as false ones. (115)

In Chapter Fifteen the 'Americans' are revealed as Canadians in disguise, emphasising the coloniser–colonised duplicity. As Bhabha points out, they are 'almost the same but not quite'. Similarly, according to Maria Mies, the exploitation and colonisation of women as a metaphorical foreign land are connected to a postcolonial mentality that emerged in the patriarchal capitalist society; it fragmented and objectified the 'other' so that it was seen as an 'enemy'.<sup>44</sup> In a similar way, indigenous lands are considered empty and unexploited by indigenous peoples, and therefore the appropriation of their resources by the colonisers is considered an improvement instead of a violation.<sup>45</sup> Hence, Canada can also be seen as a victim that colludes with the victimiser. Similarly, 'women collude in their oppression through passivity and the assumption of innocence'.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, they need to abandon the victim position and reshape their identity at both cultural and personal levels so that they can move towards a more disengaged autonomous vision. As will be seen later in this chapter, this is the 'journey' that the protagonist needs to undertake to acquire autonomy and self-awareness. Therefore, defining Canada is not simple; its identity is ambivalent, double-voiced and in flux. Palumbo argues that Atwood constantly uses double voices in her novels, as shown in the poem 'The Double Voice' in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and in the 'violent duality' that the Canadian landscape provokes in people, to which Atwood often refers. She also claims that 'through intertextual allusions, alterations in narrative point of view, and the use of the unconscious, Atwood shows the way in which the self

is constructed from contradictory impulses'.<sup>47</sup> This is certainly the process that Atwood adopts in her work. Nevertheless, the double voice is often more complex and includes multiple elements; it implies a complicity that makes it multifaceted and a disruptive intent that connects it to *écriture féminine*. Thus, unlike the 'motherland' (Britain) and the United States, which are believed to have more stable referents and symbols, Canada remains contradictory, unresolved and ever-changing, and for this reason is more open to renewal.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, 'having bleak ground under your feet is better than having no ground at all',<sup>49</sup> and choosing Canada means embracing these uncertainties that might be more realistic than the American utopian frontier or the English self-contained island. Thus, the Canadian personal and national identity becomes not only a quest that is contained within that country but a universal one that implicitly asks ontological and existential questions.<sup>50</sup> From a postmodern perspective, solutions cannot rely on stability or fixed implications but need to move and change and experience and imagine new possibilities.<sup>51</sup>

In a historical national context, this is also linked to the Canadian policy that fosters minority cultures and the preservation of languages other than English and French.<sup>52</sup> It is a 'mosaic society' rather than the American 'melting pot'. This evokes the idea of patchwork or bricolage, a trope that is present in Atwood's novels. They are recurring signs that develop awareness in the protagonist, such as the image of the heron, as will be seen in this chapter. It is also present in the intertextual network of the novel, where references to different kinds of texts range from traditional Western works of literature, folk and fairy tales to indigenous legends and visual works.

The protagonist of *Surfacing* experiences all the uncertainties and fragmentation of occupying her 'home ground' which is at the same time 'a foreign territory'. She traces her journey back to the island in Southern Quebec where she spent her childhood with her family; she is looking for her father, who mysteriously disappeared. The narrative assumes the form of a detective story and ghost story. Sheel claims that *Surfacing* is a detective story 'for most of the text' with 'elements of the mystery and ghost story'; she adds that 'the detective story also arrests a romance narrative'.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the protagonist unconsciously discards the romance narrative after her traumatic experience, which left her incapable of feeling, and then consciously refuses it in the traditional form of the romantic fairy tale. Atwood claimed in her interview with Graeme Gibson (1972) that

her reference to ghost stories is 'the Henry James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off'.<sup>54</sup> In the interview with Linda Sandler (1976), she referred to 'The Jolly Corner' by Henry James when speaking about *Surfacing*.<sup>55</sup> The ghosts are therefore projections of the protagonist's fears and desires. The Gothic novel in the form of the Southern Ontario Gothic novel is interweaved as well, as often occurs in Atwood's work; the unspeakable, apparently located in the wild, is revealed as the product of the civilised world that influences and dictates human behaviours and relationships.<sup>56</sup> It is also the projection of the protagonist's fears, trauma and desires as well as her wish to be a victim and therefore innocent.<sup>57</sup>

Janice Fiamengo claims that in *Surfacing* 'the narrative of innocence' is constantly questioned and is considered 'as dangerous as the absence of national identity'.<sup>58</sup> People in Canada are both marginalised and privileged, just as the surfer is part of the white-dominated society but because she is a woman, she is marginalised as well. Therefore, 'marginality is falsely equated with truth and goodness' as well as innocence.<sup>59</sup> The novel suggests that this is a fantasy, because '[b]eing human involves being guilty'.<sup>60</sup> Fiamengo connects this concept with the surfer's postcolonial guilt that is projected in a mythical Native presence that is relegated to the past. In fact, the indigenous peoples are 'shadowy outcast figures' that are recalled in her memories.<sup>61</sup> According to Fiamengo, this can be also interpreted as a 'strategic misidentification – a provisional self-consciously rhetorical gesture of resistance rather than an absolute claim to identify'.<sup>62</sup> Certainly the parallel between women and Canada as victims of abuse is not straightforward and unproblematic in the novel. Nevertheless, there is an attempt to include indigenous culture and experience, as well as women's experience, which are not equal but need to be part of a multifaceted diverse vision. As in the Native legends, in which the protagonists are never totally innocent, this alternative perspective includes the figures of creator and destroyer, victim and victimiser, and artist and exploiter.

However, the codes and rules of the hostile patriarchal world are so deeply rooted and internalised by the protagonist that she creates a disturbing and unreliable fantasy world where she is the victim of abusive relationships.<sup>63</sup> The journey to healing and renewal needs to involve rejecting her self-deceptive fantasies deriving from her cultural

heritage, which mainly refers to Western European fairy tales and myths. Therefore, she reverses the structure of the fairy tales in a deliberate mirroring that parodies that function as a subverting tool to explore alternative liberating possibilities.<sup>64</sup> A new language and new myths are necessary to renew and re-evaluate humanity in a Canadian (and universal) view and to rebuild a wholeness from the scattered pieces of a traumatised self or oppressed nation. As Atwood claims:

This use of the Indian – as a mediator between the whites and a Nature which is life-giving rather than death-dealing—is paralleled by attempts to find in Indian legends mythological material which would function for Canadian writers much as the Greek myths and the Bible long functioned for Europeans. [...] so it is their legends we should turn to for source material for stories and poems.<sup>65</sup>

For this reason, the novel refers to intertexts as part of traditions, both Western and indigenous traditions, that cannot be denied but need to be explored and ‘recreated’, sometimes in reverse:<sup>66</sup>

I outline a princess, an ordinary one, emaciated fashion-model torso and infantile face, like those I did for *Favourite Fairy Tales*. Earlier they annoyed me, the stories never revealed the essential things about them, such as what they ate or whether their towers and dungeons had bathrooms, it was as though their bodies were pure air. It wasn't Peter Pan's ability to fly that made him incredible to me, it was the lack of an outhouse near his underground burrow.

My princess tilts her head: she's gazing up at a bird rising from a nest of flames, wings outspread like a heraldic emblem or a fire insurance trademark: The Tale of the Golden Phoenix. The bird has to be yellow and the fire can only be yellow too, they have to keep the cost down so I can't use red; that way I lose orange and purple also.

I asked for red instead of yellow but Mr. Percival wanted a 'cool tone.'

I pause to judge: the princess looks stupefied rather than filled with wonder. I discard her and try again, but this time she's crosseyed and has one breast bigger than the other. My fingers are stiff, maybe I'm getting arthritis.

I skim the story again for a different episode, but no pictures form. It's hard to believe that anyone here, even the grandmothers, ever knew these stories: this isn't a country of princesses, The Fountain of Youth and The Castle of the Seven Splendours don't belong here. They must have told stories about something as they sat around the kitchen range at night: bewitched dogs and malevolent trees perhaps, and the magic powers of rival political candidates, whose effigies in straw they burned during elections. (47-48)

I re-read two of the folk tales, about the king who learned to speak with animals and the fountain of life, but I got no further than a rough sketch of a thing that looked like a football player. It was supposed to be a giant. (78)

The fairy-tale intertexts emphasise the obsolete quality of this mythical devalued past, which is parodied by the drawings the protagonist produces for *The Quebec Folktales* she needs to illustrate. They resemble the drawings she used to make when she was ten – fashion models imitating paper dolls and popular actresses that were 'constrained' in a 'slavery of pleasure' (36). The Golden Phoenix, a symbol of death and rebirth and the eternal power of creativity, is represented as 'a fire insurance trademark' and later reinterpreted as a 'mummified parrot' (170); the princess 'looks stupefied' and has 'one breast bigger than the other' and the giant guarding the fountain of life looks like a 'football player'. As will be seen later in this chapter, the evoked fairy tales, purged of the *loup-garou* stories and of the colour red, the colour sacred to indigenous peoples, highlight the debased, constrained roles the protagonist expresses in her drawings and expose the void quality of these roles in the Canadian (and universal) landscape: 'The Fountain of Youth and The Castle of the Seven Splendours don't belong here.' Besides, a *loup-garou* is evoked in the narration with references to the protagonist's father she

imagines is hidden in the forest and transformed into a wolf (50, 71, 77) and in her final vision of her father-god with 'yellow eyes, wolf's eyes' (181). In her Gothic fantasy, she visualises herself trapped on the island and wishes to protect her friends from his possible attacks. The father she is looking for and consciously depicts as her guide and source of knowledge is therefore unconsciously represented as a fearsome, ferocious beast.

Therefore, the fairy-tale narratives are outdated and useless for the protagonist's quest; their essential meaning needs to be recreated, remythologised and transformed from within to maintain its significance and power, and to be believable.<sup>67</sup> She needs to look for different stories about 'bewitched dogs and malevolent trees', that is, Canadian stories linked to the land and to the wilderness. Significantly, the third princess she paints 'gets out of control' on the wet paper as she adds 'fangs and a moustache, surrounding her with moons and fish and a wolf', but she concludes that it looks like 'an overweight collie' (51), which is reminiscent of the indigenous legends of monsters such as the Wendigo, as will be seen later in this chapter. It is an attempt to create an alternative to the invalidated stereotypes of the fairy tales and to connect instead with the narratives of the wilderness. The irony expressed in the drawings emphasises the obsolete quality of the myth; as Kristeva states, it 'tap[s] a meaning that is always already old, always out of date, as funny as it is ephemeral'.<sup>68</sup> As Granofsky claims, '*Surfacing* resists the "happy ever after" closure of the fairy-tale form. Her fantasy in itself is a "fairy-tale" that she must repudiate.'<sup>69</sup> The text, therefore, expresses 'a tension between a traditional form and a critique of that form's unconscious sexism'.<sup>70</sup> These stories need to be rewritten to be believable, as is highlighted in the parodic and reversed exposure of the intertexts through the protagonist's illustrations. This also reveals a different approach through visual language instead of written or spoken language that implies an attempt to find a different path that is related to indigenous pictographs, as will be seen later in the novel and in this chapter.

What is the alternative that society proposes? The novel suggests the answer: 'Humanoid bears and talking pigs, Protestant choo-choo trains who make the grade and become successful' (51). The critique the protagonist expresses is therefore at personal, cultural and national levels. The model the society proposes is an empty artificial image, devoid of meaning and useless for her quest. It suggests that a more universal



interpretation of the fairy tales in a parodic perspective is needed that opens up to multiple signification and to a new vision.

### **The amputated, devalued female self**

In the protagonist's attempt to reconstruct her split, amputated self, the story of 'The Girl without Hands' is disturbingly evoked. There are several parallels with the story of the surfer, but there are also differences.<sup>71</sup> The surfer's palm has double lines with a 'funny break' (2) that is related to her fragmentation and eventual breakdown. Later in the narrative, she recalls Anna's words: '[w]hen the heartline and the headline are one, Anna told us, you are either a criminal, an idiot or a saint'. (153) The hybridity of the human condition is therefore suggested; it allows multiplicity but also complicity. Besides, she feels amputated by her fantasised divorce as well as by the abortion. Like the girl of the fairy tale, who has her hands amputated by her father because of his pact with the devil, she offers herself in an apparent act of self-sacrifice, identifying herself with an innocent victim. For the surfer, the most significant amputation from which she has suffered has occurred in terms of her creativity. Her teacher-lover downplays her talent and induces her to choose the commercial artist role 'because there have never been any important woman artists' (46). He gives her low grades and keeps her separate from his family life. She worships him like a god, in the same way she considered her father a god, but he was not a god, only an average man who took advantage of her. Moreover, her father forced them to live on the island 'split [...] between two anonymities, the city and the bush' (53), and she thinks his 'crude drawing of a hand [...] More hands' (53) signifies the castrating quality of her father's role in her life that she unconsciously evokes. Her partner, Joe, mutilates the pieces of pottery that he produces by 'cutting holes in them, strangling them, slashing them open' (51). They do not sell and they are useless as water runs out of them. The vases suggest the fetishisation of women in the commodity culture. They are debased, abused, manipulated and reduced to a useless object. Similarly to the girl without hands, the protagonist needs to recover from her traumatic amputation and find new energy in her severed self by becoming self-sufficient both mentally and physically. In the fairy tale, the girl is helped by an angel both in her first journey in the outer world and in the second one, when she is banished to the wilderness with her son, Sorrowful. Significantly, the king she marries in the second part of the story, after the amputation,

gives her silver hands, which are surrogates that control and domesticate her. In the third part of the story, she recovers and heals in the cottage in the forest and her hands grow back. Though the wilderness has healing influences in the surfer's recovery, she is not helped by any magic or supernatural being. Eventually, she only needs to acknowledge her status as an amputee and her trauma, which cannot be reversed. The fairy tale is therefore reinterpreted in a more believable perspective and the 'happily ever after' ending is denied in a more realist view of compromise.

According to Cinda Gault, the abortion is a symbolic 'cornerstone' in *Surfacing*. It draws a parallel between the violation of women and the collective violation of Canada by the American way of life. It is a 'rape motif' that diminishes 'the narrator's choices'.<sup>72</sup> She is a criminal as abortion was illegal, and furthermore the nation denies her reproductive and sexual autonomy. Though eventually she seems to take control of her reproductive self-determination in her sexual intercourse with Joe and in her hope that she will become pregnant, she will return to a society that denies this autonomy and does not protect or support her. Therefore, 'she seems likely to be betrayed again'.<sup>73</sup>

The sense of loss that the protagonist experiences is not only related to the death of her parents and to the abortion that seems to have been forced on her, but above all to her recognition that she is a non-victim, or a victim of her role in society. They are embedded and internalised in her narrative so well that they make her complicit in her own state. Acknowledging that she is complicit and refusing to be a victim are the first steps towards being a freer self that needs to reject all the precepts of civilisation and look for more viable alternatives in the wilderness and in the culture of the Native peoples. In this renewed vision, imagining a new language is paramount for survival, which is not 'bare survival' but 'a choice made from within' to become 'a creative non-victim'.<sup>74</sup>

The intertexts are used to underline the thematic, the linguistic and the genre-based discourses which intentionally reverse and subvert the traditional codes and gender roles embedded in society in an attempt to create alternative myths and discourses. This is accomplished through the type of language used; it is a poetic language that subverts the narratives from within. For this reason, the protagonist adopts a language that reflects her state of mind; it is a 'border language' with intentionally sporadic

punctuation that highlights the voice of the protagonist and also reveals an attempt to find a new or different way of expression which is linked to *écriture féminine*. In this context, according to Julia Kristeva, poetic language is revolutionary as it expresses the repressed instincts that challenge the rules of the Law of the father, that is, the concept of language as monolithic:

Now, since writing breaks the 'subject' apart into multiple doers, into possible places of retention or loss of meaning within 'discourse' and 'history', it inscribes, not the original-paternal law, but *Other* laws that can enunciate themselves differently beginning with these pronominal, transsubstantive agencies. Its legitimacy is illegal, paradoxal, heteronymic.<sup>75</sup>

The subject is split between a symbolic function, which uses the language of the Law that represses instincts, and a semiotic *chora*, a pre-symbolic, pre-Oedipal, heterogeneous space that is always in process and is linked to maternal language, that is, the language of the womb. The semiotic *chora* is 'a space of mobility' and contradictions, fragmentation, pulverisation and negativity, but renewal is only possible in this multifaceted space through the acceptance of its polyvalence.<sup>76</sup> Logic crumbles in a 'polylogical rhythm'<sup>77</sup> that reappropriates a primitive repressed state and experiences *désir* and *jouissance*. This is 'négativité dans l'unité', a collision of negativity with the unity of the self.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, desire in language is a reappropriation of the repressed feelings that allow instincts to surface and reconnect the self with the maternal *chora* through a poetic language that destroys and renews the social code. The otherness is absorbed in a unity, in the difference where the sign is necessarily multiple and heterogeneous and where the death drive (negativity) is never totally overcome but acknowledged and absorbed in a void that is at the same time an experience that 'remodels language'.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the use of language in *Surfacing* reflects a process of deconstruction present in the intertextual reading and is connected to the maternal *chora* and to *écriture féminine*. It exposes and denies the incongruities of the narratives of the fairy tales in a Canadian (and universal) context. The surfer attempts to use and experiment with a new kind of language that exists at the border between poetry and prose and that refers to the visual as well as to the indigenous heritage of the pictographs in her own parodied illustrations, as will be seen later in this chapter. This

is an essential part of the protagonist's search for a wholeness, a possible healing of her split self, similar to the quest of Marian in *The Edible Woman*. In fact, the surfacer remarks that '[l]anguage divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole' (140). However, the story of the surfacer evolves in a more dramatic and haunting way than in the anti-comedy of the previous novel, though it addresses similar topics. The surfacer is directly involved in a personal quest, a process that leads her to a total derangement of body and mind. She questions her past and present roles and her identity in a reconnection with her family ties and an acknowledgement of her dark side – a death drive that is both complicit and self-harming.<sup>80</sup> As Kristeva states, it is a 'new representation of a world "in progress"' that suppresses 'the topos of *One Subject* of understanding' and reveals 'a violent *criticism* of ideologies, habits, and *social rules*'.<sup>81</sup> The subject is not only split, it is 'a questionable *subject-in-process*' that is evolving and changing; the emphasis is on the process and there is no definite conclusion, or the conclusion constantly shifts.<sup>82</sup> As Howells claims, '[i]n this mythic world of dynamic process, reality consists of an uninterrupted flow of energy in perpetual metamorphosis'.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the surfacer not only undergoes a transformation into an animal being at the end of the novel, which will eventually heal her, but she also faces a constant process of change and adaptation that is necessary for her present and future survival (162).

In this context, the kitsch artificiality and destructive effects of civilisation on the environment are exposed from the beginning of the novel in the bleak, almost apocalyptic descriptions of the consequences of pollution and in the fake artefacts the characters encounter on the road. The effects of the acid rain and the white birch tree disease, together with 'the pit the Americans hollowed out' (3), have changed the landscape to the point where the protagonist does not recognise it. The bottle villa imitates the tepees' zigzag pattern and the stuffed moose family reflect the stereotype of the happy American family:

The bottle house is built of pop bottles cemented together with the bottoms facing out, green ones and brown ones in zig-zag patterns like the ones they taught us in school to draw on tepees; there's a wall around it made of bottles too, arranged in letters so the brown ones spell BOTTLE VILLA. (4)

What they're after is the three stuffed moose on a platform near the pumps: they're dressed in human clothes and wired standing up on their hind legs, a father moose with a trench-coat and a pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and flowered hat and a little boy moose in short pants, a striped jersey and a baseball cap, waving an American flag.

[...]

'Oh look,' Anna says, hand going to her mouth, 'there's another one on the roof,' and there is, a little girl moose in a frilly skirt and a pigtailed blonde wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof.

(7)

Significantly, the moose daughter is far away from the rest of the family; she is on the roof, which underlines the separation of the protagonist from her own family and the rest of the group. The wild, represented by the moose family, is therefore domesticated, tamed and 'wired'. These are empty images that refer to a lost tradition and to the effects of the influence of the Americans that 'spread themselves like a virus' (123).<sup>84</sup> They are images of an image, like Anna's face, an 'imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere' (159). They are hollow reflections of a past that haunts the present with which the protagonist wishes to reconnect but that gives her no clues about her search and makes no sense. In a similar way, the bottle villa is made of discarded plastic bottles that devalue and marginalise the indigenous culture and heritage. It is 'an icon of meaningless consumerism' that subverts the Hansel and Gretel story and underlines the emptiness of the society that exists around the protagonist.<sup>85</sup> The Native people are clearly presented as marginalised in the narrative. They are physically present only once, in Part Two when the protagonist remembers picking blueberries, a typical activity of indigenous peoples, who were hunters and gatherers. The blueberries, and berries in general, were not only a source of food for the Native people; they also understood that berries and plants had medicinal qualities, a characteristic that is lost in the protagonist's consumerist discourse. In indigenous culture, food is linked to health and well-being and is experienced via hunting and harvesting as well as via storytelling, singing, dancing and language.<sup>86</sup> The surfer calls them 'the others who used to come' (79), underlining their marginality and marked otherness:

Every year they would appear on the lake in blueberry season and visit the good places the same way we did, condensing as though from air, five or six of them in a weatherbeaten canoe: father in the stern, head wizened and corded like a dried root, mother with her gourd body and hair pared back to her nape, the rest children or grandchildren. They would check to see how many blueberries there were, faces neutral and distanced, but when they saw that we were picking they would move on, gliding unhurried along near the shore and then disappearing around a point or into a bay as though they had never been there. No one knew where they lived during the winter; once though we passed two of the children by the side of the road with tin cans of blueberries for sale. It never occurred to me till now that they must have hated us.

They are a ghost presence, marginalised and diminished like the protagonist. Nevertheless, they are present in their apparent absence and make the protagonist feel responsible for and complicit in the appropriation of their resource and their marginalisation. Significantly, the indigenous family move away when they realise that white people are harvesting blueberries in that area. Therefore, postcolonial discourse appropriates and devalues the original, imitating, violating and fragmenting its value, as Bhabha claims.

According to Bhabha, '[t]he act of cultural enunciation – the *place of utterance* – is crossed by the *différance* of writing or *écriture*'.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, meaning is not mimetic or transparent but implies interpretation, a third space between me and you: the space of 'an ambivalence in the act of interpretation'.<sup>88</sup> This challenges and displaces the sense of cultural knowledge and historical identity and the claims about the "purity" of cultures' inherent in Western-dominant nations.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, meanings and symbols do not have a 'primordial unity or fixity' but fluctuate and can be 'read anew'.<sup>90</sup> It is a continuous negotiation, a hybridity and an in-between that needs to be constantly revisited. This connects with the postcolonial discourse present in *Surfacing*; hybridity and border culture seem to be the alternative to dichotomous views and to

neocolonialism. Consequently, the surfer enters this border country without a map; she is a stranger in her own land in a forest of void symbols that is littered and desecrated and to which she is incapable of connecting with any meaningful past or present discourse.<sup>91</sup> She tries to find her way, which should lead to a reconstruction of her traumatised self in the labyrinth of intertextual references and linguistic expressions that seem to make no sense to her. They are the products of a society that has violated and damaged her self as well as her land.

From this angle, it is interesting how the colonial and postcolonial views are reflected in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). Moodie is an immigrant strongly connected to England both culturally and physically, for whom Canada is inexplicable at first. In Atwood's poems, according to Hammill, she transforms herself 'from "a word/in a foreign language" to one of the "voices of the land"'.<sup>92</sup> This emphasises the 'process of colonisation and settlement' which is ambivalent as it both claims a sense of patriotism and an estrangement from the New World.<sup>93</sup> Canada is considered hostile due to the harsh climate and its vast unknown landscape. European colonisers are both immigrants and invaders, conquerors that tame the savage and pioneers allured by the country's unexplored land. This ambiguity is present in the novel too, as well as in the surfer's role of victim and victimiser and in her process of accepting Canada as her home country.

In this postcolonial context, two languages are used, English and French, and this makes the language partly incomprehensible to the protagonist as she does not speak or understand French, except for a few sentences. Words are under threat, which is testified to in the bullet holes on the sign saying 'Welcome/Bienvenue' and where words are reduced to modern graffiti where advertisements, politics and religion mix and recap the deprived 'district's entire history' (9), prefiguring the indigenous stone painting the protagonist will discover at the end of the novel, which instead will be a meaningful source of knowledge. Language is deceitful and multiple; *vers* can mean 'worm' but also a 'line of a poem' (55), and *verge* can mean 'birch' but also 'penis' in a world dominated by threatening male symbols that are littering the environment and shattering the protagonist's life. In fact, references to penises are recurrent in the narration. Besides being present in the double meaning of the Lac des Verges Blanches, which is an allusion to the white man's rape of the new land, they appear in the graffiti

of the wooden cabin the surfer had visited with her brother. They are represented as detached, fetishised organs (like the ones she imagines copulating 'in mid-air' (146)) in a world dominated by man, obsessively displaying what he thinks is the source of his power. But they are also a threatening warning for the protagonist, who undergoes three attempts of rape in the course of the narration. The debasement of language recurs in David's discourse as well. For example, the word 'neat' that he often repeats is in clear contradiction both with the narratives and with the state of the environment. Nothing is 'neat' in this story; confusion and desolation pervade the landscape, as well as the relationships and the characters' personal stories. Not even a provisional order is kept, as in *The Edible Woman*: the total untidiness of the deprived environment is reflected in the people and exposed from the first pages. Violence and vulgarity are also emphasised in David's apparently innocuous funny voices that imitate cartoons characters, such as Woody Woodpecker, Goofy and Daffy Duck; but his tone conceals aggressive intentions, which are particularly threatening to women. The foul language he uses against women and Canada reflects the power politics of the relationships in the story and urges a different solution.<sup>94</sup> It is a language the protagonist does not trust, because she does not trust the word 'love' any more: it ought to have fifty-two names, as the word 'snow' does in the language of the Inuit (100). This links again to the disruptive, multiple and polyphonic functions of poetic language and of literature in general, as Kristeva states, where the subject is pulverised and meaning is pluralised, and links to the revolutionary function of *écriture féminine*.<sup>95</sup>

In her process of reconstructing her distressed self, the protagonist needs to progress at a vertical level to reappropriate both her father's and her mother's legacies and to create new narratives and demythologise the traumatising stories she has interiorised. In the denial of her personal story and in the lies she repeats to herself, she exposes a princess who is stuck in a tower or in a bottle. She is therefore held captive by her own encoded roles and is constrained in an armour forced on her by society and reiterated in her own lies and in her illusions and dreams that are triggered by false narratives and reinforced by her own expectations. It is the mirror image she produced by imitating an ideal image of her parents, as Lacan states, that engenders alienation. According to Lacan, in the mirror stage the child constructs an idealised image (*imago*, which is an imitation but also the last stage of metamorphosis) of the child's parents which shapes his or her personality and guides the child's behaviour. This can become a repressing process



which causes alienation, a splitting of the subject between its inner world (*Innenwelt*) and the surrounding world (*Umwelt*); it is a trauma that can become manifest in dreams, which happens to the surfer.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, in the confrontation with the fairy tales of civilisation, her identity is split – pulverised. She needs her father's maps but above all she needs to reappropriate her mother's semiotic *chora*, the repressed maternal language of the instincts, to orientate herself, to become whole and feel again and to experience desire. She needs to acknowledge the multiple contradictory essence of the signs that surround her instead of the oppositional dualities she has been used to, where people are 'a winner or a loser' (65) and leeches are good or bad. Significantly, she realises that her father's rational and mathematical calculations were wrong (121) and that the people on the boat she had met during her trips on the lake were not American but Canadian (122). She therefore understands that her interpretations are imprecise, that she misunderstood what was happening around her and needs to reconsider others' stories and her own story. Her conclusion is that she is complicit in killing animals, because the simple fact of being human means having 'blood on my hands' (124).

In her search for wholeness, at the beginning of Part Two, the protagonist reveals the troublesome lie of the body being separated from the head. This is also the moment when the narration changes tense. In fact, Parts One and Three are in the present tense while Part Two is in the past tense. Her fist closes and will unclose at the end of Part Two after the plunge into the lake and her reacquired awareness of her traumatic past. The change in tense emphasises her capacity to reflect on her unsettling narrative and on her misreadings and misunderstandings in an attempt to explore new possibilities. Howells suggests that this section is 'a reconstruction from memory and that the narrator has not moved from her marginalized position in the bedroom'.<sup>97</sup> This also provokes an apparently uncontrolled narrative which may confuse the reader but is perfectly controlled by the author.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the distinction is subtler and more articulated in an intertextual perspective, because in the world of language created by the text in dialogue with the intertexts, the chance of renewal is exactly in the clash between the disruptive element of the poetic language of the narrator and the supposed logic of the patriarchal narratives that are constantly exposed and subverted. The reader is 'caught' in the surfer's quicksand of her unreliable narration and, at the same time, is involved in her traumatic experience, which exposes the violence she is undergoing. The narration questions its own credibility and, at the same time, delineates a believable

story of personal trauma that relates to intertextual narratives. It suggests alternatives in its parodic reversed interpretations of the myths and fairy tales and a possible new ontological vision in a Canadian (and universal) context.

In this world without transcendence, the roadside crucifix is an 'alien god' (8) and the plane an 'unsacred crucifix' (134) reminiscent of the surface of the heron flying above them the first evening they were on the island and of the dead heron, a useless sacrifice. The heron is a recurring symbol with a patchwork quality. The protagonist juxtaposes the changed interpretations of the symbol at different stages of the narration. From being the totally innocent 'lynch victim' with which she identifies (110), a trophy killed by the Americans, it becomes a desecrated, rotten artefact that triggers the awareness of her complicity in the killing of animals. Her 'goodness' crumbles; she acknowledges that she is a victimiser and a torturer as well as complicit, as she has confirmed and supported the oppositional dualities embedded in the patriarchal society. This is clear in the violent episode of the killing of the fish in Chapter Seven, in her burning of the 'bad' leeches that she carries out with her brother in Chapter Fifteen, and in Chapter Thirteen when she states that 'men ought to be superior' though they are not, in a reversed feminist discourse of sorts (105). She is also complicit in her brother's practice of killing animals and putting them in bottles as she is too frightened to act against him (125). In Chapter Seventeen the heron is finally recalled both dead and alive. It is a pointless sacrifice that refers to the Christian sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that is desecrated in the cannibalistic story of 'The Juniper Tree' (where the son is killed by the step-mother and served as a stew to the father, who eats it eagerly) and even more debased in the ritual eating of canned food that is compared to 'dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us' (134). This not only exposes the dark side inherent in humanity, our 'innate' cruelty (126), but also our inevitable complicity and therefore the impossibility of being innocent. It is an insatiable hunger that possesses humans like in the Canadian stories of the Wendigo and the Wabenos; it is a 'destructive lust for power over others', a greediness that ought to be controlled.<sup>99</sup> It also stresses the violence of sacrifice, a sacrifice that is a bond between father and son from which the mother is excluded. In both the Passion of Jesus Christ and in 'The Juniper Tree', the women, the Virgin Mary and the cruel step-mother, have passive roles compared to the exclusive relationship between father and son. According to Kristeva, 'a woman remains a stranger to sacrifice: she participates in it, she assumes it, but she disrupts it, she can

also threaten it'.<sup>100</sup> To attain wholeness and harmony, the concept of sacrifice and the opposition between good and evil need to be overcome; there must be an acknowledgement of the obsolete quality of the fairy tales' narratives, the artificiality of the American stereotypes and the inherent cruelty of useless sacrifices. Nevertheless, the figure of the Wendigo can be interpreted in different ways. Though it is commonly considered to be 'a ravenous man-eating giant which roams the northern forests in search of human flesh' and its description denotes connections with death, decay and corruption, it is also associated with a 'malevolent spirit' of the North that is linked to cold and starvation, that is, to conditions that are part of being human in the Canadian landscape.<sup>101</sup> Other sources connect the legend to greed and violence, negative aspects which are nevertheless part of being human. From this perspective, the story of the surfer seems to suggest an inclusive vision of being human that cannot deny its dark side.

### **Possible alternative paths**

In a world of language where the dialogue between texts is a place of revolution and renewal, the protagonist opts for a prehistoric past that she feels is an alternative to the debased artificial present that can lead to rebirth. The descent into the lake is frightening but finally brings back the awareness of her trauma, the abortion, illegal at the time in Canada.<sup>102</sup> The Canadian laws do not support her, and her journey as a woman is lonely and has no final reward. Contrary to the hero's journey, her descent into the underworld, the darkness of the self, the uncanny unconscious, is a vertical personal process she must perform by herself with no help or reward. Significantly, the surfer reinterprets her own drawings to find her way to renewal. At the end of the story, she will acquire a personal awareness and knowledge but not a proper reward in the traditional form of an elixir, a treasure or a prince or princess. Thus, her journey in the form of a process or a spiral is self-guided, personal and isolated. Even the 'sacred places' of the Indians do not bring salvation, as will be seen at the end of the novel, and her search for wholeness is personal and isolated. It is a never-ending process. Howells stresses the fact that the title of the book is a gerund 'indicating process and activity (like the fish jumping) rather than a complete action'. Therefore, there will be a change in the protagonist, a transformation, but it will not be complete and it will never attain a total, final wholeness.<sup>103</sup> Women need to continually renegotiate their role within

themselves and with the society around them in an acknowledgement of the existence of their complicity in the construction of their own prisons. For example, Anna shows the entrapping power politics of relationships in the make-up mask she constantly wears for David, who regularly emotionally demeans and humiliates her. The painful effect of this on their relationship culminates in the filming scene for *Random Samples* in which David forces her to be filmed naked, which is described as a 'virtual rape'.<sup>104</sup> In turn, Anna proposes a similar treatment for the protagonist when she suggests a gang rape before they leave the island, a final shameful scene which is left to the imagination of the reader. Moreover, Anna's songs evoke 'misreading and false associations' that testify to her incapacity for transformation.<sup>105</sup> According to Howells, in *Surfacing* 'the borders blur between realism and fantasy as the language shifts between realistic description and metaphors of psychological space'.<sup>106</sup> The site where the border blurs is the wilderness which is 'the site of dynamic transformation' within the text.<sup>107</sup> This is clear in the reference to the intertext of 'The Girl without Hands' and, as will be seen in this chapter, to Callisto's myth.

The alternative to fairy tale discourse is explored in the intertext of the stone paintings traced in the maps of the protagonist's father, which are symbols of the indigenous pre-historic past that seem free from the aggressive grand narratives of the white colonisers. It is an intertext that Atwood creates in the novel but it also refers to indigenous artwork present in North America. In an interview with Jan Garden Castro, Atwood claimed that 'the source for the Indian stuff in *Surfacing*, apart from the sort of general knowledge, was a very specific book called *Indian Rock Painting*, by Selwyn Dewdney [...] Indians still leave offerings at these sites.'<sup>108</sup> In her exploration of the Native Canadian past, the surfer tries to reach the roots of a possible alternative language and alternative myths that can answer her urgent questions about identity. The stone paintings are, significantly, red, a sacred colour for the Indians; they are important discoveries copied by her scientific father as a sort of retirement hobby (96-97). The colour red is, also significantly, the hue she would have liked to use for the Golden Phoenix and the fire in her illustrations, which denotes both the power of the colour and the powerful meaning it acquires in the pictographs. The indigenous stone paintings are nearer to the referent, less ambiguous and duplicitous, and more similar to the protagonist's own language, which is illustrative.<sup>109</sup>

It is significant that the unmotivated relation between the sign (signifier/signified) and the referent is less present in certain types of 'concrete language', according to Kristeva, which means that the 'sign has not yet been distinguished from the referent'.<sup>110</sup> Figurative art and spoken and written language are combined in the pictograms; they are spatial rather than linear and allow a kind of religious or mythical representation.<sup>111</sup> The indigenous peoples never developed an alphabet. Their language was transcribed into European languages by missionaries who created an alphabet for them, such as Cherokee syllabary and Cree syllabics.<sup>112</sup> According to Cardona, the pictograph is the second stage of the development of writing where the final, sixth, stage is the alphabet. As the written language develops, the link between the sign and the referent becomes more and more abstract, detached and arbitrary.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, the pictographs are conceptually nearer to the referent than the signs of an alphabet and are therefore less ambiguous. They are a powerful tool that guides the protagonist in her self-discovery and in the reappropriation of her denied memories. In a similar way, Branko Gorjup states that '[r]eturning to the origin of language, she may rediscover its integrity'. Each pictograph is like a hieroglyph; it 'establishes unity between image and word, between pictorial and verbal representation'.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, 'their first meaning was lost now like the meanings of the rock paintings. They were my guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs, I had read the new meaning with the help of the power' (152). Eventually, the protagonist's own pictures and the pictographs are only guides in the process of self-knowledge and self-awareness. They do not have a spiritual or magical function and do not give final solutions. They have lost their primordial power. The intertextual reference therefore underlines an alternative solution in the Canadian context to the traditional Western narratives, a visual alternative. Nevertheless, this is not a definite answer for the surfacer, whose quest results are incomplete and still leave her lonely.

Therefore, the protagonist's search for wholeness necessarily passes through language, in her case visual language and poetic language, and the reappropriation of the relationship with her mother, highlighted by the reference to the myth about Demeter and Persephone. It is a rediscovery of her repressed self, the semiotic *chora*, her mother's powers, that she needs to acknowledge in herself.<sup>115</sup> She negated these powers at the beginning because she privileged her father, who represents the symbolic rational function that entraps her and creates false myths, and because her mother was silenced,

mute (her diary only records the weather and the last pages are blank), and she was ill. She is diminished, like the protagonist herself.<sup>116</sup> Her mother left only a drab grey leather jacket, which recurs as a silent presence in the narration. On the contrary, her father left maps and drawings, which eventually reveal themselves as a partial and incomplete guide. Sherrill Grace claims that her father's logic is not only incomplete but is also 'a failure'.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, he leads her to the pictographs and to the plunge into the lake. Wall states that 'the camera keeps his [father's] body underwater', which underlines the danger of trusting in exclusive logic and rational discourses.<sup>118</sup> Inside the grey leather jacket are insignificant remnants, 'an empty metal aspirin container and an ancient Kleenex, and the husks from sunflower seeds' (150), which point out once more the belittled aspect of her mother's life. The husks of sunflower seeds emphasise the hollowness of women's place in society and suggest a connection to the pomegranate seeds Persephone eats before returning from the underworld to see her mother, Demeter, again.<sup>119</sup> The myth is remythologised: the pomegranate seeds, the symbol of fertility and rebirth, are transformed into hollow sunflower husks to expose the absence of transcendence and the need to fill the narratives with new stories.

Ovid gives space to the myth in *Metamorphoses*, exploring the different motivations of the characters in detail.<sup>120</sup> It is Venus who asks the god of love to strike Pluto with his arrow as she is jealous of Proserpina's virginity.<sup>121</sup> The innocence of the girl picking up flowers is strikingly opposed to the violence and quickness of the abduction:

Proserpina was playing, and gathering violets or white lilies. And while with girlish eagerness she was filling her basket and her bosom, and striving to surpass her mates in gathering, almost in one act did Pluto see and love and carry her away: so precipitate was his love.<sup>122</sup>

The terrified girl calls her mother and the loss of virginity is underlined by her torn garment and the scattered flowers. Significantly, two nymphs, Cyane and Arethusa, try to help her. Cyane is wounded and dissolved in water by Pluto when she tries to stop him. Arethusa has a similar destiny in the story that follows as she is transformed into a stream so that she can flee from her lover-persecutor. Notably, the story that precedes the myth about Demeter and Persephone is the killing of Medusa by Perseus, which

shows the loss of women's power in a male world. Both in the description of the abduction and in the answer Jove gives to Ceres, the concept of rape is changed into love. What Pluto did was not meant to harm the girl but was inspired by love. Ceres's wrath is fierce and relentless. She destroys the crops and cattle in Sicily, where Ovid's story is set, and once she finds out what happened to her daughter, she faces Jove. Notoriously, Proserpina eats some pomegranate seeds and, according to Jove's conditions, she can stay with her mother for only part of the year.

The intertextual reference highlights an interpretation of the ancient myth that emphasises the total powerlessness of women in modern society. While Ceres was strong and powerful in her anger and had the courage to face the king of the gods, the surfer's mother is mute; she cannot fight for her daughter, who has to take responsibility for her own destiny.<sup>123</sup> On the other hand, Proserpina is rather passive; it is her mother who fights for her. Proserpina is terrified and tries to defend herself but then she gets into trouble by eating the pomegranate seeds. She is therefore complicit in her state, that is, in the initiation into love that is violent but, from a male point of view, necessary. After all, it is love not rape.<sup>124</sup>

The surfer is passive at the beginning of the novel as well, in the fake description of her as an innocent victim. However, during her journey she acquires independence of thought and self-awareness that leads to her having self-determination and the capacity to take action. The male view relates to the devaluation of Demeter's rites that flourished in Eleusis, a small town not far from Athens, for two thousand years before the advent of Christianity and the Byzantine empire. The Eleusinian mysteries 'embodied the values of the relatively peaceful farming and trading mother-clan societies of the Goddess-preeminent Neolithic, before the sacrifice of sons in war became common practice as patriarchal warrior clans forced their way to power'.<sup>125</sup> According to the mysteries, the initiates who took part in the rites should not have had 'unatoned blood guilt on their hands'.<sup>126</sup> The rites focused on a cycle of sexual initiation, fertility, death and rebirth. There are therefore connections with the story of the surfer, although the myth is rewritten from the daughter's point of view. She is passive at first and silenced, like Proserpina. She feels innocent and pure but she has blood on her hands: she is complicit. The surfer's initiation into sexuality is ordinary; it is not rape and does not have the epic mysterious characteristic of the myth, except

for the fact that she is an unreliable narrator – she lies. Her love story is an ordinary affair in which she is debased and marginalised; she does not become a queen like Proserpina or a constellation like Callisto, as will be seen in this chapter. The violation happens elsewhere; it is the amputation of her autonomy, that is, the right to choose both to have a child as a single mother and to have a career as an artist is denied. It is a symbolic amputation that prevents her from being a full person. In this context, the reference to the myth points out the violence of the amputation that is not a physical rape but a psychological one whose consequences are similar: the exploitation and total disempowerment of women in modern society.

The protagonist's complicity in and lack of awareness of her state are therefore the main causes of her state. To be a non-victim she needs self-knowledge and an awareness of the constructed roles enforced by the dominant society. The descent into the underworld, though painful, is therefore necessary to understand her dark side and to acknowledge her world of dreams and memories and her lies. It is an initiation, just as it was in the origin of the ancient myth, but it is reinterpreted from a different viewpoint. In the Eleusinian mysteries and in the different versions of the myth, the emphasis is on the rite of passage of Proserpina from maiden to a woman who is finally mature and fertile, which is symbolised by the pomegranate seeds.<sup>127</sup> In *Surfacing*, the seeds are hollow husks and the emphasis is on the protagonist's search for autonomy, which is the condition that needs to be satisfied if she is to successfully search for her identity. Her refusal to eat the contaminated food of civilisation shows that these searches, however, cannot be completely accomplished as she will eventually need food as well as to reintegrate into society. The myth is therefore rewritten in the intertextual dialogue. Women's subjugation to male control and her debasement and powerlessness are emphasised even more in modern society than in the myth. On the other hand, the story of the surfer underlines the necessity of finding alternatives that imply autonomy of choice and self-determination.

The intertexts of the myth involving Demeter and Persephone and of the myth of the Triple Goddess also underline the potential power that is inherent in the maternal heritage as well as the necessity to accept the dark side of the triad (Hecate) and the frightening, painful descent into the underworld.<sup>128</sup> The recollection of her mother's relation with the animals and the wilderness in a reinterpretation of the fairy tale of



'The White Snake', where this time it is a woman not a man who has the power to speak with the animals, emphasises the authority of her mother's capacities. She is the new myth-maker, the person who can perpetuate the power of storytelling and language and who can guide her to rebirth. But she is also aware of female powerlessness in a male world, the phallogocentric world *aux verges blanches*, where women break their ankles in an attempt to fly, like her mother did when she was young (117).<sup>129</sup>

The reference to the Callisto myth is highlighted by Kathleen Wall, who places particular emphasis on the paradoxical characteristics of the ancient story that is in part reflected in *Surfacing*. The myth is Janus-faced; it is a story about a rape but implies love or passion from Jove's point of view; the wilderness is a place of exile but it is also a retreat, and finally the ending encompasses both death and apotheosis in Callisto's final transformation into a constellation.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, Wall claims that in the final version of the myth there are still elements of positive pre-patriarchal society where a woman's initiation into sexuality is achieved through her right to self-determination.<sup>131</sup> From this perspective, Diana and Callisto 'are one person split into two personages, one mortal, one immortal, one virgin, one soiled'.<sup>132</sup> She is punished and condemned to bestiality even though 'her human feelings remained' as she is afraid of wild beasts such as other bears and wolves.<sup>133</sup> In the evolution of the myth, the patriarchal perspective debases woman's sexuality to bestiality and controls it through rape disguised as passion, similarly to what happens in Persephone's myth. In *Surfacing*, the myth is remythologised from a woman's perspective. The split self of the protagonist, caused by her traumatic experience, is connected to the two personages of the myth, but this time the emphasis is on her capacity for autonomy and self-determination. There are no elements or characters in the story that can help her in this renewal. Her mother is silenced, Joe is a mediator and her father's logic failed her.<sup>134</sup> Hence, her experience is personal and lonely. Her bestiality and her immersion in the wilderness are both a regression and a renewal, as in Callisto's myth, but the emphasis this time is on the protagonist's capacity for transforming into a non-victim, that is, an autonomous, self-aware individual. As Wall states, 'such autonomy must be earned through [...] [the] re-invention' of the rituals, in a vision that implies suffering but also rebirth as well as power and independence.<sup>135</sup>

At the end of the novel, the surfer becomes more and more alive and recovers her feelings as 'pure joy, pure death, burning like white snow' (144). The sense of

Kristeva's *jouissance* is expressed here in the double oxymoron, in the contradictory vision that underlines the necessity to integrate the duplicity of life and death and light and darkness to attain the wholeness of a subject-in-process, as in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. At this point, she rediscovers and reinterprets her own drawings: the woman with the 'round moon stomach' and 'a man with horns on his head' (152). They connect to the gods of the neo-Pagan movement and with the images of the pictographs and the Triple Goddess myth she needs to acknowledge; she needs to accept that she is all three of them in one.<sup>136</sup> She needs to fill the hollow husks with her pregnancy and face her complicit, dark side. The father-god is finally a Horned God, which is similar to an animal and a devil because humans and gods can be both good and bad. This is a similar concept to the one that appears in the Indian legend of the Sky Woman, the Native myth about the origin of the world, in which the twins borne by her daughter represent the two sides of humanity. They are both good and troublesome, because life embraces cooperation and competition, kindness and aggression. The regression to a human-animal creature is then seen in a positive way.<sup>137</sup> It encompasses the good and the bad present in human beings, as the indigenous legends affirm and as the reinterpretation of the Callisto myth testifies.

The reappropriation of the maternal language, of the semiotic *chora*, allows the protagonist's feelings to surface again: she is finally capable of desire and *jouissance*.<sup>138</sup> This not only leads to sexual intercourse with Joe, a performance in love that she leads but also participates in, but also to her transformation, which implies an immersion in the wilderness. Therefore, wilderness is a source of knowledge in *Surfacing* that allows the protagonist to heal her split, traumatised self in her search for authenticity: 'she wishes to be accepted and merge with the land'.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, the concept of wilderness changes in Atwood's work, as Howells states, 'from representing [...] [a] distinctive national space to a much bleaker contemporary revisionary reading, where simple binary nationalist opposition disappear'<sup>140</sup> in the darkness of her own underworld and in the pulverisation of the self.<sup>141</sup> Unrolling the *Random Samples* in the lake is her act of total rebellion that means 'unbottling' Anna and herself and prefigures the final statement: 'This above all, to refuse to be a victim' (185).<sup>142</sup> She is now ready to plunge into her final transformation; it is a movement, a process that dissolves her identity in a poetic language that allows rebirth and which is triggered by the remythologisation of the intertextual reading. Her derangement is total

and she is on the brink of madness, probably triggered by some mushrooms she ate that provoke hallucinations. She bans all products of civilisation and lives in the forest, opening herself up to the power of the gods – to transformation. This allows the protagonist to remove from her mind the obsolete myths of the past and open herself up to new myths, but it also implies a final awareness: the impossibility of surviving in total wilderness, in a state of constant rejection, which would be fatal.

Language is again the signal of this change. She opts for a language that consists of verbs, as in some Indian languages,<sup>143</sup> a language that creates movement, an identity-in-process: 'I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning' (175). She is the landscape itself: 'I am a place' (175), like the 'Thingscapes' in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, which are places the protagonist needs to blend in to in order to understand their essence and acknowledge them as 'My country' (126).<sup>144</sup> Her interpretation of the world is now multiple and inclusive and is acknowledged as such:

From the lake a fish jumps  
 An idea of a fish jumps  
 A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides,  
 no, antlered fish drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit. It  
 hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed  
 again, returned to the water. How many shapes can he take.  
 I watch it for an hour or so; then it drops and softens, the circles  
 widen, it becomes an ordinary fish again. (181)

It is the dissolution of language into poetic language connected to *écriture féminine*, as Kristeva states, that constantly questions the structure of language itself and therefore the rules that uphold it, that is, the societal rules constructed by the dominant society. The language becomes 'almost a non-language'<sup>145</sup> that implies the protagonist's refusal of language in an attempt to transform herself into an animal being, which seems to be the only alternative to the corrupted, desecrated world she has been experiencing in the course of the narration. Nevertheless, living as a 'natural woman' does not seem to be a feasible perspective. Significantly, after multiple transformations, the fish 'becomes an ordinary fish again'. This return to ordinariness after the frightening experience of the underworld, culminating in the apparition of the ghosts of her parents, implies a

renunciation of total wilderness. It is an acknowledgement that the gods she has evoked cannot help her in the end and it is a definite declaration about the absence of transcendence: 'they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus' (183). This brings her back to the necessity of compromising with language and civilisation. The subversive power of the poetic language and of the intertexts exposes the constraints and artificial transcendental rationality of civilisation, but, as Kristeva claims, 'the symbolic function nonetheless maintains its presence'.<sup>146</sup> The 'writer's universe' (as well as the reader's universe) is a 'never-finished, undefined production of a new space of significance' that implies both the semiotic process and the symbolic law.<sup>147</sup> It is a dynamic dialogue that implies the compromise of the open ending, which is more viable than any fictional, ultimate solution.<sup>148</sup>

The surfer may have acquired self-knowledge and self-awareness in the descent into the underworld, in her female heroic journey into the darkness of her frightening traumatised unconscious, but she has to go back into a world that has not changed, similarly to what occurs in *The Edible Woman*, and that is hostile to women. The surfer is returned to a world where women cannot fly, where abortion is a crime and where a single mother is an outcast. In her decision not to be a victim she is aware that she needs constantly to renegotiate her position with her partner Joe who, though not completely civilised and integrated, has shown aggressive attitudes towards her as well as acceptance of her. In the course of the narration, Joe is compared to an animal, a 'buffalo' (2), his back is described as being covered in a sort of fur, thick hairs grow on his toes and he has peasant hands, hands that mould her. Therefore, he is similar to an animal being, a creature the protagonist herself has been transformed into. She responds to his touch and chooses him to impregnate her. Though at the beginning she says coldly that she chose him as she would have chosen a 'cactus plant' or a 'goldfish' (36), she also likes him, his 'body', his 'failure' and his 'purity' (51). They have similarities: he silently questions the rules of civilised society and does not seem to trust language, like the protagonist herself. But he is not a hero or a rescuer. He is incapable of defending her against David and cheats on her with Anna. Nevertheless, precisely because of his many flaws, he seems to represent a possible opportunity for the protagonist and could be the right mediator between her and society.

The end of the novel seems to suggest that the protagonist returns to civilisation, with all the risks implied in this. Her surfacing from and surviving the underworld and her traumatic memories have transformed her thanks to her capacity to develop self-knowledge and self-awareness. This allows her to become a non-victim and triggers a process of self-determination and creativity that should lead towards a more autonomous self. Therefore, in the novel's world of language, where myths are neither transcendental nor eternal but nevertheless are powerful and influence personal and collective narratives, Atwood proposes possible alternatives by exposing the obsolete quality of traditional discourses that need to be reinterpreted and remythologised. Though the protagonist decides to trust Joe in the end, the reader knows that the process of reintegration will be slow and difficult: an incessant mobility and a compromise between her semiotic *chora* and the symbolic function of language. Thus, the novel suggests alternatives but does not give solutions.<sup>149</sup> The woman needs to find the Golden Phoenix inside herself that connects with the frightening and redemptive maternal *chora* so that she can be a creative non-victim. The gods are absent, 'asking and giving nothing' (186). Therefore, woman is alone in her heroic journey, as will be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*; she faces an oppressive society that reshapes her body and effaces her identity. Offred will rise from the ashes through her creative narrative and the reinterpretation of the intertextual connections that express her opposition and expose the contradictions and abuse of the Gileadean discourse.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press, 2002), p. 5. Further references to this text will be placed in parentheses following quotations.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Granofsky, 'Fairy-Tale Morphology in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 3 (Fall 1990), pp. 51-65 (pp. 51-52).

<sup>5</sup> See: Hugh A. Dempsey, *Napi, The Trickster*. (Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary: Heritage House Publishing Company Ltd., 2018), and *American Indian Myths and Legends*, ed. by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Rose Wilson, 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 176-90 (p. 178).

<sup>7</sup> Faye Hammill, *Canadian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> See: Kathleen Wall, *The Callisto Myth from Ovid to Atwood: Initiation and Rape in Literature* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), p. 9, and Mara Lynn, 'The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality, and Rebirth', in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 27-54 (pp. 27-28).

- <sup>9</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney, *Women Writers. Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1987), p. 38.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- <sup>11</sup> Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (1998; Westport, Conn., London: Greenwood Press, 2004), pp. 66-67.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Struggling With Your Angel', interview, 1989, in *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 2006), pp. 172-76 (p. 173).
- <sup>15</sup> Hammill, p. 64.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>18</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), pp. 71-72.
- <sup>19</sup> The text of the poem is available here: < <https://canpoetry.library.utoronto.ca/macewen/poem7.htm> > [accessed 24 June 2020]. The poem was published in the collection *The Shadow-Maker* in 1969.
- <sup>20</sup> The text of the poem is available here: < <https://poets.org/poem/diving-wreck> > [accessed 24 June 2020]. The poem was first published in her collection *Diving into the Wreck* in 1973.
- <sup>21</sup> 'I'm talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost ... Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind.' Atwood, *Survival*, p. 12.
- <sup>22</sup> Indigenous maps were simplified designs the Indians produced from memory and were used all over North America. See: Barbara Belyea, 'Native societies and French colonization', in *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells and Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 9-28 (pp. 19-20).
- <sup>23</sup> Janice Fiamengo, 'Postcolonial Guilt in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, 29 (Spring 1999), pp. 141-63 (p. 144).
- <sup>24</sup> Atwood, *Survival*, pp. xvii and v.
- <sup>25</sup> Sharon Wilson refers to the following fairy tales: 'The Golden Phoenix', 'The Fountain of Youth', 'The Juniper Tree', 'Fitcher's Bird', 'The Robber Bridegroom', 'The Girl without Hands', and 'The White Snake'. Sharon R. Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 97. See also Elizabeth Baer, 'Pilgrimage Inward Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs in *Surfacing*', in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form*, ed. by Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, pp. 24-34 (p. 24). See also Granofsky, p. 51.
- <sup>26</sup> Wall, p. 155 and 175. Kathryn VanSpanckeren, 'Shamanism in the works of Margaret Atwood', in VanSpanckeren and Garden Castro, pp. 183-204 (183-84).
- <sup>27</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949; London: Fontana Press, 1993), pp. 30, 35 and 36-37. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>28</sup> Nathalie Cooke claims that the quest narrative is exaggerated and parodied, and finally inconclusive. Cooke, p. 72-73. Gina Wisker claims that 'the quest is horrific and cathartic'; it valorises 'femininity, nature and the irrational' Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 20, 24. A similar conclusion is in Jane Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts, 1993), p. 40.
- <sup>29</sup> Serenity Young, *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 4.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>32</sup> Cooke, p. 74.
- <sup>33</sup> Annis Pratt, 'Surfacing and the Rebirth Journey', in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays on her Work*, ed. by Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: Anansi, 1981), pp. 139-47 (p. 145).
- <sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Woodcock claims that Atwood puts 'mental toughness and resilience' in opposition to the 'failure syndrome' present in Canadian narratives. He adds that '[i]t is an attempt to come to terms with the reality of the writer's environment'. George Woodcock, *Surfacing to Survive: Notes on the Recent Atwood*, available at < <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/31946> > [accessed 20 September 2019], p. 22.
- <sup>35</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Travels Back', in Margaret Atwood, *Curious pursuits. Occasional writing 1970-2005* (Great Britain: Virago Press, 2008), pp. 7-13 (p. 12).
- <sup>36</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things. The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 35, 44, 64. She ends the book by expressing her environmental concerns about the possible future death of the North.

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- <sup>37</sup> Emily Gilbert, 'Beyond Survival? Wilderness and Canadian National Identity into the Twenty-First Century', in *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 21(2008), pp. 63-88 (p. 65).
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- <sup>39</sup> Cooke, p. 61.
- <sup>40</sup> Gina Wisker, 'Imagining Beyond Extinctation: Indigenous Knowledge, Survival, Speculation – Margaret Atwood's and Ann Patchett's Eco-Gothic' *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 11 (2017), pp. 412-31 (p. 412 and 415).
- <sup>41</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', October, 28, *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 1984, pp. 125-33 (p. 126), available at: <<http://www.marginalutility.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/01.-Bhabha.pdf>> [accessed 15 March 2019].
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 126. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- <sup>44</sup> Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (New York: Zed Books, 2014), p. 5.
- <sup>45</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the international division of labour* (London: Zed Books, 2014), p. 32.
- <sup>46</sup> Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 98.
- <sup>47</sup> Alice M. Palumbo, 'On the border: Margaret Atwood's novels', *Margaret Atwood work and impact*, ed. by Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), 73-86 (p. 73).
- <sup>48</sup> Atwood claims that there is not a Canadian identity ready for the immigrant but only 'a nebulosity, a blank', Atwood, *Survival*, p. 166.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- <sup>50</sup> Quoting Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Atwood remarks on the importance of going from the personal to the universal, *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278. Cooke claims that Atwood suggests nurturing alternatives rather than eliminating them. Cooke, p. 77.
- <sup>52</sup> Hammill, pp. 27-28.
- <sup>53</sup> Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 39.
- <sup>54</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Conversations* (1978; London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 18.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>56</sup> Graeme Gibson identified the presence of a specific subgenre, Southern Ontario Gothic, in his interviews in *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (1973). Authors like Atwood, Munro, Findley and Symons 'share a sense of distinct regional, even mythological, place where horror, murder, and bodily violations are not uncommon'. Life is apparently calm and respectable on the surface but merciless underneath due to the forces of 'Perfectionism, Propriety, Presbyterianism and Prudence', in *The Oxford Companion of Canadian Literature*, ed. by William Toye and Eugene Benson (Ontario: Oxford University Press Canada, 1997), p. 1085.
- <sup>57</sup> Cooke, p. 66, and 74.
- <sup>58</sup> Fiamengo, p. 5.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- <sup>63</sup> Granofsky, p. 52.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52. According to Sander, 'a myth is never transported wholesale into its new context; it undergoes its own metamorphoses in the process'. Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 81.
- <sup>65</sup> Atwood, *Survival*, p. 110.
- <sup>66</sup> 'A tradition doesn't necessarily exist to bury you: it can also be used as material for new departures.' *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- <sup>67</sup> Estella Lauter, 'Margaret Atwood: re-mythologizing Circe' in Estella Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-century Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 62-78.
- <sup>68</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'How Does One Speak to Literature?', in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 92-123 (109).
- <sup>69</sup> Granofsky, p. 54.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>71</sup> 'The Maiden Without Hands', in *The Complete Fairy Tales of The Brothers Grimm*, trans. by Jack Zipes (New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam Books, 1992), pp. 118-123.

<sup>72</sup> Cinda Gault, "'Not Even a Hospital': Abortion and Identity Tension in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*", *Atlantis*, 32.1 (2007) pp. 16-17. Available at:

<<http://journals.msvu.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/viewFile/1146/1080>> [accessed 20 June 2018].

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>74</sup> Atwood, *Survival*, pp. 27, 30 and 35.

<sup>75</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'How Does One Speak to Literature?' p. 113. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>76</sup> *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 12-13.

<sup>77</sup> Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylogue', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 159-209 (p. 175).

<sup>78</sup> 'Le désir est la notion qui tombe comme représentation la plus fidèle de ce télescope de la négativité dans l'unité', Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1977), p. 115.

<sup>79</sup> Kristeva, 'How Does One Speak to Literature?', p. 109.

<sup>80</sup> The surfer's breakdown is connected to other female characters' experience in literature where madness leads to self-awareness, as in the short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. This is also highlighted in the analysis of Western literature in the seminal work by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; London: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>81</sup> Kristeva, 'How Does One Speak to Literature?', p. 114. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>82</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to Another', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 124-47 (p. 135). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>83</sup> Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup> Hammill reports that according to the Massey Commission (1951) 'Canada was culturally threatened by the United States'. Hammill, p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> Granofsky, p. 55.

<sup>86</sup> *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper and Jan Peter Laurens Looers (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020), pp. 33 and 36.

<sup>87</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in *New Formations*, n. 5, (Summer 1988), pp. 5-23 (p. 20). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>91</sup> The desecration and littering of the country are also present in some of the poems of the collection *Animals in that Country* published in 1968; see 'Backdrop addresses cowboy', 'The surveyors', 'The festival', and 'At the tourist centre in Boston'.

<sup>92</sup> Hammill, p. 143.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>94</sup> David uses abusive expressions such as 'split beaver' (113), 'cunt on four legs' (145) and 'tight-ass bitch' (146). In *Power Politics*, published in 1971, Atwood explores the warfare between a couple by exposing the sadomasochistic quality and the ambivalence and complicity of relationships, which are consequences of the constructed roles imposed by the narratives of society. The links with *Surfacing* are numerous and occur at both linguistic and thematic levels in poems such as 'My beautiful wooden leader', 'They are hostile Nations', 'Returning from the dead' and 'He is last seen'. The poems suggest that this kind of relationship is not only abusive and diminishing for women but it is also a constraint for men that inhibits freer and happier relations. See also Woodcock, p. 17.

<sup>95</sup> Kristeva, 'How Does One Speak to Literature?', p. 111.

<sup>96</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* (1949), trans. by Alan Sheridan. Available at

<[https://nosubject.com/The\\_mirror\\_stage\\_as\\_formative\\_of\\_the\\_function\\_of\\_the\\_I](https://nosubject.com/The_mirror_stage_as_formative_of_the_function_of_the_I)> [accessed 20 June 2018].

<sup>97</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 45.

<sup>98</sup> Brooks Bouson, p. 42.

<sup>99</sup> Atwood, *Strange Things*, p. 83.

<sup>100</sup> Julia Kristeva and Catherine Clément, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (1998; New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 16. See also Kristeva, 'From One Identity to an Other': 'paternal function represents sacrificial function', p. 138.

<sup>101</sup> Hammerson Peters, *Legend of the Nahanni Valley* (Hammerson Peters via PublishDrive, 2019), p. 316.

<sup>102</sup> Shead claims that 'abortion is the result not the cause, of her complicity'. Shead, p. 53.

<sup>103</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 49.



- <sup>104</sup> Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood, Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 45.
- <sup>105</sup> Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 65.
- <sup>106</sup> Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 42.
- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- <sup>108</sup> 'An Interview with Margaret Atwood 20 April 1983', in VanSpanckeren and Garden Castro, pp. 215-232 (224). See also Selwyn Dewdney, *Indian rock paintings of the Great Lakes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).
- <sup>109</sup> The power of the visual sign is further explored in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*.
- <sup>110</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Language the Unknown: an initiation into Linguistics*, trans. by Anne M. Menke (1969; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp.24-25. Kristeva identifies this 'type of concrete language' in the writing system of the Chinese and the North American Indians.
- <sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>112</sup> Lyle Campbell, *American Indian Languages: The Historical Linguistics of Native America* (1997; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 9. Interestingly, a Sioux medicine man, Leonard Crow Dog, stated that 'our modern Sioux language has been white-manized. There's no power in it. I get my knowledge [...] above all out of the ancient words of the grandfathers, the language that was there at the beginning of time'. Erdoes, Ortiz, p. xiii.
- <sup>113</sup> Giorgio R. Cadorna, *Antropologia della scrittura* (Torino: Loescher, 1981), p. 34.
- <sup>114</sup> Branko Gorjup, 'Paradox of discourse in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', in *Margaret Atwood: Essays on her Work*, ed. by Branko Gorjup (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2008), pp. 42-54 (p. 49).
- <sup>115</sup> See Tolan, p. 49, and Wall, p. 166 and 170.
- <sup>116</sup> In 'Five Poems for Grandmothers' from the collection *Two-Headed Poems*, published in 1978, Atwood underlines the absence of recognition of the hard work of her silenced women ancestors and their consequent anger: 'Sons branch out, but/one woman leads to another. [...] Is this you, this edgy joke/I make [...] is this your outraged/eye, this grip/that will not give up?'
- <sup>117</sup> Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1980), p. 103.
- <sup>118</sup> Wall, p. 157.
- <sup>119</sup> In the poem 'Procedures for Underground', there is a connection to the Demeter and Persephone myth and to the surfer's story when the lyric voice warns 'never to eat their food' and that as a consequence of the descent into the underworld, 'For this gift, as for all gifts, you must/suffer.' Margaret Atwood, *Procedures for Underground* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 25.
- <sup>120</sup> I am considering Ovid's version of the myth as it is the most popular one. Besides, according to Johnston, the different versions of the Demeter and Persephone myth 'adhere nearly perfectly to a single pattern plot'. Sarah Iles Johnston, 'Demeter, Myths, and the Polyvalence of Festivals', *History of Religions*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (May 2013), pp. 370-401 (p. 374).
- <sup>121</sup> I am using the Latin names of the gods and characters, as in Ovid's version.
- <sup>122</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1936), trans. by Frank Justus Miller, vol. 1, p. 265.
- <sup>123</sup> Sherrill Grace claims that 'loss' and 'silence' are the keynotes of *Surfacing*. Sherrill E. Grace, 'In search of Demeter The Lost, Silent Mother in *Surfacing*', in VanSpanckeren and Garden Castro, pp. 35-47 (p. 36).
- <sup>124</sup> The *Homeric Hymn* to Demeter (7<sup>th</sup> century BC) emphasises the rape using verbs connected to the violence of war and thievery. Mara Lynn Keller, 'The Eleusian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality, and Rebirth' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 27-54 (p. 44).
- <sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- <sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- <sup>127</sup> Interestingly, Bruce Lincoln points out that in the *Homeric Hymn* to Demeter, the word *kokkos* can mean both 'testicle' and 'seed'. Bruce Lincoln, 'The Rape of Persephone: A Greek Scenario of Woman's initiation' *The Harvard Theological Review*, 72 (July-October 1979), pp. 223-235 (234).
- <sup>128</sup> See Adam McLean, *The Triple Goddess: An Exploration of the Archetypal Feminine* (Michigan, USA: Phanes Press, 1989), pp. 10, 15 and 27. See also Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Goddess and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 14, 15, 23, 46, and 264. McLean claims that the Demeter-Persephone myth reveals the triad Demeter-Persephone-Hecate where Hecate is the Goddess of the underworld. McLean, p. 62.
- <sup>129</sup> The idea of indigenous societies where women had major power and that there were matriarchal societies in the past are unproved constructions. Furthermore, women were excluded from knowledge and from initiation into society and leadership in general. See: *Matriarcato e Potere alle Donne*, ed. by

Ida Magli (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1982), pp. 11, 17, 22 and 35. However, in a word of language, the myth of the Triple Goddess has paramount significance as it testifies to the need for modern narratives to remythologise the stories of the people regardless of their 'reality', which is never taken for granted.

<sup>130</sup> Wall, p. 9.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>133</sup> Ovid, pp. 93, 95.

<sup>134</sup> Wall, p. 161, 166, 167. The surfer claims that 'there are no longer any rational points of view.'  
(163)

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>136</sup> Atwood connects here to the movements involving the Horned God and the Goddess of the Wicca, New Age and neo-pagan movements that emerged in Britain and America in the 1950s and 1960s. These movements are also linked to the Goddess Movement, to ecofeminism and to American Indian religions and traditions. They all share concern for the environment being menaced by the anthropocentric mentality. See: *Belief beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic spirituality and the new age*, ed. by Joanne Pearson (Aldershot: Ashgate in association with the Open University, 2002); Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London, New York: Zed Books, 2014); *Religion and Diversity in Canada*, ed. by Lori G. Beaman and Peter Beyer (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008).

<sup>137</sup> Baer, p. 27.

<sup>138</sup> Women's narratives express '[t]he need to reinvent reality so that it conforms more closely to narratives of desire is a strong imaginative imperative, as well as an act of optimism'. Coral Ann Howells, *Contemporary Canadian women's fiction: refiguring identities*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 203.

<sup>139</sup> Fiamengo, p. 149.

<sup>140</sup> Coral Ann Howells, 'It all depends on where you stand in relation to the forest'. 'Atwood and the Wilderness from *Surfacing* to *Wilderness Tips*,' in *Various Atwoods*, ed. by Lorraine M. York, (Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1995), pp.47-70, (p. 48).

<sup>141</sup> See Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylogue', p. 175: 'Within the text taken as a whole, which is neither poem nor novel but *polylogue*, both pulverizing and multiplying unity through rhythm, the unpunctuated but metrical sentence finds its justification.'

<sup>142</sup> The allusion to *Hamlet*, I. 3. 78, 'This above all: to thine own self be true', which can be interpreted as a call for the surfer to look for an alternative self though the ambiguity of the statement, lingers both in Shakespeare's play and in Atwood's novel. In fact, in both stories 'truth' is revealed by dreams, ghosts and memories, which are personal and unreliable visions. The refusal to be a victim seems to be only the start of a long unending process.

<sup>143</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 92.

<sup>144</sup> The poetry collection *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, published in 1970, has many parallels with *Surfacing*, especially in terms of the experience of the protagonist in accepting Canada as her own country, a transformation that implies a plunge into the underworld, which is, in the case of Mrs Moodie, both internal and external. The difficulty in deciphering the landscape and the resistance to the different logic of the wilderness are explored in both works, as is the capacity to acquire a 'double voice', which is a positive duplicity that brings wisdom and knowledge. Grace, p. 39.

<sup>145</sup> Gorjup, p. 50.

<sup>146</sup> Kristeva, 'From One Identity to an Other', p. 134.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., pp. 135 and 139-40.

<sup>148</sup> Cooke, p. 77.

<sup>149</sup> The experimentation with language employed in *Surfacing* is dropped by Atwood in her later novels. She opts for a mainstream kind of narrative that maintains disruptive, parodic characteristics but does not break completely with tradition, as happens in part in *Surfacing*.

## Chapter 4

### **Bodily Sight: *The Handmaid's Tale***

And after this I saw with my bodily sight.

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 1670

You could not believe I was more than your echo.

Margaret Atwood, 'Orpheus (1)', *Interlunar*, 1984

In Offred's struggle to survive, the 'dialogic thought' she engages in via her memories and her interconnections with the Gileadean propagandistic discourse generate a creative reconstruction of her fragmented self. It is a process of transformation that allows her a temporary survival in the oppressive theocratic Republic of Gilead. Her language is disciplined, her voice is silenced and her body is used as a commodity to procreate in a disturbing dystopian, or anti-utopic,<sup>1</sup> society which emerged from a utopic religious experiment. Nevertheless, she survives, resisting, adapting and finally opposing Gilead's rules, playing between the gaps of apparent outward acceptance of her role and secret transgression. She manages to create her own role eventually, different from the one the society assigned her, in a relentless operation of remembering the past and rewriting her life in Gilead. She survives, though provisionally, in spite of the violence that surrounds her and the risks she takes in transgressing the rules of Gilead. She not only exposes the contradictions, abuse and atrocities she witnesses in parodic and ironic discourses,<sup>2</sup> she also revises Gileadean narratives through a complex network of allusions and intertextual references. At the same time, the novel presents these brutalities as they are and encourages Offred's future reader to engage with them critically and to deconstruct them as well as to take a stand.

The novel challenges the narratives of the Gileadean dystopic regime in an attempt to rewrite them from a female point of view, as Atwood claims in her essay 'George Orwell: Some Personal Connections'<sup>3</sup>. She adds that 'this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a "feminist dystopia"' and emphasises the different perspective of the novel compared with dystopian classics; above all, she refers to her direct model, that is, to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>4</sup> She not only started to write *The Handmaid's Tale* in

1984 but also mentions Orwell's essay on Newspeak that she connects to the 'Historical Notes'. According to Atwood, this connection reveals a positive view that is embedded both in Orwell's essay and in the 'Historical Notes'. In fact, 'the essay is written in standard English, in the third person, and in the past tense, which can only mean that the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived'.<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, the 'Historical Notes' reveal that the Gilead regime is over and that it is now the object of academic study. This connection also emphasises the importance of language in Atwood's novel, which is connected to the intertextual dialogue and to the disruptive function and polyphonic quality of the novel. Kristeva claims that:

'[P]oetic language' ... is an unsettling process – when not an outright destruction – of the identity of meaning and speaking subject, and consequently, of transcendence or, by derivation of 'religious sensibility.'<sup>6</sup>

[T]he poetic function departs from the signified and the transcendental ego and makes of what is known as 'literature' something other than knowledge: the very place where social code is destroyed and renewed.<sup>7</sup>

[This] produces in poetic language 'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself.<sup>8</sup>

Kristeva calls this disruptive and heterogenous disposition semiotic and links it to the maternal *chora*, which is anterior to naming and to the father's law.<sup>9</sup> The narratives that Offred develops in the novel unsettle the constraints of Gilead and of civilisation in general, suggesting a rhythm that is multifaceted and polyphonic. Offred's identity is shattered, dissolved by the regime, and this allows her the possibility of a renewal which is accomplished through the intertextual dialogue and through language, as will be seen in this chapter. The exploration of the world around her through her senses, her 'bodily sight', allows her survival and a different perspective that questions, challenges and opposes the Gileadean narratives. This alternative perspective proposes a different way of being human, a new ontological view that is linked to the intertextual dialogue at a linguistic level. It pulverises the subject, a subject-in-process, as Kristeva claims,<sup>10</sup>

and renews it through the maternal *chora*, which is linked to *écriture féminine*. This alternative vision is opposed to the propaganda of Gilead, which is exposed and challenged in the novel through the intertextual references. It is a disruptive, multifaceted vision that is always in flux and opposed to the dichotomous view of Gilead, where the intertextual references are manipulated, misquoted and mutilated in order to validate the regime's policy. The regime's discourse does not have a referent but is mere propaganda that is used to control and exploit the subjects. In a similar way, Newspeak means changing people's way of thinking; it rewrites the language, eliminating concepts that are related to the *oldspeak*, such as words like freedom. It is a constructed language with political purposes that controls people's thoughts, that is, the main source of dissent. In Gilead, this control is exerted through the narratives, especially through the biblical discourse, as will be seen in this chapter. Differently from Newspeak, in which the vocabulary is reduced to a minimum in order to lessen ambiguity and the possibility of expressing dissent, Gilead manipulates biblical, literary and mythical narratives, emptying them of their meaning and using them to publicise the regime. In this way, they maintain their power without being concerned about possible linguistic or textual contradictions and ambiguities. It goes without saying that their power is also maintained through threats to and the oppression and execution of dissenters and transgressors. Nevertheless, these ambiguities already exist at the origin of the traditional discourses, as will be seen in the intertextual analysis in this chapter, for example in the biblical references. The dichotomous view is therefore denied at the root and a multifaceted perspective is proposed.

### **The exploration of the world through body language**

Offred's discourse opposes Gilead through the polyphonic expression of her body language that explores the world around her through her senses. Her fragmented narrative is interspersed with flashbacks and constantly questions the novel's intertextual references, parodying and revising them in order to propose a different view, a female perspective, as Atwood claims. Survival is therefore attained through the female body which expresses a polyphony that engages the protagonist at intellectual and physical levels; it deconstructs Gileadean 'truths' and envisages different interpretations. Thus, traditional stories can be reinterpreted as myths that are not eternal or transcendent but historical.<sup>11</sup> As Atwood claims, referring to Northrop

Frye's theories, myths are stories, but stories 'of a certain kind'.<sup>12</sup> They are serious stories that build identity and shape the culture of a country. Hence, though they can be revised, they maintain a power that cannot be completely erased; it emerges in art or political ideologies, according to Atwood.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the intertextual dialogue between the novel and biblical stories, myths, fairy tales and literary texts proposes a different vision, a female perspective that rebels against the linguistic manipulations expressed in *Gilead* and proposes alternatives that deconstruct traditional discourses in the Gileadean context. These alternatives open up different interpretations which are non-dichotomous and in flux.

As will be seen in this chapter, the crucial intertexts for my argument are some passages from the Bible, myths and fairy tales, such as 'Cinderella', 'Little Red Cap',<sup>14</sup> and Orpheus and Eurydice's myth; Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, specifically 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' and its Prologue, 'The Clerk's Tale' (which also refers to Boccaccio's and Petrarch's versions of the same story), 'The Second Nun's Tale'; and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I will consider allusions, songs and music, poetry, language puns and some dystopian or anti-utopian works.

In my study I will not consider the 1990 film adaptation and the Hulu TV series as they are much too detached from the novel and their interpretation deviates substantially from Atwood's story. The 1990 film adaptation, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, focuses on the protagonist's sexual life and her affair with Nick. The ending is very different from that of the novel, as in the film Offred kills the Commander and is rescued by the Mayday organisation, for which she starts to work. The first season of the Hulu TV series, created by Bruce Miller, portrays Offred as an active rebel and dissenter; she takes part in demonstrations against Gilead before the regime takes power and expresses her view, outwardly supporting Moira's plan to escape. As will be seen in this chapter, this does not occur in the novel, in which the protagonist never acts against Gilead and keeps her comments and criticism secret. The second and third Hulu seasons are not based on the novel. Besides, according to Atwood, 'films are a different medium' from novels as they are 'made with images, not words' and 'can only handle two or three levels of meaning' and of time, and 'can't handle metaphor'.<sup>15</sup> According to Glen Willmott, the film reverses the condition of time compared with the novel: '[t]ime is not free in the movie, but is absolutely conditioned by the medium'.<sup>16</sup>

Willmott also claims that '[t]he translation of the novel to film empties it of the "conversational" form constructed in its temporal dimension of freedom. What we see is what we get, the visible surface of the novel.'<sup>17</sup> For these reasons, I opted not to comment on or analyse the filmic adaptations.

The novel is positioned in a dialogue with a wide ranging but specific network of texts from cult dystopian novels, such as *We, Nineteen Eighty-Four, Brave New World, A Clockwork Orange* and *Things to Come*, to works by Shakespeare, Chaucer, Boccaccio, More, Swift, Hawthorne, and the Bible, myths and fairy tales.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, there are mentions of and connections with the poetry of Tennyson and Milton, hymns and pop songs, Descartes, Freud, Marx, Beethoven, the Puritanism of the American Founding Fathers, totalitarian regimes, such as those built on Nazism and Stalinism, South American far-right governments and Iranian theocracy, as well as the writing of mystics such as Julian of Norwich. This gives the work a wide cultural breadth and a precise critical and ontological strategy. The extensive intertextual connections and allusions testify to the vast cultural dialogue that the book establishes with the past and the present, despite Offred's claims that it is a fragmented and incomplete recollection of female writing.<sup>19</sup> These connections also point to the necessary and undeniable legacy the novel establishes with past works and events in a reinterpretation that makes the novel relevant to the present day.<sup>20</sup> The ironic and parodic use of intertexts and allusions not only highlights the message of the story but also emphasises the necessity of rewriting certain narratives; here the Bible is considered to be at the same level as myths, fairy tales and fictional works.<sup>21</sup> In fact, according to Atwood, 'Mythology precedes religion. What we usually mean by religion is theology and ritual.' These stories speak about the origin of the world and how people 'should or should not behave, but those stories are not consistent [...] the Bible is full of such examples'.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the intertextual references both expose the incongruities of the mythical and biblical narratives according to what occurs in the Gileadean world and invite the reader to deconstruct them in a critical engagement with the story of abuse in the totalitarian regime. The social context refers to totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany, Stalin's USSR, Ceausescu's Romania and the Philippines, as well as the Puritan New England of the Founding Pilgrim Fathers.

The novel also presents an intertextual connection at language level with the language of the mystics. According to the Victim Positions that Atwood explains in *Survival*,<sup>23</sup> Offred certainly progresses from Victim Position three to position four as a creative non-victim, especially in her creative storytelling and in her love affair with Nick, which defies the rules of the regime.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, I argue that she is also in Victim Position five, the mystic. Atwood does not analyse position five in depth as she thinks 'mystics do not as a rule write books'.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Offred is not a proper 'writer' as she records her story, which is an oral account that is similar to those of the storytellers and mystics whose stories and visions were written down by scribes. Furthermore, as will be seen, she acquires knowledge and consequently power via her exploration of her body and her use of all her senses to understand the world around her. This strategy guarantees her self-awareness and self-control as well as temporary survival. For this reason, I adopt the expression 'bodily sight' used by the English mystic Julian of Norwich. In her *Revelation of Divine Love*, the mystic describes her experience of 'bodily sight, by words formed in my understanding and spiritual sight';<sup>26</sup> it is through involving both her body and her soul that the mystic encounters Christ as a mother who nourishes her children through her wounds. In a similar way, Offred experiences a bodily understanding which is not spiritual but physical and intellectual at the same time. I argue that this is connected to Victim Position five, to the mystics and to the practice of *écriture féminine*. *Écriture féminine* emphasises the disruptive and heterogeneous quality of the semiotic discourse that is linked to a pre-Oedipal state and to the unsettling maternal *chora*, as Kristeva claims. It has a transgressive function in the novel and works in parallel with the intertextual dialogue. Cixous remarks:

It is necessary that woman writes via her body, that she invents the magnificent language that kills separation, classes, and rhetoric, orders and codes.<sup>27</sup>

Writing is the possibility of change itself, the space where a subversive thought can start, the front-runner movement of the transformation of social and cultural structures.<sup>28</sup>

This is what Offred accomplishes in her narrative that opposes, criticises and disrupts Gileadean discourse through the intertextual dialogue within the novel. Through her



senses, that is, through her 'bodily sight', she explores the world around her, acquires knowledge and expresses understanding in the dialogue with the intertexts that question and challenge Gilead. In this way, she also acquires power that grants her survival, though this survival is provisional.

Atwood sets the atmosphere of the novel in 'Writing Utopia'.<sup>29</sup> She claims in the essay that utopian worlds can easily turn into dystopian ones; besides, she considers *The Handmaid's Tale* 'speculative fiction' rather than a dystopian novel, that is, 'there is [...] nothing in the book without a precedent'.<sup>30</sup> She adds that utopias can be only imagined, while dystopias are more believable as they are 'like dire warnings on present situations'<sup>31</sup>. She also remarks that many examples of dystopias are present in monotheistic cultures, such as those in Plato's *Republic*, Marxism and the Book of Revelation, and she refers to literary classics such as *Gulliver's Travels*, *News from Nowhere*, *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Herland*. She acknowledges that she did all the 'required readings' such as books on the Second World War, for example Churchill's memoirs and a biography of Rommel, and books on the history of seventeenth-century Puritans, whom she considers to be her ancestors. She highlights what Perry Miller claims, which is that Puritans were more interested in practising their religion rather than opening it up to other people and tended to banish or hang the so-called heretics.<sup>32</sup> Atwood made up the word 'ustopia', which combines utopia and dystopia, because in her view 'each contains a latent version of the other'.<sup>33</sup> According to Atwood, ustopia is a state of mind and implies two journeys, one journey to visit a place and one back, so that the storyteller can report what they have witnessed.<sup>34</sup> What Atwood highlights in her essay is the fact that dystopias and utopias are not the opposite of each other but there is always a little utopia concealed in every dystopia and vice versa. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are two little utopias, according to Atwood, that is, the past that Offred remembers and the future when Gilead has ended.

Atwood kept a scrapbook that contains clippings from newspapers and other documents testifying to the abuse inflicted by totalitarian regimes in past and present societies.<sup>35</sup> In 'times of oppression', Offred is the voice of the storyteller who plays the part of the fool with a 'goose-face', which links her to Mother Goose, the feather-bodied sirens and Scheherazade, a Sybil figure; she negotiates her story with the audience and the listeners become accomplices.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, there is a tension between

'acquiescence on the one hand and rebellion on the other'.<sup>37</sup> As Calvino claims, the storyteller repeats the traditional plot of the fairy tale but at the same time changes it almost unintentionally, mixing respect for conventions and 'libertà inventiva' (inventive freedom).<sup>38</sup> In this way the narrator eludes the constraints of tradition and produces their own version of the story, speaking about 'ciò che gli sta a cuore' (what they care about). In a similar way, Atwood acknowledges her connections with the literary tradition of creating dystopias and other classics as well as fairy tales and myths, confirming the position of the narrator as a witness who voices a rebellion against the system transforming its stories.

According to Atwood, witnessing is implied in the act of writing, as she claims in *Second Words*:

Writing is [...] a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling. It is a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word. It is also a witnessing. *Come with me*, the writer is saying to the reader. *There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know*. The writer is both an eye-witness and I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens, and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer *bears witness*.<sup>39</sup>

A similar point of view is expressed in her poem 'Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written':<sup>40</sup>

V

The facts of this world seen clearly  
are seen through tears;  
why tell me then  
there is something wrong with my eyes?

To see clearly and without flinching,  
without turning away,  
this is agony, the eyes taped open  
two inches from the sun.

What is it you see then?

Is it a bad dream, a hallucination?

Is it a vision?

What is it you hear?

The razor across the eyeball

is a detail from an old film.

It is also a truth.

Witness is what you must bear.

Offred witnesses the atrocities of Gilead and presents them to the reader; she creates alternatives that not only speak about what is important to her but also challenge the narratives of the dominant society. She uses intertexts and allusions in a parodic way to expose the incongruities and offer possible alternative visions. This engages the readers in a process of critical thinking about the world that surrounds them, that is, a world of language, but it also refers to a 'real' world where things have happened and might happen again. Atwood's technique of both referring to a physical world and revising myths, fairy tales and literary classics provides space for a rethinking of the rules and roles in the dominant society and questions the readers about their position in this world as well as about power relations.<sup>41</sup>

This links to Riffaterre, who claims that the 'rhetorical transformation' of the narrative guides the reader's interpretation and constructs a system of 'verisimilitude' that conforms with ideological models.<sup>42</sup>

Rather, truth in fiction rests on verisimilitude, a system of representations that seems to reflect a reality external to the texts, but only because it conforms to a grammar. Narrative truth is an idea of truth created in accordance with the rules of that grammar. These rules implement a principle of substitutability: by virtue of this principle, any verbal given will seem to be true when it generates tautological derivations that repeat it in successive synonym forms.<sup>43</sup>

[V]erisimilitude is an artifact, since it is a verbal representation of reality rather than reality itself: verisimilitude itself, therefore, entails, fictionality.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, there is a grammar that the text needs to conform to, that is, the rules of 'reality' that are, paradoxically, artefacts created by language: they are a 'fictional truth'. This concept of verisimilitude implies, as Atwood claims, that 'I would not put into this book anything that humankind had not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools.'<sup>45</sup> In the intertextual dialogue within the text, 'fictional truth' is therefore produced when the reader is guided in decoding the text and is simultaneously engaged in creating new interpretations. This entails the revision of traditional narratives and engages the reader in critical thinking. In Hutcheon's critical perspective, this revision is prompted by the novel's narratives and invites the readers to take a stand against the abuse of oppressive regimes, as will be seen in the 'Historical Notes' at the end of the novel.

Critics have highlighted the importance of intertexts and allusions in different ways, underlining all the possible connections, but have rarely analysed them in depth as that was not the aim of their studies. Sharon Rose Wilson claims that Atwood's works are 'filled with literary, political, and historical allusions, and subtle in their use of symbolism, parody, and satire'.<sup>46</sup> Her protagonists survive as 'tricksters and creators' and expose the hypocrisies and contradictions of the world they live in.<sup>47</sup> According to Wilson, the intertexts create a network of meanings through the 'poetic inversion'; they undermine 'conventional thought patterns, attitude, values, or textual norms by turning them on their heads'.<sup>48</sup> This leads to 'a prismatic multiplication of sense' that has the implicit power to 'transform the perception of reality'.<sup>49</sup> The intertextual references 'deconstruct stereotypical conceptions' and 'binary oppositions';<sup>50</sup> they expose and uncover the traditional subtext using parodic techniques.<sup>51</sup> The emphasis is on transformation but also on saving human culture in a wider perspective, which implies a 'tenacious survival' and 'constant metamorphosis'.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, Atwood uses postmodern techniques that simultaneously challenge and confirm the narratives of the dominant society. She challenges them, exposing their inconsistencies and hypocrisies, but confirms their power, which is 'interior to society', as Sheckels claims by referring to Foucault.<sup>53</sup> This 'multifaceted interplay between explicit and implicit meaning'<sup>54</sup>

leads to multiple readings, resulting in a 'polyphonic concept of language' that Sheckels, referring to Kristeva, considers feminine and which is 'opposed to the more masculine univocal language Gilead is trying to insist upon'.<sup>55</sup> In fact, as Kristeva remarks in her interview 'Unes Femmes', women are open to questioning identities and affirming inherent contradictions in the system, and this acts as counter-power.<sup>56</sup> This results in Offred's multiple versions of the same events and in her acceptance of contradictory interpretations. She fights for survival by deconstructing and reconstructing different versions of the same story in a dynamic way, intentionally confusing the incongruous narratives of the oppressive world she lives in.<sup>57</sup> Through intertextual references and allusions, the novel emphasises the corruption and perverted use of power in Gilead and suggests, in Offred's narration, possible alternatives and changes.

### **The Bible as a tool of propaganda**

Intertextual quotations and intentional misquotations from the Bible underline the manipulative, deceitful and oppressive quality of Gilead, to which Offred opposes her narrative of attentive observation and exploration of the world through the senses in an attempt to survive. Her polyphonic, multifaceted vision deconstructs the dichotomous view of Gilead, proposes different visions and opposes them to the empty and propagandistic view of the regime. As will be seen, the dichotomous view is repeatedly deconstructed in the novel, exposing the contradictions inherent in the narratives of Gilead and in the use and abuse of the biblical discourse. The ancestors of Gilead are identified as the Puritan Founding Fathers who landed in New England in the first half of the seventeenth century (41). This idea is also present in the dedication of the book to Atwood's ancestor Mary Webster and to Professor Perry Miller.<sup>58</sup> In an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Atwood also claims that 'the mind-set of Gilead is really close to that of the seventeenth-century Puritans'.<sup>59</sup> In this way Atwood intends to connect the story to a past that has a precise historical context but which is also reflected in the present, precisely in her concern about a far-right religious revival in the 1980s in the US.<sup>60</sup> The historical context refers to the Puritans who followed the religious teachings of John Calvin and established their communities in the American colonies. They were against the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and intended to 'purify' the Church of England as well.<sup>61</sup> Similarly to those living in Gilead, the Puritans lived in

separated communities; they wanted to build 'a city upon a hill', a model of charity for the old world, where the Scriptures were the only source of authority and only one interpretation was permitted.<sup>62</sup> John Cotton, in his sermon 'Christ the Fountain of Life',<sup>63</sup> delineated the importance of 'diligence in worldly business, and yet deadness to the world'. This concept was subsequently neglected by the following generations and confused with mere success in this world.<sup>64</sup> As Gaskill remarks, probably 'most of them were seeking economic opportunity rather than religious liberty in the new world'.<sup>65</sup> In Offred's narratives, this notion of purity is exposed and criticised in the intertextual dialogue, which challenges the Commander's claim that the regime meant to improve and 'return things to Nature's norm' (232), that is, a 'return to traditional values' (17).

In a similar perspective, the novel also refers to the Christian Right movement<sup>66</sup> that gained visibility and power during the Reagan presidency (1980–1984). It did not endorse any particular party but supported the candidates that represented its values. Reagan, with his political programme of free enterprise, limited government, anti-communism and individual responsibility, represented what the Conservative Christians believed would bring economic progress. In America in the late 1970s there was a period of 'economic stagnation and high inflation'; Reagan's 'optimistic rhetoric of America's potential' brought hope and eventually economic growth, and an increase in employment.<sup>67</sup> It was also a period when the ideas of revolutionary socialism spread around the world, causing concern for the conservative leadership. These ideas were opposed and considered immoral by the Christian Right. They thought that 'there was nothing inherent in capitalism which made exploitation and corruption necessary or unavoidable'.<sup>68</sup> One of its leaders, Jerry Falwell, co-founder of Moral Majority in 1979,<sup>69</sup> thought that 'Jesus Christ made it clear that the work ethic was part of His plan for man' and that '[o]wnership of property is biblical. Competition in business is biblical'.<sup>70</sup> Moral Majority members supported capitalist entrepreneurship as they believed it would bring prosperity, though condemned corruption and indiscriminate consumerism. Besides, according to them, 'welfarism' risked undermining the importance of hard work and was not the right solution to help the poor.<sup>71</sup> Falwell and other conservative Christian leaders gained great support from the population as many Americans attended conservative services rather than those held at mainstream churches.<sup>72</sup> In America's competitive free market of religion, they expanded and gained

power, thanks also to the new electronic technology, that is, cable television and computerised mailing.<sup>73</sup> In the light of these new technological developments, Timothy Raphael also claims that the importance of performance and the production of images and electronic media became crucial in the Reagan presidency. The relationship between culture and politics changed and Reagan 'was the first to fully exploit the techno of performance and the network of electronic media as principal modes of governance'.<sup>74</sup> This introduced a process of 'representation by substitution' where the leader is a staged character.<sup>75</sup> According to Raphael, the Republican National Convention in 1984 was a trade show that launched Reagan as a product for the consumers watching on TV;<sup>76</sup> this emphasised the aesthetic side of a commodity-based market stimulated by a desire for the brand.<sup>77</sup>

Therefore, Conservative Christians supported Reaganomics, believing that the cutting of taxes for the richest and the reduction in government regulations would bring economic improvement and create jobs.<sup>78</sup> In this scenario, they claimed, along with pro-life movements, that it was time 'to put God back in government'.<sup>79</sup> Reagan's presidential campaign also supported pro-life movements and anti-abortion movements,<sup>80</sup> starting 'an era of backlash against women's rights'.<sup>81</sup> Faludi remarks that 'the backlash is at once sophisticated and banal, deceptively "progressive" and proudly backward'.<sup>82</sup> This connects to the Gileadean world, where claims about protecting women simply control their sexuality and eventually lead to segregation. Moral Majority aimed to reverse the tide of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s by targeting abortion, homosexuality, which was considered 'unnatural' and 'evil', and the ERA (the Equal Rights Amendment).<sup>83</sup> This vision was shared by Reagan, who had an evangelical background and was supported by the conservative wing of the Catholic church.<sup>84</sup> This politics had a huge economic impact because it led to the social programme budget being cut, targeting 'single mothers and poor minority women'.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the anti-feminist backlash extended 'from abortion to all aspects of sexual freedom and alternatives to traditional (patriarchal) family life' and was linked to 'the anti-social welfare backlash'.<sup>86</sup>

The parallels with the context of Gilead are manifest at a religious level and in relation to media propaganda. In Gilead, the Commander's wife is a singer who used to perform on television and who supported the fundamentalist Christian sect that eventually

gained power through her performances and speeches. Offred maliciously states that she must be furious 'now that she's been taken at her word' (56). The sect claims to support traditional moral values based on the Bible and its governance in Gilead is reinforced by images and performative acts such as the birth and impregnation ceremonies, Salvaging and Particicution respectively. These rituals have an aesthetic side as well as a disturbing and horrific one. The Commander's wife is now a victim, like all women, of the regime; she is voiceless and bored. The novel's critique and exposure of the Puritan beliefs, which have been debased in modern society, and the reference to the Christian Right movement, are on both a fictional and a historical level in the intertextual discourse of the novel. In fact, via Atwood's use of biblical intertexts in Offred's narrative, the novel suggests that the quotations and misquotations from the Bible are void of meaning, mere propaganda in Gilead. Religious fundamentalism, reflected in the consumerist society, creates the horrors of oppression in an illusionary attempt to attain 'perfection'; being human, however, needs a wider perspective in which different contradictory sides coexist. Quoting Wallace Stevens, Atwood claims that 'the imperfect is our paradise'.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, perfection contradicts itself and chaos emerges from rational order. In addition, there is implicit criticism of the radicalised religious background of America, as opposed to the religious background of Canada; the latter includes a more diversified kind of immigration, with a strong Catholic presence in Quebec, and still does not include any radical religious group at the time of writing.<sup>88</sup>

The original intention of the Puritans was to attempt to reform the Church, or Churches, a concept that had existed in the Protestant movement since Luther,<sup>89</sup> while in Gileadean society, rules are stricter and have completely lost their spiritual link to the Scriptures. Similarly to the citizens of Gilead, the Puritans believed in social inequality and lived in 'tightly knit communities' where they were able 'to scrutinize their neighbours' behaviour'.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, the 'modern' Puritans of Gilead banish reading, which was important, together with education, in the Founding Fathers' Puritan communities. Meditation on the Scriptures had a cardinal role in Puritan life, but is totally emptied and desecrated in the parodic and amputated references to the Bible in the Gileadean world, or it is reduced to the mechanical repetition of the Soul Scrolls. The Founding Fathers lamented that the spiritual intensity of the following generations of the chosen and reborn saints of the Puritan community often deteriorated



and that they became a 'provincial anachronism' where the difference between spiritual and financial success became confused.<sup>91</sup> For example, in Jonathan Edward's sermon, 'Charity and Its Fruits', he 'linked the experience of prosperity with faithfulness and divine blessing'.<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, this view is in no way comparable to Atwood's dystopian vision. The extreme views present in the novel highlight a wider concern about the nature of being and the incongruity of a dualistic oppositional view; they suggest inherent contradictions in the text of the Bible itself, which presents different points of view and cannot have one interpretation. The ambiguities and multiple readings do not only depend on different historical moments, so they are therefore temporary and are influenced by the interpretation of the rulers or the people in power, but they are also present in the text itself and can be reinterpreted and rewritten like other stories, such as myths and fairy tales.

The amputated, manipulated and fragmented biblical intertextual references sustain the rules of the oppressive regime; nonetheless, they have ambiguous, sometimes reversed, implications, which simultaneously contradict them and which are present at the origin of the text. This is obvious in the name Gilead itself, whose etymological meaning refers to a rocky region east of the Jordan but also to a cairn representing Laban and Jacob's testimony in Genesis 31:

So he fled with all that he had; and he rose up, and passed over the river, and set his face toward the mount Gilead. And it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob was fled. And he took his brethren with him, and pursued after him seven days' journey; and they overtook him in the mount Gilead.<sup>93</sup>

Laban and Jacob built a landmark with stones to seal their agreement after Jacob fled to Gilead with Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel, with the goods Rachel stole from her father and a significant number of goats that Jacob bred, cheating Laban.

Except, the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. God hath seen my affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked thee yesternight. And Laban answered and said unto Jacob, These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle, and all that thou seest is mine: and what can I do this day unto these my daughters, or unto their children which they have born? Now therefore come thou, let us make a covenant, I and thou: and let it be for a witness, between me and thee. And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar. And Jacob said unto his brethren, Gather stones; and they took stones, and made a heap: and they did eat there upon the heap. And Laban called it Jegarsahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. And Laban said, this heap is a witness between me and thee this day. Therefore was the name of it called Galeed.<sup>94</sup>

In the context of the novel, the intertextual reference highlights the ambiguity of the toponym and consequently of Laban and Jacob's story. It is a story of business competition where the shrewdest wins and the heap of stones is called as a witness, God's witness, between Jacob and Laban's marking of their territories and of their promise to watch over Laban's daughters.<sup>95</sup> Eventually, Jacob is the winner because he finds refuge in Gilead, where his fortune is safe; it consists of his wives and children, cattle and goods. According to Laban, Jacob stole his assets, even though he had worked for Laban for fourteen years to gain his wives. Nevertheless, he eventually fled and cheated Laban (who had exploited him for twenty years). Before leaving, Jacob makes white sheep breed so that they have spotted and coloured lambs, which, according to his deal with Laban, would be his wage for the years he had worked for Laban without being paid. Jacob uses magic of sorts, that is, peeled rods to encourage the sheep to have spotted lambs. This is interestingly interpreted by Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* as a way of taking interest for the years Jacob worked for free for Laban – 'a way to thrive, and he was blest,/And thrift is blessing if men steal it not'.<sup>96</sup> It is therefore linked to the business-like mentality of the consumerist society of Gilead and to the merging of spiritual and financial success in the late Puritan community as

well as in the Christian Right movement. Gilead is the ambiguous territory where the successful businessman Jacob starts his new patriarchal life and where the twelve tribes of Israel were born. The intertextual reference therefore points to the hybridity of biblical narratives that allow different interpretations and deny dichotomous good/evil perspectives.

Gilead is also a region of 'evildoers, marked by a trail of blood', according to the prophet Hosea,<sup>97</sup> which gives an additional layer of meaning to the name. Gilead is a witness, a beacon city on the hill, but it is also corrupted by business and stained by blood. These multiple meanings are already present in the Scriptures. The novel exposes these incongruities in the intertextual references that are developed at both ontological and historical levels. Therefore, there is not one interpretation and the Bible itself is not 'holy' in the sense of 'pure'; the characters of its stories are not 'perfect' but stained with blood and have greedy and ambiguous traits. The power of the biblical narrative is therefore confirmed and simultaneously exposed as contradictory at its root. Consequently, multifaceted readings are present in the Scriptures as well as in the verb 'esse' (197). In fact, the Latin verb 'esse' (to be) is presented in three versions: the original version, the subversive version and the invented version,<sup>98</sup> which points to its ambiguity and the coexistence of multiple interpretations that are significantly connected to the essence of being (the verb 'to be'), that is, to identity and the construction of self. This seems to suggest that 'to be' has, therefore, at least three faces that simultaneously coexist and are linked to one other. Thus, the intertextual references invite the reader to deconstruct Gileadean narratives which pretend to be 'pure' but are revealed as corrupted; they are merely propaganda that sustains the regime. The disruptive, polyphonic function of the novel is therefore confirmed through the intertextual dialogue that challenges the narratives of the dominant society and proposes a change, a different vision that give space to multifaceted interpretations.

Similar parodic contradictions and ambiguities are present in the names of the cars and in the aunts' names. They are allusions, or syllepsis, according to Riffaterre's definition, where more than one meaning is present.<sup>99</sup> The biblical references are therefore debased in the consumerist world of Gilead where they are reduced to names of commodities, losing their symbolic and spiritual value; they are a 'national resource', as is everything else in Gilead, even God himself (225). Thus, biblical

references are parodied, exposing their incongruities and emptiness in a world where religiousness is a powerful tool in the hands of the regime. In a similar perspective, the aunts' names have at least a double meaning, with similar desecrating results.<sup>100</sup> Once again, the allusion to a religious view is emptied of its value and reduced to an instrument of propaganda for the regime and, at the same time, refers to a consumerist world of business and profit where people are used as commodities.

In a radical feminist view, Aunt Lydia's vision of an all-woman's world is extreme and contradictory: it excludes pleasure but includes rape (65). She describes the handmaids as 'pearls' (124), referring to Matthew 13:45–46, while in Gilead they are constantly sexually abused:

A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. She is rich in pauses, which she savours in her mouth. Think of yourself as pearls. We, sitting in our rows, eyes down, we make her salivate morally. We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives.

I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit. This is what I will tell Moira, later; if I can.

All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia, with satisfied good cheer (124).

The biblical quotation instead emphasises the great worth of the pearls and the inestimable value of the pearl, which symbolises the Kingdom of God and for which the merchant gives up all he owns in the world:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.<sup>101</sup>

Therefore, the insistence of the novel's passage on saliva and spit, that is, on bodily functions, contrasts with the preciousness of the pearls. In this way, the contradictory essence of Aunt Lydia's discourse and the biblical intertextual reference show Offred's

parodic interpretation. The handmaids are not pearls but 'congealed oyster spit' that are licked 'into shape'. Therefore, the intertextual reference to the kingdom of heaven is reduced to the realistic debased context of Gilead, where no one would sell 'all he had' for a handmaid. The manipulated use of the biblical text is exposed and the passage from the Gospel is emptied of its sacred meaning. At the same time, the business transaction in the Bible alludes to the handmaids as commodities, slave prostitutes that can be bought and sold.

Furthermore, Aunt Lydia sees men as 'sex machines' that women need to manipulate (153), similarly to Offred's mother, who does not want a man around as 'a man is just a woman's strategy for making other women' (130). Offred's comment is ironic at the end of Chapter Twenty-One; her answer to Moira's all-woman radical vision seems to suggest a different point of view in which men cannot just be ignored (181). According to Kołodziejuk Feldman, the relationship between Offred and her mother reflects a conflict between second-wave feminists and their daughters, who represent a new movement labelled 'postfeminism'. The daughters claim 'the redundancy of further struggle' and the return of women to the home.<sup>102</sup> This conflict is partially resolved in the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, in which 'identity is multifaceted and layered' in the voices of the three narrators that emphasise the diversity of issues relating to women as well as women's solidarity.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear from the narrative that a more radical attitude would not have changed the course of the action and would only have worsened Offred's condition. As Susan Jacob points out, 'survival is itself a form of resistance' and she adds that the active protest led nowhere while the collaboration is self-destructive. She concludes that the battle against Gilead is 'within Offred's mind'.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, the intertextual references and allusions to the Bible in the consumerist society of Gilead have multiple meanings which are parodied in Offred's narrative. They also link to and comment on a 'real' world where the feminist movement developed in different directions, and this is reflected in the diverse attitudes of the female characters that are revealed in the narratives. Evans considers second-wave feminism to be the feminist movement that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. It emphasised equality, sameness and difference between men and women. She sees it as 'not a continuum, but, three corners of a triangle' and identifies two kinds of second-wave feminism: a liberal one linked to the image of the 'feminine mystique', and another, more radical one that is linked to the New Left.<sup>105</sup> Liberal feminism asked for

'equality in the sense of sameness of attainment, and therefore treatment', while radical feminism believed that 'both men and women have been damaged by capitalism and patriarchy'.<sup>106</sup> According to the radical Left, the system needed to be overthrown by a revolution to 'bring full equality and abolish oppression'.<sup>107</sup> Similar positions are reflected in the novel: Moira, Offred's mother and Aunt Lydia can be seen as radical feminists, while Offred's view seems more moderate and liberal. This confirms what Riffaterre claims concerning verisimilitude and 'fictional truth': the narration paradoxically refers to a 'reality' outside the text and, at the same time, creates an artefact.

The parodic use of the title of the hymn 'There is a Balm in Gilead', which is an African American spiritual from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the allusion to Jeremiah 8: 22, 'Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?', point out again the distorted and propagandistic use of biblical references in Gilead. In the above quote from the Bible, there is a rhetorical question at the end of the chapter underlining the core of Jeremiah's prophecy: the corruption of the kingdom of Israel will be the cause of its destruction by the Assyrian army, which will inevitably happen if the Israelites do not follow God's laws. Whoever finds refuge in God will be saved, but the sinners' punishment will be their own sins. Therefore, not even the healing balm produced in Gilead, the mound of testimony and the land of fertility where Jacob fled and thrived, can heal the sinners;<sup>108</sup> it cannot 'make the wounded whole', contrary to what the spiritual claims. In the biblical context, the balm is useless because of the Israelites' refusal to obey God's rules. The daughters of Israel will be left alone and unhealed, which is similar to what happens to the handmaids. In Chapter Thirty-Four the context is the Prayvaganza, where young brides are married to the Angels of the regime. The marriages are arranged, which anticipates the conversation between the Commander and Offred that follows, where she points out that what is missing in Gilead is love, '[f]alling in love' (231-32). Moira's subversive interpretation of the words of the hymn is therefore justified: 'There is a bomb in Gilead' (230) emphasises the revolutionary potentials triggered by the oppressive regime that imposes constraining rules and suffocates basic human needs such as falling in love. The bomb will explode and provoke the fall of the regime. The Gileadean rulers will be punished in a similar way to how the Assyrian army carried out the punishment in Israel, because of their corruption and the enforced

rules they impose on their citizens. Thus, the sacred and messianic message of the Bible is not only parodied in Moira's words but also acquires sinister characteristics. The citizens of Gilead have been forced into obedience by false teachers who manipulated the biblical text, and they are also an example of 'the patriarchal abuse embedded in the biblical text'<sup>109</sup> whenever it is forced on people and emptied of its messianic meaning.<sup>110</sup> In the Gileadean propagandistic discourse, God is a 'natural resource', a commodity to use and trade. The conditions of women in this patriarchal society are emphasised even more by the reference to Timothy 2: 8-5 in the chapter about the Prayvaganza. Women are mentally and physically abused and their life is at risk if they do not follow the roles assigned to them and the rules they must obey or if they fail to accomplish the tasks they are set, such as getting pregnant (233). As the Commander claims at the Prayvaganza, women can be saved only by childbearing. Therefore, '*Love is not the point*' (232, emphasis in the original), as Aunt Lydia claims, again denying basic human needs.

The Eyes are another example of the biblical perspective; they are the state police that control and observe everyone in Gilead and their name refers to the Eye of Providence,<sup>111</sup> which appears on the reverse of the one-dollar bill opposite the Great Seal of the United States at the top of a pyramid that has thirteen steps leading up it and a Latin inscription saying 'the New Deal of the Ages'. The symbol is also connected to the Freemasons' all-seeing eye and to the Eye of Evil in the Hamsa Hand and other apotropaic talismans dating back to 3000 BC. Once more, the allusion highlights that the ideal of the Puritan Founding Fathers, who are connected with Gilead, is intermingled with profit and business and is ambiguously linked to evil, an inevitable connection that stains the regime's utopian project and makes it invalid. There is no purity or perfection in humankind, as Offred demonstrates with her own narrative and her 'imperfect' life. There is no dichotomous quality of good and evil but an inextricable mixture of the two. The novel seems to warn that negating the flaws might bring us to the 'utopic' horrors of Gilead.

Therefore, the 'beacon on the hill' is inevitably intermingled with worldly profits that are already present in the contradictions that exist in the Bible itself and in the merging of good and evil in the symbols of the banknote. The either/or dichotomy of the Manichean, Cathars and Puritans is an ontological utopia, a no-place that is not only

eventually inhuman but is absent in the Scriptures, which do not allow a literal and radical interpretation of the term but instead suggest multiple meanings. Good and evil are shifting concepts that mix with and mirror each other and merge at different levels, both in the Bible and in cultural heritages.

The amputated quotations from the Bible manipulate their meaning by taking them out of the spiritual context and reinserting them in the oppressive material setting of Gilead, which has the aim of controlling people's behaviour from within. 'Gilead is within you', says Aunt Lydia misquoting Luke 17:21. Other examples can be found in the handmaids' greetings (29), in the reference to the parable of the sower (28), Matthew 13:1–23, and to Psalm 27:14, quoted in Milton's 'Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is spent'.

I walk to the corner and wait. I used to be bad at waiting. They also serve who only stand and wait, said Aunt Lydia. She made us memorize it. She also said, Not all of you will make it through. Some of you will fall on dry ground or thorns. Some of you are shallow-rooted. She had a mole on her chin that went up and down while she talked. She said, Think of yourself as seeds, and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial, like the voices of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say, Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we are trees (28).

The intertextual reference to the parable of the sower is misleading as the handmaids' task is not to grow in spirituality but to obey the regime and eventually to get pregnant. The ambiguity of their role is even more underlined by the use of the verb 'pretend' at the end of the passage in Offred's comment. The handmaids have to pretend to be who they are not in a conspiratorial, manipulative attitude. The intent is parodic and humorous but still underlines a disturbing manipulation, of which Offred becomes increasingly aware. Other corrupt biblical references are the Beatitudes (100):

For lunch it was the Beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed be that.  
They played it from a tape, so not even an Aunt would be guilty



of the sin of reading. The voice was a man's. *Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed be the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent.* I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking. Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Nobody said when (100).

The words of the Beatitudes are changed and adjusted to the message of the regime; they are amputated in order to avoid the revealing part of their words, which are considered misleading. Significantly, the silent are blessed because speaking your thoughts in Gilead is severely punished. Similarly, in the Commander's reference to 2 Chronicles 16:9 (103), the last part, which reveals King Asa's betrayal, is cut. In fact, Asa relied on the king of Syria instead of the Lord, as the seer Hanani warns him:

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. Herein thou hast done foolishly: therefore henceforth thou shalt have wars.<sup>112</sup>

The passage is quoted at the end of Chapter Fifteen just after Offred recalls the episode of Moira's torture. Significantly, Moira betrayed the regime and was punished; in a similar way, Gilead betrayed God, as is highlighted in the reference to the episode involving King Asa.

Furthermore, in an even more parodic and humorous discourse, quotations falsely attributed to the Bible are taken from other sources, for example the slogan from Marx's *Gotha Program* is attributed to St. Paul (127). In addition, the words of Christ from the cross, in Luke 23:34, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (quoted literally from the biblical text this time), are particularly threatening when referred to the wives, who are considered the handmaids' enemies to the point that they feel like crucifying them (56). The intertextual dialogue, therefore, not only points out the abuse of the text of the Bible and its inherent multiple interpretations, it also reveals the threatening undertones that mean to warn and control society. Thus, the intertextual dialogue underlines the manipulative and propagandistic use of biblical references in

Gilead and its aim, which is to threaten and control the subjects. Offred witnesses and exposes these incongruities and invites the reader, the *Dear reader*, to be aware of these contradictions and maybe to take a stand.

The central point in the use of biblical intertextual reference is the impregnation ceremony, during which the reading from Genesis 30:1–3 is interpreted as a right to rape in the business-like world of Gilead where people are used as commodities:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.<sup>113</sup>

The quotation is fundamental as it is mentioned at the beginning of the book as well, but it is understated as 'the usual story' by Offred. In the competition between Rachel and Leah, ambiguous elements of jealousy and manipulation are already present in the Scriptures;<sup>114</sup> they become frightening in the 'purified' regime of Gilead. The use of human beings as objects, commodities the regime can manipulate, use and dispose of, is the extreme point of Gilead's dangerous and abusive project. Using the excuse that Gilead is improving the human condition by eliminating humans' 'evil' side, human beings are stripped of their vital part. Furthermore, the Bible itself, reputed to be the only source of authority, is reduced to a commodity – to slogans and a means of propaganda – emptying it of any authority and shifting its meanings. The use of intertexts and allusions creates a multi-layered meaning with a parodic intent that questions and challenges Gileadean grand narratives and reduces them to mere brainwashing whose only aim is to control and profit from its subjects. Through Offred's dialogic intertextual discourse, the novel suggests a critical revision of the biblical narrative that acknowledges its ambiguities. They are present at the origin of the biblical discourse and point to a non-dichotomous view. The story also underlines the tendency of the Gileadean society to use God and the Bible as mere publicity to attain its aims of profit and power.

In Offred's story, her intellectual awareness of the artificial and manipulative quality of the Gileadean regime, to which she never completely surrenders,<sup>115</sup> culminates in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13):

I pray where I am, sitting by the window, looking out through the curtain at the empty garden. I don't even close my eyes. Out there or inside my head, it's an equal darkness. Or light.

My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within.

I wish you would tell me Your Name, the real one I mean. But You will do as well as anything.

I wish I knew what You were up to. But whatever it is, help me to get through it, please. Though maybe it's not Your doing; I don't believe for an instant that what's going on out there is what You meant.

I have enough daily bread, so I won't waste time on that. It isn't the main problem. The problem is getting it down without choking on it.

Now we come to forgiveness. Don't worry about forgiving me right now. There are more important things. For instance: keep the others safe, if they are safe. Don't let them suffer too much. If they have to die, let it be fast. You might even provide a Heaven for them. We need You for that. Hell we can make for ourselves.

I suppose I should say I forgive whoever I did this, and Whatever they're doing now. I'll try, but it isn't easy.

Temptation comes next. At the centre, temptation was anything much more than eating and sleeping. Knowing was a temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you, Aunt Lydia used to say.

Maybe I don't really want to know what's going on. Maybe I'd rather not know. Maybe I couldn't bear to know. The Fall was a fall from innocence to knowledge.

I think about the chandelier too much, though it's gone now. But you could use a hook, in the closet. I've considered

the possibilities. All you'd have to do, after attaching yourself, would be to lean your weight forward and not fight.

Deliver us from evil.

Then there's Kingdom, power, and glory. It takes a lot to believe in those right now. But I'll try it anyway. *In Hope*, as they say on the gravestones (204-205).

It is a dialogue within herself or with an audience that she creates in her mind that is functional to her story – 'I tell, therefore you are' (279) – in a 'dialogic thought' that shapes the self and creates alternative interpretations. This is also connected to women's writing and to *écriture féminine*, that is, a weaving of stories that occurs in limited spaces, similarly to Penelope's and Arachne's work, in the enclosed space of her body – within her *chora*. In Offred's case it is a conversation that encompasses her own body and mind that are challenging and questioning Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* as insufficient to define the self. As Bakhtin remarks, discourse is formed in the dialogue with the Other, which is a never-ending process. In 'The Dialogic Imagination', Bakhtin remarks:

The word, directed toward its objects, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, [...] and all this may crucially shape discourse. The utterance arises out of this dialogue.

[...]

The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way.<sup>116</sup>

Language is therefore composed and uttered in a dialogue that encompasses different social discourses which Bakhtin calls heteroglossia. They are in a dialogic relationship and their meaning is in process. According to Bakhtin, this also implies a response in an act of understanding that is always active and that 'establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements'.<sup>117</sup> The orientation is towards a listener in a dialogue that 'introduces totally new elements into his discourse'.<sup>118</sup> He also claims that 'language, for the individual

consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other'.<sup>119</sup> These dynamic dialogic concepts connect the subject and the object, which meet in language or utterance, as Bakhtin calls it, that is, in the language of the text. Contradictions coexist in this heteroglossia and therefore discourse is constantly in motion. Different kinds of texts intermingle, creating alternative perspectives and achieving different interpretations. Readers therefore have an 'active relationship with the text'<sup>120</sup> and '[o]ur personalities are formed and transformed by what we have comprehended'.<sup>121</sup> Thus, meaning is produced in the constant dialogue between texts where the subject and the Other interact. Offred, the storyteller, is in dialogue with the *Dear reader* in an intertextual interaction that weaves the story and proposes disruptive alternative interpretations of the narratives of the regime. These interpretations' aim is survival; she therefore reassembles her shattered self in a recollection of her memories and in the hope of a future reader that grants her survival. In the Lord's Prayer, Offred's dialogue occurs within herself, as in Eurydice's myth and in Griselda's story, as will be seen in this chapter. God seems to be the Other that Offred is in conversation with in the Lord's Prayer – the *Dear reader* who will hopefully listen to her story and will perhaps take a stand against abuse and oppression. Therefore, although God is called for help, he does not seem to be involved in the atrocities. According to Howells, Offred, in the Lord's Prayer, 'speaks out her anguish in her own ironic version, deliberately confusing the literal and symbolic meanings of the words'.<sup>122</sup> She links them to the contingency of her situation, which is desperate, and she feels suicidal – her situation always requires renewed emotional motivations to carry on living. The intertextual rewriting of the Lord's Prayer underlines a request for help and a reference to the kingdom of heaven, which are both interiorised, that is, they do not refer to a transcendental entity. It is a personal exploration that she endures physically and emotionally and that looks for a renewed hope. It is also a dialogue with a supposed audience '*In Hope*' that her story might survive. Significantly, in the Lord's Prayer, knowledge is pointed to as a temptation, her temptation, and the cause of the original Fall, and therefore the impossibility of a total absence of evil is made clear. In fact, the phrase 'Deliver us from evil' is not commented on by Offred.

In this context, hope is the only virtue left and is connected to death, and therefore Offred is on the verge of extinction, her own extinction.<sup>123</sup> In Gilead, love is absent (231-32) and faith is abused.<sup>124</sup> This is also suggested in the rewriting and reversing of

the phrase 'God is love', where carnal love becomes heaven, 'abstract and total' (237), and is a promise of bliss incarnated in flesh (237). In the same way, the reversal of John 1:14 suggests a free, open identity that is human and contingent and where sin and purity are mixed. Therefore, 'Faith is only a word, embroidered' (304), and Offred's body, in the extreme final distress, can only feel and conceive 'fatigue' (304), that is, a contingent, realistic status, not a spiritual one. It is the only status she can formulate in the uncertain condition she is experiencing at the end of the story and she is open to different possible developments. Physical and mental tiredness are the only emotions she can feel in her state of distress and deprivation while she is trying to reassemble her shattered self. This is reflected in the fragmented discontinuous narration in which she alternates moments of desperation with episodes in which she seems in control. As will be seen in this chapter, she also gives different versions of the same episode, which underlines ambiguity and challenges the system.

From a similar view, as Sherrill Grace claims, 'the female autobiographical "I" is more like a process than a product'.<sup>125</sup> The Scrabble board is the place where Offred plays out her story in different directions 'around the invented, constructed centre', which is Offred herself.<sup>126</sup> This is also how Offred communicates in an act involving the reappropriation of her own language and, therefore, of herself. This act is dialogic, as Bakhtin claims, and double-voiced.<sup>127</sup> She needs a 'you', a *Dear reader*, to tell her story, real or invented, that makes her shape her self through memory and language.<sup>128</sup> The *Dear reader* can also be considered 'her mirror image', an 'alter ego' that helps her find answers and 'verbalize her incomprehension'.<sup>129</sup> Thus, the novel invites the reader to engage with the story of oppression and abuse and deconstruct Gileadean narratives through the intertexts. The intertextual connections underline this dialogue that resists the regime and attempts to construct the character and her self in the oppressive world of Gilead, which is effacing Offred's story. Along these lines, Offred also creates potential alternatives in a dialogue with the Other, questioning and revisiting the traditional narratives; the *Dear reader* becomes an accomplice and is involved in a critical interpretation of the status quo. This point is also highlighted by Wilson's critical approach to Atwood's use of intertexts where she claims that Atwood allows 'the muted or silenced subtext to speak' and 'usually heightens, exaggerates, or parodies the "embroidered" intertexts'.<sup>130</sup> Atwood deconstructs 'the plot and the language' (for example, she reverses Red Cap's story because for Offred–Red Cap

staying on the path in Gilead is more dangerous than going off it)<sup>131</sup> and ‘engages the reader in creating the text and remythifying patriarchally amputated intertexts’.<sup>132</sup> Once again, this offers a possibility of transformation, of change, and it is linked to the essential function of the novel, which is to be subversive and polyphonic, as Bakhtin and Kristeva claim.<sup>133</sup> Atwood writes ‘beyond the ending’ (*au-delà de la fin*) as Du Plessis remarks,<sup>134</sup> engaging the reader in the process of writing, as Hutcheon claims quoting Atwood.<sup>135</sup> It is a moral and political responsibility and is complicit with the power structures of the dominant society.<sup>136</sup> In this sense, Hutcheon and others point out the self-reflectivity of Offred’s story;<sup>137</sup> she often self-consciously reflects on her storytelling and, at the same time, the story ‘is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities’.<sup>138</sup> In fact, according to Atwood, the political is ‘a part of life. It is part of everybody’s life [...] What we mean by [political] [...] is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa.’<sup>139</sup>

Moreover, Hutcheon considers *The Handmaid’s Tale* the ‘fictional rendering’ of the three attributes of the writer according to Atwood: a human imagination, the power to communicate, and hope.<sup>140</sup> The parodic use of intertexts confirms this trajectory that creatively challenges the master narratives of Gilead by communicating with the Other and pointing to hope – a hope in a future audience and possible alternatives.<sup>141</sup> This also confirms the postmodern paradox of the narratives of the novel that ‘subvert the patterns and conventions of dominant culture from within, criticizing but all the while sustaining a certain complicity with the cultural dominants within which it functions’.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, the reader is empowered ‘as active co-creator of meaning’<sup>143</sup> through a network of intertexts and allusions that ‘the reader is invited to piece together’.<sup>144</sup> Consequently, the reader is guided by the intertexts and allusions and, at the same time, is empowered to assemble them in a polyphonic, multi-layered reading.<sup>145</sup> This gives hope for possible changes where the narratives of the dominant society ‘can be transformed from within losing [their] power’.<sup>146</sup> For this reason, Atwood remythologises the stories, preserving enough of the original narrative but restructuring it and acknowledging the power of the intertext while at the same time underlining the journey of transformation, which is a never-ending progression that does not reach a final point;<sup>147</sup> it is a process of becoming.<sup>148</sup> This dynamic tension between confirmation and renewal not only connects with the postmodern perspective but also engages the reader in a possible different ontological vision, an alternative way

of being human compared to the constrictive roles of the oppressive regime. Through the parodic use of intertexts and allusions, the novel criticises, comments and remythologises or restructures traditional narratives in an attempt to change them from within.

### **Rewriting her self**

In Chapter One, Offred gives 'Her own image of a palimpsest [...] where the past gives depth to the present';<sup>149</sup> it is an image of progression that points to a tenacious survival and to hope. Moreover, as will be seen in this chapter, occasional philological explorations of different layers of meaning of words express in an ironic way the constraints of language as well as its ambiguity and power. Possible different meanings coexist and, therefore, confirm the ambiguity of the sign, as Kristeva claims. This opens up the meaning to multiple interpretations and to change. As Marta Dvorak claims, 'the narrative strategy [consists] in cultivating ambiguity and dis-order so as to challenge a system of values, a certain vision of the world'.<sup>150</sup> For example, the tapes are not numbered and Offred gives different versions of the same event simultaneously, such as her meeting with Nick and her husband's destiny. Moreover, her narratives are fragmented with flashbacks and flashforwards. Consequently, the subversion of the narratives of Gilead function at all levels of language and storytelling, addressing 'the dominant culture from within all the while signalling a position of difference', of resistance that grants Offred emotional and physical survival.<sup>151</sup> This links to the subversive polyphonic essence of the novel highlighted by Kristeva and Bakhtin, as explained in this chapter and in Chapter 1. It is a process of deconstruction and provisional reconstruction of Offred's shattered self through storytelling in which the reader is invited to contribute and take a stand.

The close analysis of intertexts and allusions in the novel confirms the tendencies highlighted by the various critics who emphasise the reconstruction of Offred's identity through language. This implies a 'dialogic thought'<sup>152</sup> that opens up to multiple readings and at the same time engages the reader in a critical view of the narratives of the main text, the intertexts and the society they refer to, insisting 'on the existence of a historical reality that exists beyond the words of the text'.<sup>153</sup> At the end of the novel, Offred 'opens to all risks and possibilities',<sup>154</sup> which is different to what Winston Smith



does in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as will be seen in this chapter. This again emphasises her dialogue with the Other that creates multi-layered meanings that are always open to interpretation and define her storytelling as polyphonic, destabilising and in continuous progress.<sup>155</sup> These meanings encourage the reader to deconstruct Gileadean narratives and take a stand against the abuse inflicted by dictatorships and oppressive regimes that are present in the novel and in the real world.

Hence, in the oppressive world of Gilead, Offred rewrites herself as a palimpsest (13), layering her fragmented story to reconstruct her shattered self that has been disassembled by the regime. She reconstructs her story from scratch, assembling and superimposing keen observations of her everyday life, recollecting her memories and giving different versions of the same events. She also explores her body, which becomes one of the means to understand herself and the world around her. Her moments of reflection and remembrance occur at night, a dark dimension in space and time.<sup>156</sup> As she remarks, 'the night is mine, my own time' (47). At night she is '[o]ut of time'; it is her 'time out', that is, an empty space she fills with her memories, a space of dialogue with the *Dear reader* where she can reassemble her shattered self (113). Significantly, the last chapter of the novel, before the 'Historical Notes', is set at night, which emphasises openness and an uncertain quality of the ending. In fact, we do not know what Offred's destiny will be after she steps into the van.

Therefore, linking objects and situations in her mind is a survival tactic that reconstructs 'reality' and her self from the fragments available to her.<sup>157</sup> She is not in a position to enjoy total vision but can collect 'valid objects' (43) in her mind and assemble a view that helps her explore and understand her situation and reconstruct her past. She will refine this tactic, and consequently increase her power, in the course of the narration through her 'bodily sight' using all her senses.<sup>158</sup> For example, during her outings she is vigilant and gives detailed descriptions of her own movements and of what is happening around her. In Chapter Four she describes the procedures at the checkpoint and the young Guardians, emphasising the oppressive control of the Eyes and evoking the repressed desires that linger like a thick fog in Gilead. This is further developed in the description of Serena's garden, where there are sensual and sexual references from Chapter Eight. The tulips are red and opening 'no longer winecups but chalices' (55), and, as the summer progresses, the irises grow 'female in shape [...]

subversive [...] bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light' (161). The passage mentions 'a Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word swoon' (161); it alludes to the poems 'Come into the garden, Maud' and 'The Lotos-Eaters', underlying the repressed erotic atmosphere of Gilead and the sexual desire that inevitably comes back, though silenced, in opposition to the puritanical rules that have perverse and cannibalistic undertones. Love is polluted in Gilead, like the rest of the environment.<sup>159</sup> These accurate descriptions help her develop the personal reconstruction of her fragmented self through an understanding of the world around her using all the senses, her 'bodily sight', in a process of self-assertion which will lead her to a personal acquisition of power and, consequently, to survival. The allusions highlight once more the ambiguous and contradictory rules of Gilead that constrict and endanger the self.

In this evolution, Offred reworks her body and her identity through storytelling, remembering her past in scattered memories and relating her everyday life in detail. In this process she adopts different tactics to survive. She develops an attentive, curious observation of what is around her. For example, during her exploration of the room in Chapter Nine, she divides 'the room into sections' in her head and examines them 'with the greatest minuteness' (61). After her capture, her body was broken down and rearranged to serve the 'mechanism of power' and produce a 'docile body' fit for the economic utility of the regime.<sup>160</sup> She was probably drugged, maybe tortured (49, 80), brainwashed and trained to become a handmaid, a 'two-legged womb' (146) to produce children, 'a national resource' for the regime (75). She needs to reassemble her self by remembering her past and hoping for a future after Gilead in order to survive. This occurs in the intertextual dialogue within the novel where the revision of traditional narratives proposes different interpretations.

The analysis of the world around her includes investigations of her room, where she discovers clues of past love on the mattress, dangerous hooks in the cupboard and finally the writing left by her predecessor: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, a phrase whose meaning she does not understand but which fuels her hope in a dialogue with an unknown woman, maybe her predecessor, whom she imagines has the aspect of her friend Moira. The phrase itself is a recurring motif which is explored further in the narrative and acquires different meanings according to different situations. Different

interpretations are added one upon the other and coexist, denoting a progress of signification that helps Offred in her struggle for survival. It is a recurring symbol, as explained in Chapter 1. It allows a palimpsest reading, or, more accurately, it has the quality of a bricolage in which different interpretations that refer to different kinds of texts are juxtaposed. The sentence is at first only an undecipherable message that gives her hope in the possibility of communication in Gilead – a ‘taboo message [which] made it through, to at least one person’ (62). Offred is the reader of the message who can perpetuate it and make it stay alive. The phrase appears again as a prayer she recites during the reading of the Bible before the impregnation ceremony and it gives her strength. Finally, the meaning of the sentence is revealed in Chapter Twenty-nine (196-197) as a joke in Pig-Latin invented by schoolboys, ironically by the Commander himself, who probably rebelled against the school establishment or against the state that ruled at the time, a democratic state. ‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down’ reveals the rebellious side of the Commander and the subversive power of the sentence that Offred rightly repeats like a mantra in her difficult moments. The phrase is also significantly juxtaposed with a picture of the Venus of Milo ‘with a moustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair drawn clumsily on her’ (196) and with the picture of *The Sabine Women*, who were notoriously raped by Romans. The allusions underline the objectification of women both in the past and in the present discourse of the Commander, who represents Gilead and the dominant male society. Therefore, the dichotomous view of the Puritan Founding Fathers and their ‘one interpretation’ of the Bible is opposed to Offred’s narrative: the essence of being human is not univocal but involves multiple voices. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* recurs three more times towards the end of the narration (237 and 304), marking moments of crisis when Offred is on the brink of desperation and is almost suicidal. She insists that the sentence is not a prayer but its power is testified to by the fact that she recites it in her worst moments and that it gives her hope.

In the process of the reconstruction of her fragmented self, the notion of power being connected to knowledge and disciplined by the surveillance of the Gileadean regime is a fundamental concept that Offred needs to understand, deal with and eventually adopt. This is linked to Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘the body as the object and target of power’.<sup>161</sup> This notion is not a proper intertext but a point of reference highlighted by various critics. Bouson and Shead point out the importance of the notion of power in

Atwood's novels in her exploration of wrongdoings.<sup>162</sup> Wisker, Somacarrera and Sheckels refer to Foucault's theories of power in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale* and to *Bodily Harm*.<sup>163</sup> According to Wisker, in *The Handmaid's Tale*

there are clear relationships between language, power and sexuality and the theories of Michel Foucault (1926-84), whose *The History of Sexuality* (1984) enlightens an exploration of these relationships in Gilead. Foucault relates language to power, surveillance and sexuality, showing that language and power can enable the expression of self and sexuality, or repress them. In Gilead there seems to be only repression. [...] Surveillance predominates. Language is power and disempowerment depending on who you are.<sup>164</sup>

According to Foucault, since the classical age the body has been 'manipulated, shaped, trained' by the mechanism of power 'that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it'.<sup>165</sup> In this way, disciplinary practices produce 'docile' bodies, increasing their utility but diminishing their force and submitting them to obedience.<sup>166</sup> Offred is a 'docile body' at the beginning of the story that tries to resist Gileadean discipline in order to survive. In this kind of society, surveillance becomes fundamental and expands its tactics and techniques, according to Foucault.<sup>167</sup> This occurs not only in prisons but also in other public institutions, such as schools, the army, hospitals and asylums. Artificial order and rules are set up to regulate and discipline the body in a continuous increasing surveillance that aims to create docile and efficient bodies. To illustrate this, Foucault adopts the example of the Panopticon, originally a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham,<sup>168</sup> in which a prison guard in a central tower can watch all the cells of the inmates positioned around it. Foucault points out the isolation and constant visibility of the individual inmate, which reverses the principle of the dungeon of the previous centuries.<sup>169</sup> The aim of the project is to make the inmates feel constantly looked at; it is a 'laboratory of power' because it penetrates 'into men's behaviour' and makes them interiorise disciplinary rules.<sup>170</sup> In a similar way, Offred has interiorised the rules of Gilead but at the same time tries to oppose and resist them with her own *petits récits*, her 'limping and mutilated story' (279). This is testified to by her complicity, which emerges in the narration in various occasions, for example in the Salvaging (Chapter

Forty-two) and in the Particicution (Chapter Forty-three), where she takes part in the execution of the dissenters and feels hungry after it. Her instinct for survival goes beyond an idealistic and illusory concept of active rebellion that in Gilead seems to lead only to repression. This is also evident in her repeating a quotation from the Bible, 'give me children or else I die', which is not only metaphorical but also reflects her destiny in Gilead if she does not get pregnant. Moreover, the use of the word 'habit' highlights its multiple etymological sense that encompasses the concepts of 'having' or 'consisting of' and a 'garment', that is, Offred's handmaid's dress, as well as a 'practice' or 'custom'. The word is also linked to the French *habiter* (live, dwell). As Offred comments, 'Habits are hard to break' (34) and this is valid both for her past habits and for the attires and practices she has learned 'to wear' in Gilead, which have become part of her. She has interiorised them, as Aunt Lydia suggested; Gileadean rules had become habits – 'after a time it will [...] become ordinary' (43). The sign is therefore ambiguous; it has a shifting quality that is subject to multiple interpretations that coexist, as Kristeva claims. In the controlled context of Gilead, Offred offers different interpretations, juxtaposing diverse views in a vision that is open and always in motion.

In his later works, such as *History of Sexuality*, Foucault overcomes the concept of the docile body in a more disengaged notion of the self who identifies 'a certain number of practices and techniques through which individuals *actively* fashion their own identities'.<sup>171</sup> It is an assertion of autonomy that avoids the total homogenisation that can be imposed by power relations. In this way, individuals become capable 'of challenging and resisting the structures of domination in modern society'.<sup>172</sup> This is not a 'recovery of an authentic, 'natural' self' but rather a 'search for an aesthetic of existence' where 'alternative truths' are expressed by marginalised groups that counter-attack the established power structures.<sup>173</sup> What Foucault claims is linked to Derrida's concept of displacement and opens the individual up to the construction of 'alternative truths'.<sup>174</sup> Consequently, power is not necessarily centralised or working from top to bottom but is dispersed and at the disposal of each individual, who can exercise a certain amount of power at different degrees and in different situations and can transmit power.<sup>175</sup> This later concept of power can be connected to Offred's process of the reconstruction of her fragmented self in a search for 'alternative truths' to the

devastating narrative of Gilead. She resists the oppressive regime, formulating alternatives to the corrupted Gileadean narratives and practices in an attempt to survive.

Gilead adopts structures of power that are similar to the ones described by Foucault, precisely in its constant surveillance that works from within and aims to interiorise rules and shape the body according to what the regime requires. Offred opposes her female perspective and her *écriture féminine* to the devastating narratives of the dominant society. Gilead's power is dispersed and unidentifiable; everybody is subjected to it and it might even decide to overthrow the rulers. In fact, from the 'Historical Notes' at the end of the book, we know that there were purges in Gilead when high ranks were decimated and that the regime ended at a certain point. At the same time, everybody exercises a certain amount of power and there are oppositional forces that constantly resist Gilead, creating alternatives, such as Offred herself, Moira and the Mayday organisation.

In the course of the narrative, Offred transforms herself from a 'docile body' to a self-assertive self that partially overcomes the strict surveillance of the regime, as described in Foucault's thought. She is alert to the shifts of power and cleverly exploits the little power that is granted her. For example, Offred shows her power at the checkpoint (32) and speaks of the power of forgiveness (144), her own forgiveness towards Gilead. She increases her power by taking advantage of the weaknesses of her antagonists but is also well aware of the 'true power' of the people in charge, who 'can do what to whom and get away with it' (144), or, with an ironic overtone, 'be forgiven for it' (145). As she confesses to the Commander at the end of Chapter Twenty-nine, she wishes to know 'Whatever there is to know' (198), well aware that knowledge is power, as Foucault claims, and she will increase her power during the course of the narration. It is a power of the body, her female body, that she is ready to exchange to survive – her body that is subjected to the dreadful rules of Gilead. She is aware of her vision as a woman: she 'can see in darkness' thanks to her 'bodily sight', while man 'strains blindly forward' (98-99). At the end of her story, as she is leaving the Commander's house to step into the van, she finally looks down at him and he is described as 'shrinking' (306), which shows her newly acquired power.

Offred's power is strictly linked to language, her body language, and consequently to knowledge.<sup>176</sup> As Foucault claims, power, knowledge and sexuality are connected and can be used to create a partially autonomous identity that can, in turn, exercise power. In her transformation from a docile body that is licked 'into shape' (124) by the regime into a provisionally autonomous being that expresses her 'alternative truth' and acquires knowledge, Offred uses her language skills. This culminates in the game of Scrabble with the Commander, but, being a storyteller, she demonstrates from the beginning her proficiency in the use of puns, double meanings and word games. As an instrument of power, language is necessarily unstable and the ambiguity of the sign is linked to historical and personal interpretations in the dialogue with the Other, as Bakhtin and Kristeva claim. Offred analyses words and draws conclusions, for example, in relation to the word '*Household*' (91); she ironises it because it is used in Serena's cliché about marriage and in relation to her own hollow self but it is also used in the Commander's illusion of 'holding' the house. She plays with words, sometimes using French, in puns and double meanings with sexual undertones, such as in *Date Rapé* (47), which translates as 'date rape' but also alludes to *Dattes Râpés* (grated dates); or the word *chair* (120), which is ironically linked to opposite meanings, such as 'charity' and 'flesh', *chair* in French. More examples can be found in the ironic use of the word 'job', which is also parodically linked to the Book of Job (182), and the multiple meanings of May day in the context of Gilead (53-54). The multiple layers of meaning prompt opposite, coexisting interpretations, as Kristeva claims happens in poetic language or in literature, that are in opposition to the rules of the dominant society. They are allusions, or syllepsis, as Riffaterre claims, that disrupt and deconstruct the master narratives of Gilead; they invite the reader to reconsider these narratives in a critical way and formulate alternative readings. This reveals Offred's knowledge and her acquisition of power in a process that allows her to reassemble her shattered self and that grants her survival.

Interestingly, Madonna Miner interprets the Scrabble game as a way to construct meaning out of disparate pieces that allow 'free-wheeling creativity' and imply the bending of the rules.<sup>177</sup> This is also reflected in the narrative, where the words posit meaningful connections, for example in the multiple ambiguous meaning of the word 'chair', which also resonates in the 'Historical Notes' section with significantly ironic and sexist undertones. Therefore, 'women and flesh are interchangeable' in a society

where love follows prescribed patterns.<sup>178</sup> This occurs in the different versions that Offred gives of her meeting with Nick, which follow a 'limited number of scripts' provided by romance, magazines, old films and fairy tales. Consequently, the novel subverts and parodies those narratives, though it operates within their rules.<sup>179</sup> I agree with this close reading that testifies to Offred's reflection on language; this allows her to make distinctions in order to map her everyday life. At the same time, her relationship with Nick, even though it seems partly to follow prescribed rules and stereotypes, is a way to survive in Gilead and satisfies some of her needs as well. The multiple meanings of 'chair' not only underline sexism but also her bodily needs and 'bodily sight', which are contingent and undeniable; they are part of her self and of her strategies for survival. As Wilson remarks, Offred's discourse 'utters words rather than The Word'.<sup>180</sup> Similar attention to language is applied in Hilde Staels' analysis. She remarks that the adverbs 'in', 'into', 'across', 'up' and 'through' that Offred often uses 'point to the crossing of limits' of her discourse.<sup>181</sup> In this way she activates her 'silenced inner body' and asserts a denotative poetic speech that resists Gileadean discourse 'by creating heterogeneity'.<sup>182</sup> This concept is linked to Kristeva's poetic language that is disruptive and polyphonic, as we have seen. Offred adopts a 'free flow of similes [...] metonymical speech and synaesthesia, as in 'my hands; they fill with flowers of light', or 'time as white sound'.<sup>183</sup> According to Staels, Offred 'ideally unites the word and the flesh' in order 'to bridge the gap between language and feelings'<sup>184</sup> which occurs in *écriture féminine*. On the contrary, the academic approach of the 'Historical Notes' follows a 'sheer logical reasoning' that 'exclude[s] polyvalence and ambiguity in favour of essential meaning'.<sup>185</sup> This is an attempt to undermine Offred's narrative by trying to control her poetic, subversive voice. Pieixoto and his colleagues wish to control Eurydice through their gaze and bury her in the underworld again, as will be seen in this chapter. Nevertheless, the readers who wish to listen to Offred's voice will resurrect her from the dead and keep her alive.

We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would



taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious (149).

As is clear from this passage, language is one of Offred's pleasures, and she activates it in the reconstruction of her fragmented self.<sup>186</sup> Playing Scrabble is her utmost pleasure, surpassing sex.<sup>187</sup> She describes the feeling as 'voluptuous' and a 'luxury'; the 'counters are like candies' she likes to savour (149). Her sense of taste is at its apex, an almost sexual apex; it is powerfully activated to win the game but also to create words and therefore knowledge and power. Language is savoured, not used as an instrument of oppression and torture. In this activity, Offred not only demonstrates her ability in the use of language and, therefore, her power, but also her creativity, which involves all her senses and her intellect in a harmonious osmosis that makes her whole. In this way she can take advantage of her situation and ask for something in exchange. Though she does not ask much at first, this helps her survive and makes her acquire knowledge and formulate 'alternative truths' in the process of the acquisition of power and the reconstruction of her self. Therefore, her understanding and use of language suggest multiple meanings and empower her and her knowledge and help her to reconstruct her self creatively. This occurs in the intertextual dialogue within the novel, in the 'dialogic thought' between the subject and the Other that generates alternative views. It is emphasised by Offred's skilful use of language that starts from the body and involves both her body and her intellect. *Écriture féminine* is therefore a source of power that helps the protagonist to explore her body and the world around her, to express her feelings and consequently to acquire knowledge and power.

Offred proposes a new synthesis, a multifaceted heretical one, in the etymological sense of the word 'heresy' – which comes from the ancient Greek *hairesis*, meaning choose or choice – which is an opinion that is in opposition to the orthodox one, that is, a different point of view. She defines herself in her storytelling as being in opposition to the regime and in a dialogue with the reader and with the intertexts and allusions. Her 'Dear You' (49) can guarantee her survival in the act of reading, as did her predecessor's phrase *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. This not only represents a hope for a future audience but is also an ontological necessity. As Bakhtin claims, identity is created in a dialogue with an Other; it cannot occur in isolation. It is the dialogue with the reader and with the intertexts that guarantees survival, and the

intertexts are necessarily challenged and questioned in a parodic way in an attempt to change the narratives from within. This confirms the multiplicity of perspectives and the possibility of 'alternative truths' expressed in the narrative through the use of intertexts. It is also connected to Spinoza's thinking, which denies Cartesian duality and proposes a connection between mind and body and a relation with other minds and other bodies that generate alternatives and possible changes.

Offred's power and her knowledge are also evident in the Jezebel's section, where she finally knows what is behind the scenes – that '[a]ll is the same' (263). Gilead is just camouflage that masks unchanged corrupt habits, business transactions, prostitution and drugs. What has occurred was only a change of the people in power that had mixed results and appalling consequences for the majority. The intertextual reference to Jezebel's section confirms the historical construction of the discourses of power,<sup>188</sup> as Foucault claims. The Phoenician queen, wife of Ahab, king of Israel, is considered the stereotype of the promiscuous, treacherous and sensual woman in the biblical discourse. In reality, she was a powerful queen, a woman with a distinctive voice who defied the patriarchal orthodox discourse of Israel and wished to establish her culture and religion in opposition to the prophet Elijah. She fought until the end with dignity; she was aware of her position and cultural heritage but lost her battle, and her story is told by the people in power as a temporary 'truth' that can be rewritten, as can the other biblical references.<sup>189</sup> The reference to Jezebel not only shows once more the contradictory status of Gilead but also highlights the ambiguity of the biblical narrative itself. Its stories can be reinterpreted and remythologised like myths and fairy tales. The interpretation of the Jezebel story in the Bible is therefore temporary, and the origins of the story have been reconstructed and manipulated.

### **A new model: the female perspective**

Howells mentions that the most important intertexts and allusions in the novel refer to some passages in the Bible, especially from the Book of Genesis, *The Canterbury Tales* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The intertextual references also involve the ironic use of songs and hymns, and Offred's 'close analysis of language', which is 'a powerful instrument for resistance on the one hand and for oppression on the other'.<sup>190</sup> As we have seen in this chapter, storytelling, that is, language and Offred's memories,

are the private spaces that she cuts out and explores in the oppressive world of Gilead in order to survive. She refuses to believe in Gilead and submit to its narratives and forget her past, and therefore she resists the role of the handmaid the regime is imposing on her.<sup>191</sup> This goes hand in hand with the exploration of her body, 'her own dark inner space'.<sup>192</sup> Thus, her history is not only the memory of her past events and the witnessing of the horrors of her everyday life but also a 'personal history of physical sensations'.<sup>193</sup> The process of the exploration of her body goes from considering her body as being an 'unknown continent which she is trying to map, and later as a cosmic wilderness'.<sup>194</sup> It is both ethereal and immanent, a product of her imagination and physical at the same time. It is a place she inhabits and which her emotional survival depends on.<sup>195</sup> In this sense, Howells connects Offred's storytelling with Cixous' *écriture féminine* where Offred rediscovers 'the marvellous text of herself'.<sup>196</sup> She defies the 'grand narratives' of Gilead with her little narratives of everyday life, domesticity, memories and bodily sensations (her 'bodily sight'), expressing curiosity, accurate descriptions and witty observations.<sup>197</sup> Her voice resists and eventually survives 'beyond the ending' and beyond Gileadean narratives.<sup>198</sup> Wilson provides a similar interpretation when she claims that Offred's "'enlarged" sensory organs' save her once she recovers 'her ability to hear, smell, taste, and most significantly, touch, see, and speak';<sup>199</sup> this also accompanies her 'desire to know'.<sup>200</sup> Therefore, her 'bodily sight', expressed in *écriture féminine*, that is, a disruptive practice that works in parallel with the intertextual dialogue, involves attentive observation and exploration of her body and of her bodily sensations – this is connected to her acquisition of knowledge and thus power. In this way, she understands the world around her and develops strategies for survival. This 'insatiability' for life (13) is silenced by the regime; it is repressed but present in contradictory and transgressive behaviours. She uses smell to explore her room (17), and the kitchen smells of yeast, a 'treacherous' smell, the 'smell of mothers' (57), that recalls her lost child. She detects Serena's hostility through smell – her 'knowledge' of Offred's presence in the room is like sour, old milk (56) – which is an implicit threat to Offred's life. At the end of the Birth Day, the other wives' envy smells of 'faint wisps of acid, mingled with their perfume' (136). This sense allows Offred a deeper understanding of her antagonists and makes her wary and more powerful. Her alertness and self-control, which she has learned in part from her oppressors, and her 'bodily sight', guarantee her a temporary survival, which gives her time to reassemble her fragmented self.<sup>201</sup>

What Offred really lacks is touch, which is completely negated in Gilead. It is a dangerous amputation of the essence of being human, as expressed in the Commander's need for intimacy (222). Offred expresses it when she sees Rita making bread: she would like to sink her 'hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh' (21). She is hungry 'to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch' (21). In the same way she misses her husband Luke, the presence of his body near her in bed (61), repeatedly in the course of the narration. She would also like to put her hands on the 'exposed face' of the young guardian at the checkpoint (31). Touch is missing in Gilead because physical contact is related to impure and undesirable relations, to sex, which is strictly controlled and eventually forbidden or reduced to an impersonal act of pure procreation. Offred will recover the sense of touch eventually when she makes love with Nick, of which she gives different versions, all involving touch, and which will empower her.

Another example of this strategy is the sense of taste, which is rather diminished at first as Offred is not hungry and forces herself to eat her meals (75). But towards the end of the narration, taste comes back and 'flavours [are] lush' (294) on her tongue; she is becoming whole again – she is recovering. This is also a consequence of her unquenched instinct for survival that makes her fight at a physical and mental level to avoid extinction. Once again, her strategies are a mixture of physical yearning and intellectual tactics that express her female point of view that defies Gileadean narratives. This is a winning strategy that grants her a provisional survival.

Thus, besides being an example of *écriture féminine*,<sup>202</sup> Offred's vision implies a sensual exploration which involves all her senses as well as her intellect and develops in an encompassing experience of suffering and bliss. The empowerment of her 'bodily sight' is a tactic that involves both her body, in a reappropriation of all her senses, and her understanding, in an accurate observation of the world around her and in her exploration of language; this experience is physical and mental. In her 'hunger', which implies cannibalistic undertones as well as tenacious survival, she is hungry for food after the Particution and she is hungry for knowledge during her meetings with the Commander. In the end, her sexual desire, expressed in her relationship with Nick, is the fulfilment of a necessary act of communication that implies understanding between

human beings that is gained through touch which connects to her intellect in a temporary wholeness that guarantees her survival. This exploration of the world around her and the communication with the Other work in parallel with the intertextual connections at a linguistic level and confirm the disruptive function of the novel that opens up the future to possible changes.

At the same time, the dark side or the evil part of being human cannot be denied, not only in Gilead but also in Offred's narrative. For example, her reference to the story of the German lady whose lover was a Nazi official at the end of Chapter Twenty-four is an allusion to the concentration camps and to her role in the relationship with the Commander (155-156). She becomes his 'mistress' and is therefore complicit with the regime but in control; she witnesses a physical violation that she cannot stop, and there is a cannibalistic implication that also refers to the bodies of people who were incinerated in ovens (155). Other allusions to Nazi concentration camps are made via Offred's tattoo, the use of butter as a face cream, the torture and the constant surveillance of the Eyes, which are pointed out in the 'Historical Notes' (312, 317, 319). In this sense, Offred's story may allude to Primo Levi's *If this is a man*. Similarly to Levi's narration, Offred's narration includes little narratives of everyday life and recollections of her past in dreams and adopts a non-chronological order of the narrative. There are also connections between Levi's and Offred's strategies of survival; they adapt to the context, keeping their head down without playing the hero in a process of transformation in order to survive 'in any form' (298).

Hence, Offred expresses her language in *écriture féminine*.<sup>203</sup> She is the modern mystic who has a new vision and provides a new perspective in the oppressive world of Gilead. Her strategies for understanding merge minute observation, rigorous intellectual deduction and self-control and involve all her senses, that is, her 'bodily sight'. This does not allow her a total final victory – which is an illusion, as demonstrated by her mother's, Ofglen's and Moira's stories, though she considers them her heroes – but grants her a personal transformation and a provisional survival. Furthermore, the mystics' vision of God's generosity,<sup>204</sup> which encompasses sin and emphasises love and hope, which are diminished in Gilead, connects with Offred's view and with her process of understanding. There is no transcendence in Offred's view, though – everything happens in this world, a 'reality' that she witnesses. Her

recovery is partial and occurs through her narratives, a self-reflexive kind of narrative of her everyday life that she often acknowledges to be a partial reconstruction. As Pieixoto points out in the 'Historical Notes', Offred's account is everyday little narratives presented from a woman's perspective, which he considers narrow and limited; he would have preferred the rulers' point of view, the grand narratives of Gileadean Commanders. Consequently, Offred is 'off-read' (misread) by the misogynistic Pieixoto and is 'of-fred' by Atwood to the reader as a warning.<sup>205</sup> Thus, the reader is invited to criticise the narratives of Gilead through the intertextual references, take a stand against oppressions and injustices and give space to 'alternative truths', that is, to a female perspective.

Professor Pieixoto in the 'Historical Notes' mentions the reference to *The Canterbury Tales* in the choice of the title of Offred's story (313). The three stories linked to Offred's tale, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', 'The Clerk's Tale' and 'The Second Nun's Tale', reveal examples of woman's behaviours that work as a referent model for Offred and are reinterpreted, parodied and rewritten in the narration. Chaucer himself rewrote and commented on part of the stories he took from different sources.<sup>206</sup> The main female figures, the wife of Bath, Grisildis, or Griselda, and Saint Cecilia, are all present in Offred, connecting her with the mythological Triple Goddess. They are trivialised in the world of Gilead and renewed in Offred's vision. The novel therefore suggests a new model, an alternative interpretation, that allows Offred's survival and a certain amount of power and autonomy.

Her desire is clearly referred to by the wife of Bath, as is the discourse of the silenced woman's writing<sup>207</sup> and the story of the rape in the tale itself. The story of Saint Cecilia can only be read in an ironic key in the world of Gilead, where faith is a threadbare embroidery on a faded cushion. The spiritual motivation of the first Apostolic community, or of the Founding Fathers, is emptied of any meaning and is manipulated by the regime. St. Cecilia is the ideal example of Christian life because of her total devotion to God to the point of martyrdom and her perseverance in chastity until the end of her life.<sup>208</sup> Chaucer's interpretation of her name underlines these characteristics; she is a 'hevenes lilie' (lily of Heavens), 'the wey to blynde' (path to the blind) and 'Wantynge of blyndenesse' (wanting in blindness), qualities that are testified to by her standing up and fighting for the Christian faith in relentless 'bisynesse'.<sup>209</sup> She defies

and opposes the Roman authority with her combativeness, 'rhetorical acuity and physical endurance',<sup>210</sup> proposing 'a new ordering of hierarchies'.<sup>211</sup> She is a figure of authority whose strength is based on her intellectual and physical capacities. Her body as well as her mind work in unison to attain success. Though there might be connections with Offred's defiant attitude towards the Gileadean regime, Offred never openly attacks the regime and is not looking for martyrdom; on the contrary, she wishes to survive at all costs. Besides, Offred is sceptical and criticises Gilead's Christian propaganda in her parodic subversive discourse. On the other hand, the legend of St. Cecilia's points out the true faith and devotion of the primitive Christian Church and questions the Church's authority in Chaucer's time.<sup>212</sup> In this way, the legend of Cecilia's highlights the contrast between the true faith and the threadbare faith of the Gileadean regime, where God is absent.

The female figure that mainly interweaves with Offred is Griselda, the faithful, meek wife and the poor peasant girl who marries the rich and powerful Walter, or Gualtieri, marquis of Saluzzo. There are several versions of the story. One is in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Day 10, Story 10), which is the last story of the collection. It was translated into Latin by Petrarch in a letter to Boccaccio, published in *Seniles* (Senile XVII, 3), in which he praises the story for its emphasis on woman's virtue and says that Boccaccio kept the best one for the end, which fitted with rhetorical rules. The Latin version spread all over Europe and is Chaucer's main source. Nevertheless, Petrarch omits Boccaccio's ironic comments and emphasises Griselda's patience. Chaucer, instead, comments on the story in the Envoy, inciting wives not to follow Griselda's example but to answer back to insults and abuses. In addition, the intertextual reference, linking to the fairy tale about Cinderella, highlights some subtleties of and strategies for survival that are present in Offred's narratives. Similarly to Griselda, Offred presents a meek and patient outward attitude though she never surrenders to Gilead within herself.<sup>213</sup> She is 'orderly and calm' (299) outwardly and maintains this attitude even when Serena verbally abuses her. Offred's attentive observations and witty comments keep her alert but this happens in her mind or in the reconstruction she records after the escape, presumably. In the narration she only takes one risk, which is when she tries to find out what happened to Ofglen (296); otherwise, she keeps her head down, well aware that daring too much would mean worsening her condition, deportation or even death.

The patient Griselda endures her husband's 'crazy brutality'<sup>214</sup> and his cruel tests;<sup>215</sup> she never answers back but counters her husband's ruthless behaviour with her wisdom and incredible self-control.<sup>216</sup> In Boccaccio's story, her behaviour is set against the madness and ruthlessness of the aristocrat; she represents the new emerging class that will subvert the feudal order, in this case showing dignity and virtue in spite of her humble condition and of the abuse. At the end of the story, Gualtieri reveals the reasons for his behaviour: his fear of marriage, that is, of women. The conclusion is ambiguous because the narrator, Dineo, suggests that Griselda should have paid back her inhuman husband by taking another lover. This is what Offred does via her love affair with Nick; she changes the ending of the story, rewriting it as Petrarch and Chaucer did, though in a different way, by referring to Boccaccio's suggestion. She cannot answer back or rebel against Gileadean rules, as Chaucer claims in the Envoy, or she would be deported or executed, but she can take her 'little' revenge.<sup>217</sup> Offred's tactics are winning strategies in the oppressive regime of Gilead; they allow her a provisional survival and escape, which are denied to other apparently more courageous and bold heroines such as her mother, Ofglen and Moira. Through her 'bodily sight' and creative storytelling, Offred is capable of reconstructing her fragmented self with practices of attentive observation and accurate deductions, which imply a parodic intertextual dialogue that challenges and partially defeats the surveillance of Gilead. Her storytelling is the evidence and result of these practices; it grants her knowledge and a new identity and, consequently, power.<sup>218</sup> Hence, the intertextual reference deconstructs the stories and invites the reader to formulate a different interpretation that questions the origins of the narratives and suggests new strategies; it is a female interpretation that points to survival. This view allows a polyphonic multifaceted reading that challenges traditional narratives and opens up the narrative to different voices.

The figure of Griselda is connected to 'Cinderella'; that tale and 'Little Red Cap' are the two main intertextual fairy tales of the novel. The references to Cinderella's story are in Offred's subjected position of a handmaid who is 'chosen' by a 'prince' and in the direct links present in the narrative, for example when she needs to be back home by midnight. In the degrading situation of the brothel, where she is finally clearly playing the part of a prostitute, Offred is capable of ironising, saying, 'I must be back at



the house before midnight; otherwise I'll turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?' (266), which reveals the parodic and absurd narrative of the fairy tale in the context of Gilead. Serena is the wicked stepmother but also the fairy godmother who waits for her at midnight and offers her the opportunity of an 'alternative' prince. She actually means only to exploit her, as normally happens in Gilead, where people are objectified bodies the regime uses and abuses. Differently from Griselda's and Cinderella's stories, in Gilead the husband-prince is an elderly man with grey hair, a sad 'little belly. Wisps of hair' (266), and their relationship is not a romance – quite the contrary. The context of the ball is totally debased as well; it is parodied and ridiculed in the description of the prostitutes' costumes and in the degraded environment of the brothel, where Offred feels 'lurid' (245).<sup>219</sup> The obsolete and artificial quality of the fairy tale is exposed and the story is also rewritten in part as Offred decides to meet Nick again after the first time, choosing her own prince in a bodily involvement that makes her recuperate her sense of touch and makes her temporarily whole. This renewal is also implicit in the reference to Little Red Cap, where the repeatedly raped Offred is born again from the wolf's belly,<sup>220</sup> not thanks to the help of a woodcutter figure but to her own developed ability to improve her condition through an increased acquisition of knowledge and consequently of power. In the course of the narrative, Offred becomes a shrewd Griselda, a liberated Cinderella and an experienced Little Red Cap. The stories need to be rewritten, which the novel does in a parodic key that exposes their anachronisms but reaffirms their power and value in a world of power language and intertextual relations that threaten people's lives. In the process of acquiring knowledge through language and through her 'bodily sight', Offred develops new strategies that grant her survival even in the oppressive world of Gilead.

Thus, in Gilead, the Triple Goddess figure is reduced to and trivialised as a subjugated wife, a raped girl and a suicidal woman. The last-mentioned figure is not only linked to Ofglen, to Offred's predecessor and to Offred's own suicidal fantasies, but it is also clear that there is a reference to the myth of Eurydice in the 'Historical Notes'. This is the story of an attempted rape, according to Virgil's version, as Eurydice was bitten by a snake she did not see while fleeing from Aristaeus, who was chasing her. It is also an attempt at resurrection from the underworld, which the faithful and beautiful wife is doomed to go back to because of Orpheus' forgetfulness, or fear, which is true for Gualtieri too, or possibly for his wish to obliterate her completely. The reference to

Eurydice at the end of the novel is significant as we do not know whether Offred has ended her life free, as Pieixoto claims (324). From what we understand from the narrative and because of her recorded messages, she was probably rescued by the Mayday organisation and recorded the tapes in some hiding place, but there is nothing in the novel that guarantees her final liberation. She may have been found by the Eyes, deported to the colonies or executed. The reference to Eurydice also suggests man's wish to obliterate a woman's story, to send it back into the underworld and to annihilate her life with his gaze for fear of losing his control over her. This is also hinted at in Pieixoto's sexist puns,<sup>221</sup> which show that although Gilead is part of history, man's diminishing attitudes towards and fears of women have not completely changed.<sup>222</sup> This is not Gilead anymore, but it is not an equal world for women either.

Orpheus and Eurydice's myth has three main versions: in Plato's *Symposium*, Virgil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>223</sup> The different stories underline different interpretations, especially regarding the reasons why Orpheus turned his gaze towards Eurydice. According to Plato's version, love has power and having the courage to die for love is equal to braveness in battle. This cannot be applied to Orpheus, who failed to rescue his wife and is considered a coward. Therefore, his death by the hands of women is deserved. Virgil highlights the attempted rape by Aristaeus (who is not present in Ovid's account, in which Eurydice is bitten by a snake while she is dancing with the Naiads) as the reason for her death. The author also points out that Orpheus lost her because of his 'dementia' (madness, frenzy):

When a sudden frenzy seized Orpheus, unwary in his  
love, a frenzy meet for pardon, did Hell know how to  
pardon! He halted, and on the very verge of light,  
unmindful, alas, and vanquished in purpose, on Eurydice,  
now regained looked back!<sup>224</sup>

His madness is also remarked on in Eurydice's words when she asks him 'quis tantus furor?' (what dreadful madness).<sup>225</sup> Therefore, his fears and wish to control her, his 'matta bestialità', seem to be the cause of Eurydice's second death. Similar fears and anxieties are present in Ovid's version, in which Orpheus is not considered mad but

'afraid that she might fail him, eager for sight of her'.<sup>226</sup> Eurydice has no voice in Ovid's story and Orpheus has no punishment.

Interestingly, Atwood comments on and reinterprets the myth in three poems in her collection *Interlunar* (1984),<sup>227</sup> 'Orpheus (1)', 'Eurydice' and 'Orpheus (2)'. They underline the silenced woman's voice and man's manipulative and physically domineering will that shapes her and keeps her under control until he finally loses her. There is a warning at the end of the poem 'Eurydice': 'it is not through him/you will get your freedom'. Eurydice does not seem to wish to go back to the 'real' world and to the relationship with her husband Orpheus, either in 'Eurydice' or in 'Orpheus (1)'; she would rather stay in the underworld because it frees her from the constricted role of faithful and loved wife. Therefore, death and silence can mean freedom and survival in a world of language where opposites coexist; Kristeva claims it occurs in the subversive narrative of poetic language or literature where the intertextual dialogue promotes a change at linguistic level and suggests new interpretations and different social relationships.

Similarly to Eurydice in the myth, Offred risks being sent back to the underworld to be silenced once more despite all her patience and endurance; she might be reduced to an echo of Orpheus' discourse. Pieixoto's reference to Offred, who, like Eurydice, 'slips from our grasp and flees' (324), reflects the disruptive narrative of the protagonist, the open-ended conclusion and her process of becoming. The final sentence of the novel in the form of a question directed to the reader is not only an invitation to take a stance against oppressive regimes and a consumerist, radically religious world that reduces people to objects, manipulates their bodies and souls and tortures them; or against violence and fundamentalist dichotomous utopias and environmental risks. It is also and above all an appeal to speak the unspoken, to witness and to let marginalised 'truths' have a voice in a necessarily multiple-voiced world. According to Howells, the final question is 'a challenge to its reader in the present'.<sup>228</sup> Dominick Grace claims that the 'Historical Notes' 'invite us to question rather than accept' and 'undercut our faith in reliability' as Offred's narrative is 'a transcription edited by male scholars'. Therefore, there is a 'suspension of judgement' and a subversion of the devices of verisimilitude.<sup>229</sup> Brooks Bouson remarks that the final question is a 'textual space for our questions and speculations', which can be diverse, and points out the collaboration

between reader and writer in the novel both in the process of 'assembling the text' and in the 'self-reflexive discussions'. She adds that the novel also discomforts 'the reader as it immerses them in a regressive – and voyeuristic – sadomasochistic fantasy'.<sup>230</sup> Thus, the reader is involved in a dialogue with the text and the intertexts that interrogates the narratives of the regime and engenders critical thinking.

Offred's survival and victory are therefore temporary and uncertain, though present in the story. She steps into the dark but it might become light and full of hope again. Maybe she is pregnant and therefore open and ready to accept what will come, confident in her own ability to understand and experience life. This is a different perspective, a female perspective, to that which appears in previous dystopian novels. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the most relevant dystopian intertextual reference in *The Handmaid's Tale* as it connects to the story at different levels rather than there just being sporadic allusions to it, like, for example, the reference to the dress colour codes and division between castes in *Brave New World*. These connections appear in the pervading sense of power that tears 'human minds to pieces and [puts] them together again'.<sup>231</sup> There are also similar references to torture, which are described in detail by Orwell's narrator<sup>232</sup> but are only briefly related in Atwood's novel (49, 102 and 260). Besides, sex in both novels is 'a political act'.<sup>233</sup> Significantly, Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984 while she was living in West Berlin. Moreover, the connection to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, as an allusion to the Puritan world of New England in a theocratic perspective, cannot be considered an intertext either. Though *The Handmaid's Tale* refers to that historical context, which is revealed in the dedication to Professor Perry Miller and remarked on by the author in some of her interviews,<sup>234</sup> the tone of the two novels is very different, as are the two protagonists. The progress in Hawthorne's novel is epic and dramatic, while in Atwood's it is parodic and ironic. While Hester Prynne is described as splendid and erotic, and develops from being an adulteress to an angel, Offred is ordinary but she is an adulteress and an angel and complicit and transgressive, both in her past life and in Gilead. Furthermore, Hawthorne maintains a dichotomous vision that Atwood denies. The colour red is a powerful symbol in both novels, but Atwood's text goes beyond it and beyond the ending, aiming for a world that is outside of Gilead. Offred's body is repressed and violated but it is also transformed in a fluid new vision that resists the regime and forms alternatives that empower and connect.<sup>235</sup>

Differently from Winston Smith, Offred is very cautious and is disillusioned about the possibility of fighting and winning against the regime. Because she is a woman, she has experienced its terrible power that breaks and reassembles the body. She is not in a relatively privileged position, like Winston, who is a member of the regime, though power operates on him just as it does on Offred. They are both vulnerable but Offred's condition is more dangerous than Winston's and she has less freedom than him. She has been physically and mentally abused repeatedly and she often witnesses abuse and executions. She feels 'abject' (298) and surrenders to the regime's power as there is no other way. Above all, she is not pure; she is complicit in some of the horrors of the regime, for example when she takes part in the execution of the three women in Chapter Forty-two and in the Particicution (290), as well as in the reference to Nazi concentration camps. She has a realistic rather than an idealistic view because of her marginalised position, that is, because of her vision from below. She has learned from experience that to survive she has to develop her senses, adapt to the environment and surrender to her instincts but also be self-controlled and refine the observation and analysis of what occurs around her.

What the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn't equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other. Nick for Luke or Luke for Nick. *Should* does not apply.

You can't help what you feel, Moira said once, but you can help how you behave.

Which is all very well.

Context is all; or is it ripeness? One or the other (201-02).

'How many fingers, Winston?'

'Four! Four! What else can I say? Four!'

The needle must have risen again, but he did not look at it. The heavy, stern face and the four fingers filled

his vision. The fingers stood up before his eyes like pillars, enormous, blurry, and seeming to vibrate, but unmistakably four.

‘How many fingers, Winston?’

‘Four! Stop it, stop it! How can you go on? Four! Four!’

‘How many fingers, Winston?’

‘Five! Five! Five!’

‘No, Winston, that is no use. You are lying. You still think there are four. How many fingers, please?’

‘Four! Five! Four! Anything you like. Only stop it, stop the pain!’

Abruptly he was sitting up with O’Brien’s arm round his shoulders. He had perhaps lost consciousness for a few seconds. The bonds that had held his body down were loosened. He felt very cold, he was shaking uncontrollably, his teeth were chattering, the tears were rolling down his cheeks. For a moment he clung to O’Brien like a baby, curiously comforted by the heavy arm round his shoulders. He had the feeling that O’Brien was his protector, that the pain was something that came from outside, from some other source, and that it was O’Brien who would save him from it.

‘You are a slow learner, Winston,’ said O’Brien gently.

‘How can I help it?’ he blubbered. ‘How can I help seeing what is in front of my eyes? Two and two are four.’

‘Sometimes, Winston. Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once. You must try harder. It is not easy to become sane.’<sup>236</sup>

For Offred, ‘What the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four.’ This echoes what Winston says above, reversing Winston’s stubborn, heroic claim that four fingers make four and cannot be five. This is because ‘[e]ach one remains unique’, adds Offred, and ‘there is no way of joining them together. They

cannot be exchanged, one for the other'. In his idealistic audacious vision, Winston opposes the inadequate strategies of the regime in his need to rely on something or someone 'real' (O'Brien or the fingers he sees) and in his insufficient instinct for survival, which is overcome by his death drive. Winston never surrenders to the body, even in his apparently satisfying relationship with Julia. He wants more; he wants to be a hero, a martyr in his inevitable, and predictable, rush towards death. But his epic vision is doomed. Winston is incapable of rebirth and transformation and ends his days emptied and suicidal. On the contrary, Offred's capacity to be open to the unknown, to alternative diverse 'truths', to the cavity of her belly and to the underworld mean that she surrenders to her body and resigns 'it freely, to the uses of others' (298), and this grants her rebirth and a hopeful, though temporary, survival. She wants 'to keep living, in any form' (298), metamorphosing her self and adopting strategies that do not fail and allow her to carry on and record her story as she courageously witnesses the horror of the regime in an appeal to future readers. Atwood rewrites the dystopian story from a woman's perspective where there is no place for purity or perfection, where 'each one remains unique' and where there are no heroes, not in the traditional male sense of sacrifice. The heroine is alive and lively at the end; in spite of all her excruciating sufferings and her precarious situation, she has acquired knowledge and power and has reassembled her fragmented self, though provisionally.<sup>237</sup> In addition, the reference to Shakespeare's *King Lear* (V. 2. 11) highlights Offred's wish to endure at all costs and, at the same time, her attention to 'context', that is, she wants to understand what occurs around her in order to refine her strategies for survival. Hence, through intertextual references the stories are deconstructed and rewritten from a female point of view. They invite the reader to critically rethink their position in the narratives of the dominant society and in the world in a general sense.

Offred's story offers different suggestions in the course of the narrative. The intertextual reading highlights the necessity of rewriting obsolete discourses, which are never absolute, in a dialogue that negates dichotomous views and emphasises multiple perspectives that need to include different 'alternative truths' that are open to marginalised groups. Offred's strategy of merging 'bodily sight' and intellectual understanding, which implies that she has good linguistic skills, makes her acquire power and knowledge; this means that she is winning and survives. She witnesses what occurs around her and is alert to backlashes that aim to negate women's voices: 'Denay

Nunavit', that is, deny none of it, as stated at the end of the story in the 'Historical Notes'. The novel invites the reader to critically rethink the narratives of the regime through intertextual references. They expose in a parodic way the incongruities of Gileadean narratives that are already present in the origins of the intertexts and question the absolute validity of the regime's views, thereby suggesting that changes ought to be made to them. Offred's polyphonic fragmented narrative offers alternatives and implies that it is time that Eurydice came back from the underworld into the light to make her voice heard. Therefore, the novel suggests an investigation of the alleged wholeness proposed by society that is revealed to be propagandistic and based on profit and is created through the control of the individual. A more encompassing view is proposed in *Cat's Eye*, in which the reconstruction of the protagonist's memories envisage a view of being human that includes art, language and science.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Atwood speaks of 'speculative fiction ... a logical extension of where we are'. Jane Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 136. The quote is from 'Writing Utopia', in Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), pp. 92-93. Atwood also claims that '[t]he thing about utopias and dystopias is that they very quickly change into their opposite, and whether it is a utopia or dystopia depends on the point of view of the narrator'. Margaret Atwood, 'The Handmaid's Tale: a Feminist Dystopia?', in *Lire Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale*, ed. by Marta Dvorak (Rennes Cedex: Collection Interférences, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1999), pp. 17-30 (p. 19).

<sup>2</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale: York Notes Advanced* (London: York Press, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011; London: Virago Press, 2014), p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-46.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to An Other', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 124-125.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'How Does One Speak of Literature?', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> There are several versions of the 'Little Red Cap' story. The first written version is 'Little Red Riding Hood' by Charles Perrault (1697), which has sexual undertones and in which the girl is eaten by the lusty wolf and is not rescued by the hunter. The Brothers Grimm's version (1812), 'Rotkäppchen' (Little Red Cap), in part desexualizes the story and adds the final rescue. I will consider the Brothers Grimm's version as it is the most popular and as Atwood notoriously often refers to Grimm Brothers' fairy tales.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'The Beaver's Tale', in *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 2006), pp. 153-63 (pp. 161-62).

<sup>16</sup> Glen Willmott, 'O Say, Can You See: *The Handmaid's Tale* in Novel and Film', in *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels*, ed. by Lorraine M. York (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1995), pp. 167-90 (p. 172). In an interview with Bonnie Lyons Atwood also claims that



'novels are about time [...] novels are about change, living in time'. Margaret Atwood, *Conversations* (1978; London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 223.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> See 'Margaret Atwood on what *The Handmaid's Tale* means in the age of Trump', available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html>> [accessed 30 October 2018].

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 279. Further references to this text will be placed in parentheses following quotations.

<sup>20</sup> Atwood kept newspapers cuttings and clipping files of articles about abuses in totalitarian regimes. Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> According to Howells, Gilead's discourses testify to an 'abuse of the Bible rather than an endorsement of its teaching', Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 10. Nevertheless, Atwood does not treat the Scriptures as 'holy' writing in the theological sense of the word, but as historical narratives that can be interpreted and rewritten. See also Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Branko Gorjup, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', in *Margaret Atwood: Essays on Her Works*, ed. by Branko Gorjup (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2008), pp. 239-53, (p. 242).

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A thematic guide to Canadian Literature* (1972; Toronto: Anansi Press, 2012), p. 34-35.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Foley, "'Basic Victim Positions" and the Women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Atlantis*, 15 (Spring/printemps, 1990), pp. 50-58 (p. 55), available at <<http://journals.msvu.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/download/4251/3495/>> [accessed 20 November 2018]

<sup>25</sup> Atwood, *Survival*, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of the Divine Love* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), p. 55. Il faut que la femme écrive par son corps, qu'elle invente la langue imprenable qui crève les cloisonnements, classes et rhétorique, ordonnances et codes. My translation.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 43-44. L'écriture est la possibilité même du changement, l'espace d'où peut s'élancer une pensée subversive, le mouvement avant-coureur d'une transformation des structures sociales et culturelles. My translation. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> Atwood, 'Writing Utopia', p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> See Margaret Atwood's interview, Hay on Wye May 2001, in Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Margaret Atwood: Essential Guide* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 11-25: 'In *The Handmaid's Tale* I was very careful to have nothing that we hadn't already done, or for which we don't already have the technology. We could do it all, we have done it all.', pp. 13, 20. See also Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> Atwood, 'Writing Utopia', p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 93-96.

<sup>33</sup> Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> Regarding keeping files, see: *Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale/Le Conte de la Servante. The Power Game*, ed. by Jean Michel Lacroix and Jacques Leclair (Paris: Presse de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1998), p. 30-33. According to Lacroix and Leclair, Atwood presents in the novel 'éléments du 'lu', mais aussi au 'vu' et au 'su'. (Things she has read, seen and known) My translation, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Not so Grimm: The Staying Power of Fairy Tales', in Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional writing 1970-2005* (London: Virago Press, 2005), p. 199.

<sup>37</sup> Atwood refers to Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blond*, Part One. Atwood, Ibid., p. 200. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blond* (London: Vintage Press, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> Italo Calvino, *Fiabe Italiane*, (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1981), pp. 54-55.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 348.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Atwood, *True Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> Reynolds and Noakes, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. xv.

<sup>45</sup> Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, p. 88.

<sup>46</sup> Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), p. xi.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

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- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 23.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>52</sup> George Woodcock, 'Metamorphosis and survival in Margaret Atwood', p. 142, in *Language, Text, and System*, ed. by Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983) pp. 125-42 (p. 142).
- <sup>53</sup> Theodore F. Sheckels, *The Political in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: The Writing on the Wall of the Tent*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. viii.
- <sup>54</sup> Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations*, p. 6.
- <sup>55</sup> Sheckels, p. 94.
- <sup>56</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Unes Femmes', in *Le Cahiers du GRIF*, 7, (1975), pp. 22-27 (pp. 22-23) available at <<https://www.persee.fr/authority/29955>> [accessed 31 July 2019].
- <sup>57</sup> Jacques Leclair 'De la Dystopie à la métafiction dans *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Lacroix and Leclair, pp. 63-78 (p. 73-74).
- <sup>58</sup> See: Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 13. Mark Evans claims that Atwood 'echoes the procedures of Puritan New England', for example in the birth scene. Mark Evans, 'Versions of History: *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Dedicatees', in *Margaret Atwood Writing and Subjectivity: New Critical Essays* ed. by Colin Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 177-188, (p. 182).
- <sup>59</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 223.
- <sup>60</sup> See: Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 71, and Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 94. See also Marta Dvorak, 'Foreword', in Dvorak, *Lire Margaret Atwood*, p. 14, and Brooks Bouson, p. 133. See also *Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), p. 2.
- <sup>61</sup> Louise Chipley Slavicek, *Life among the Puritans* (San Diegi, CA: Lucent Books, 2001), p. 9.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 24.
- <sup>63</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *Writing New England: an anthology from the Puritans to the present* (Cambridge, Mass, London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001), p. 113. References to the importance of work in the Bible can be found in 1 Tess 5.10; 2 Tess 3. 6-15; 2 Tess 3.11; 1 Tess 4.11.
- <sup>64</sup> According to the author, the commitment to conversion and reform is a peculiar characteristic that permeates the Puritan mentality and which ought to be reinvented every time. Delbanco, p. 258.
- <sup>65</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, 'At the House of Mr Frog', *London Review of Books*, 43, 6, March 2021, pp. 21-24 (p. 22).
- <sup>66</sup> The Christian Right movement included 'evangelicals, fundamentalists, conservative Protestants, conservative Catholics, Pentecostals, and other charismatic Christians'. See: Eric R. Crouse, *The Cross and Reaganomics: Conservative Christians Defending Ronald Reagan* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 9
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 14.
- <sup>69</sup> Moral Majority and the Christian Right were against abortion, equal rights for women, homosexuality and pornography and supported morality and traditional family values, a programme that is reflected in Gilead.
- <sup>70</sup> Crouse, p. 45.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 45.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 49.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 50.
- <sup>74</sup> Timothy Raphael, *The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 13.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 19.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-154.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 159-160.
- <sup>78</sup> According to John Komlos, Reagan reversed the achievements of the New Deal and increased the national debt. Reaganomics caused a rise in inequality in American society and eventually led to Trumpism. The income of the middle class fell behind and economic oligarchy took power. John Komlos, 'Reaganomics: A Watershed Moment on the Road to Trumpism', *The Economists' Voice*, January 2019, pp. 1-21 (pp. 1 and 5). Blanchard claims that although inflation was reduced, cuts in taxes created 'the political pressure to reduce government spending' and an increase in the external debt. Olivier Jean Blanchard, 'Reaganomics', in *Economic Policy*, (2 vols, V, October 1987), pp. 15-56 (p. 1).
- <sup>79</sup> These are the words of Rev. Pat Robertson, a Pentecostal leader quoted in Crouse, p. 16.
- <sup>80</sup> See: Warren H. Hern, 'Ronald Reagan and Abortion', available at

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271966500\\_RONALD\\_REAGAN\\_AND\\_ABORTION](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271966500_RONALD_REAGAN_AND_ABORTION)> [accessed 20 October 2020].

<sup>81</sup> Françoise Coste, “‘Women, Ladies, Girls, Gals...’: Ronald Reagan and the Evolution of Gender Roles in the United States’ *Miranda* (12, 2016), <<https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8602>> [accessed 20 November 2020].

<sup>82</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991), p. 10.

<sup>83</sup> Coste, p. 2. See also Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, ‘Antiabortion, Antifeminism, and the Rise of the New Right’, *Feminist Studies*, (Summer, 1981), pp. 206-246 (p. 231).

<sup>84</sup> Pollack Petchesky, pp. 212-213. The Conference of the Catholic Bishops declared that the foetus was a person from the moment of fertilisation and therefore abortion is homicide.

<sup>85</sup> Coste, p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Pollack Petchesky, p. 208.

<sup>87</sup> Margaret Atwood, ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale: A Feminist Dystopia?*’, in Dvorak, *Lire Margaret Atwood*, pp. 17-30 (p. 24).

<sup>88</sup> In her introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English chosen by Margaret Atwood*, Atwood claims that ‘[n]o religious mission inspired the emigrants: they did not seek to convert the heathen to the greater glory of God, or to found a model “city upon a hill”’. *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English chosen by Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Margaret Atwood (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. xxxi.

<sup>89</sup> Giancarlo Pani points out how the necessary attempts to reform the evident corruption and spiritual inadequacies of the Roman Catholic Church were undermined and neglected by cardinals and popes; this inevitably led to the Protestant schism. Besides their sincere wish to be good Christians, the Protestants wished to deal with the original sources of Christianity, both as texts and ideals. Giancarlo Pani, *Paolo, Agostino, Lutero: Alle Origini del Mondo Moderno* (Catanzaro: Rubbettino Editore, 2005), pp. 74-75, 151-52 and 165-66.

<sup>90</sup> Slavicek, p. 13.

<sup>91</sup> Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 36.

<sup>92</sup> Crouse, p. 46.

<sup>93</sup> *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version* (New York, London, Ontario: New American Library, 1974), Genesis 31. 21-23.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, Genesis 31. 42-48.

<sup>95</sup> Genesis 31.

<sup>96</sup> The quotation is from *The Merchant of Venice*, I. 3. 86-87. The whole passage is in I. 3. 75-87.

<sup>97</sup> Hosea 6. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Marta Dvorak, ‘What’s in a name: readers as both pawns and partners or Margaret Atwood’s strategy of control’, in Lacroix and Leclaire, pp. 79-99 (p. 88).

<sup>99</sup> Michel Riffaterre, ‘The Intertextual Unconscious’ in *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Winter 1987), the University of Chicago Press, pp. 371-385, (p. 375).

<sup>100</sup> ‘Historical Notes’ (321).

<sup>101</sup> *Holy Bible*, Matthew 13. 45-46.

<sup>102</sup> Kołodziejuk Feldman, p. 69.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>104</sup> Susan Jacob ‘Woman, Ideology, Resistance: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Third World Criticism’, in *Margaret Atwood the Shape-Shifter*, ed. by Coomi S. Vevaina and Coral Ann Howells (New Delhi: New Delhi Creative Books, 1998), pp. 26-43 (p. 34).

<sup>105</sup> Judith Evans, *Feminist Theory Today: An introduction to second-wave feminism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 9 and 18.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19

<sup>108</sup> The allusion is also present in ‘The Raven’ by Edgar Allan Poe, published in 1945, where the balm should be the cure to the protagonist’s suffering after his beloved died. Similarly to in the biblical context, the balm cannot heal as the raven’s voice reiterates, repeating the word ‘Nevermore’.

<sup>109</sup> Dorota Filipczak, ‘Is there no Balm in Gilead? Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid’s Tale*’, *Literature and Theology*, 7, 2 (June 1993), pp. 171-185 (p. 183), available at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23924862?seq=1>> [accessed 20 March 2021].

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>111</sup> Prov 15. 3.

<sup>112</sup> *Holy Bible*, II Chronicles 17. 9.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, Genesis 30. 1-3.

<sup>114</sup> Atwood ironically calls it a 'baby contest'. Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. 275. The quotation is from an interview with Margaret Atwood, Hay on Wye May 2001, in Reynolds and Noakes, p. 13.

<sup>115</sup> Offred takes pleasure in little acts of transgression and in discovering transgression in others, especially in the members of the establishment. Examples of this can be found in Chapter Three where she realizes that Serena has contacts with the black market, when she discovers the Commander near the door of her room, and when she discovers the Commander's secret passions. They are weaknesses she can take advantage of. This gives her hope of finding 'a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable' (146).

<sup>116</sup> *The Bakhtin reader, selected writings by Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, ed. by Pam Morris, (London: Arnold Publishers, 1994), pp. 75-76.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>120</sup> Dennis Cutchins, 'Bakhtin, Intertextuality and Adaptation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. by Thomas Leitch, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 6.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 40.

<sup>123</sup> There are several references to suicide in the course of the narration, such as when Offred feels that her body is 'treacherous ground' because it fails her but that it is also 'my own territory' (83) that she will finally explore and recuperate in her relationship with Nick. Other references to suicide are at pp. 84 and 204-205. See also Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 103.

<sup>124</sup> There is only one cushion left in Offred's room, the one with the faded blue inscription FAITH. The other two cushions from the set, that would say HOPE and CHARITY, are, significantly, missing in Gilead. See: Coral Ann Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 23.

<sup>125</sup> Sherrill Grace, 'Gender as Genre: Atwood's autobiographical 'I'', in Nicholson, pp. 189-203 (p. 191).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>128</sup> The *Dear reader* evokes *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, where, in chapter Thirty-eight, the protagonist says: 'Reader, I married him.' This refers to women's writing though both the context and the personality of the protagonist in Brontë's novel, which are very different from Gilead and Offred's story.

<sup>129</sup> Marlene Dolitsky, 'Characterizing the narrator', in Lacroix and Leclaire, pp. 101-116 (p. 108).

<sup>130</sup> *Approaches to teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and other works*, ed. by Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen, (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996), p. 60.

<sup>131</sup> Sharon Rose Wilson, 'Off the path to Grandma's house in *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Bloom, pp. 63-79 (p. 72).

<sup>132</sup> Wilson, Friedman, and Hengen, p. 61. See also Coral Ann Howells, 'A generic approach to Margaret Atwood's novels', in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. by R.M. Nischik, (New York: Camden House, 2000), pp. 139-156 (pp. 142-143): 'this is her story, a deconstructive view of patriarchal authority'; Howells also remarks that Offred's story is a 'reconstruction of a reconstruction' where 'the reconstructor is the reader'.

<sup>133</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 71.

<sup>134</sup> Wilson, Friedman and Hengen, p. 2; see also Lacroix and Leclaire, p. 16.

<sup>135</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary Canadian Fiction* (1988; Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 154.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>137</sup> Tolan, p. 169; Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. 271; Dvorak, 'What's in a name', p. 81; Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 80.

<sup>138</sup> Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 13.

<sup>139</sup> The quotation is in Foley, p. 55.

<sup>140</sup> Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 157. Hutcheon refers to what Atwood claims in her address to Amnesty International in Atwood, *Second Words*, p. 397.

<sup>141</sup> Coral Ann Howells, 'Questions of survival in *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Lacroix and Leclaire, pp. 35-48 (p. 42).

<sup>142</sup> Dvorak, 'What's in a name', pp. 80-81.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

- <sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 86-87; see also Bouson, p. 136-137, and Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 8.
- <sup>145</sup> Dvorak, 'What's in a name', p. 92; see also Bouson, p. 151.
- <sup>146</sup> Estella Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-century Women* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 74; see also Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire": Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism' *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 20.4 (1989): 149-175, p. 154. [pdf] available at: <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10262/1/TSpace0171.pdf>> [accessed 30 June 2018].
- <sup>147</sup> Lauter, p. 74.
- <sup>148</sup> Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality. A study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1978), p. 76.
- <sup>149</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 87.
- <sup>150</sup> Marta Dvorak, 'Subverting Utopia: ambiguity in *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Dvorak, *Lire Margaret Atwood*, pp. 73-85 (p. 80).
- <sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 81.
- <sup>152</sup> Cutchins, p. 2.
- <sup>153</sup> Bouson, p. 151.
- <sup>154</sup> Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 107.
- <sup>155</sup> Cutchins, p. 8.
- <sup>156</sup> See: Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 203.
- <sup>157</sup> As Howells claims, Offred has a 'full inner life'. Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 84.
- <sup>158</sup> Wilson indicates that Offred 'recovers her senses'. Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations*, p. 286.
- <sup>159</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, 'Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: The Handmaid's Tale', in Gorjup, *Margaret Atwood: Essays on Her Works*, pp. 115-29, (122).
- <sup>160</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; London: Allen Lane Penguin Books, 1977), 138.
- <sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 136.
- <sup>162</sup> Bouson, p. 136; Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of Popular Genre* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), p. 15.
- <sup>163</sup> Wisker, p. 95; Pilar Somacarrera, 'Power politics: power and identity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 43-57 (p. 51); Sheckels, pp. 5, 81 and 89. Sheckels also refers to the Panopticon.
- <sup>164</sup> Wisker, p. 95.
- <sup>165</sup> Ibid., pp. 136 and 138.
- <sup>166</sup> Ibid., pp. 136 and 138.
- <sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 175.
- <sup>168</sup> Bentham intended the panopticon to be a serious project that he tried to realise using public funding, whereas Atwood points out the satiric inherent intention behind this project, quoting from *A modest proposal* by Jonathan Swift at the beginning of the book. Similarly to Swift's proposal, the panopticon, referred to as the capillary of Gileadean surveillance, should be intended as a satire. Nevertheless, it is not completely so, as surveillance is a reality in totalitarian regimes, and not only there, especially with the widespread modern use of CCTV cameras. In the same way, though Swift's proposal is extreme, it reflected a reality of greediness and exploitation of Ireland by the English colonisers. And children are traded in the 'real' world, though not for food. A prison based on the model of the panopticon was built in Italy on the island of Ventotene (Santo Stefano prison) in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Political dissenters were interned in this prison during the Fascist period.
- <sup>169</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 200.
- <sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 204.
- <sup>171</sup> Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 3; Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité I: La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), p. 3.
- <sup>172</sup> McNay, p. 4. Dominant systems can always be overthrown or suspended.
- <sup>173</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-63 and 136.
- <sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 138. Foucault claims that people implement rules of behaviour to transform themselves and create an oeuvre, thereby developing 'techniques de soi'. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1984), p. 13 and p.18.
- <sup>175</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (1972; Brighton: The Harvest Press, 1980), p. 72.
- <sup>176</sup> Brooks Bouson points out Offred's awareness of the power of language in the phrase 'pen is envy' (196) that alludes to Freud's notion of penis envy and ironically comments on woman's marginalisation rather than on her lack of sexual organs. Bouson, p. 148.

<sup>177</sup> Madonna Miner, “‘Trust me’: reading the romance plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, in Bloom, pp. 21-39 (p. 22).

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>180</sup> Wilson, ‘Off the path to Grandma’s house in *The Handmaid’s Tale*’, p. 77, and Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. 293.

<sup>181</sup> Hilde Staels, ‘Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: resistance through narrating’, in Bloom, pp. 113-26 (p. 119).

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-25.

<sup>186</sup> ‘I like this. I am doing something, on my own. The active, is it a tense? Tensed’ (108).

<sup>187</sup> The centrality of Scrabble is pointed out in Sherrill Grace, ‘Gender as Genre: Atwood’s autobiographical ‘I’’, in Nicholson, pp. 196-98. Marta Dvorak remarks that the ‘Scrabble game can be considered as a synecdoche of Atwood’s textual strategy’. The crossword pattern reflects the ‘crisscrossing of voices, leitmotifs, refrains, intertextual references and time sequences that make up the complex textual web’, Marta Dvorak, ‘‘What’s in a name’’, p. 87.

<sup>188</sup> Jezebel’s story is in 1 King, 19 and 21. Regarding the interpretation of the story, see Janet Howe Gaines, ‘How Bad Was Jezebel?’ *Bible Review*, October 2000 and *Bible History Daily*, June 2010.

Available at <<https://members.bib-arch.org/bible-review/16/5/8>> and

<<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/>> [accessed 30 September 2018]

<sup>189</sup> Ironically, Gileans, and ‘modern’ Puritans, have repudiated Yahweh to worship other gods, Jezebel’s ones.

<sup>190</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 9.

<sup>191</sup> See also Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 99.

<sup>192</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 57.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76. Howells also claims that Offred survives emotionally by falling in love with Nick, Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 106.

<sup>196</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 77.

<sup>197</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 66. Howells also claims that Offred ‘relegates the grand narratives to the margin as mere framework of history’, Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 93.

<sup>198</sup> ‘She becomes the most important historian of Gilead’, Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 93.

<sup>199</sup> Wilson, ‘Off the path to Grandma’s house in *The Handmaid’s Tale*’, p. 73.

<sup>200</sup> Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. 288.

<sup>201</sup> Offred shows self-control at the appointment with the doctor, controlling her answer and her tone without offending him, because if she had done so he would report her and have her deported to the colonies (71). The same occurs at the end of Chapter Twelve, where she composes herself as a ‘thing’ or a ‘speech’, which underlies the artificial essence of her being reassembled by the Gilead regime.

<sup>202</sup> Julian of Norwich was the first woman whose writings are expressed in English.

<sup>203</sup> Besides referring to Cixous’s *écriture féminine*, women mystics, such as Julian of Norwich, Saint Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen and Saint Theres of Lisieux, describe their writings as humble and uneducated. In a similar way, Offred speaks of her writings as fragmented, a ‘limping and mutilated story’ (279). She has visions and dreams, like the mystics, (84-85, 119 and 138), which are disturbing rather than healing. Nevertheless, her ‘little narrative challenges the absolute authority of Gilead’.

Howells, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 70.

<sup>204</sup> This is especially present in Julian of Norwich’s visions or ‘showings’ where the emphasis is on love and generosity, contrary to the dictates of Gilead. According to Julian, God ‘wants us to forget our sin and all our depression and all our doubtful fear’. Though violation and suffering are ingrained in human life, they are finally transformed in ‘heavenly bliss’ through the body. Julian of Norwich, pp. 37-38, 45, 117, 125. This vision seems to agree with Offred’s feminine encompassing and transgressing attitude that involves body and mind, though there is not a spiritual reference in the novel.

<sup>205</sup> Bouson, p. 138. See also Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 93.

<sup>206</sup> The source of ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’ and prologue is the *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and by Jean de Meun. ‘The Clerk’s Tale’ refers mainly to Petrarch’s version of the story, which was also translated into French by Philippe de Mézierès, and to Boccaccio’s version. The story of Saint Cecilia is in Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, a very popular book at the time.

- <sup>207</sup> Prologue to 'The Wife of Bath's Tale'. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, ed. by A.C. Cawley (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1958, 1978), p. 176, vv. 692-698.
- <sup>208</sup> Eileen S. Jankowski, 'Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale" and the Apocalyptic Imagination', *The Chaucer Review*, 36, 2 (2001), pp. 128-148 (p. 138), available at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096159?seq=1>> [accessed 20 March 2021].
- <sup>209</sup> Chaucer, 'The Second Nun's Prologue', vv. 85-105, pp. 479-80.
- <sup>210</sup> Lynn Staley Johnson, 'Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent', *Studies in Philology*, 89, 3 (Summer, 1992), pp. 314-333 (p. 321), available at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4174427?seq=1>> [accessed 20 March 2021].
- <sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- <sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- <sup>213</sup> We do not know Griselda's point of view in Petrarch, Boccaccio and Chaucer's stories.
- <sup>214</sup> Matta bestialità. My translation.
- <sup>215</sup> He takes her two children away, saying they will be killed, but instead they are brought up by his sister in Bologna. This is another trait that links Offred to Griselda, because if a handmaid has a child, it will be taken away from her, and maybe killed in the case of a 'shredder'.
- <sup>216</sup> Boccaccio repeatedly uses the words 'senza mutar viso' (without changing her facial expression), my translation, denoting Griselda's self-control. This also appears in Chaucer, where Griselda does not change her 'countenance' or tone of voice because she seems 'nat agreved'. Chaucer, p. 236, vv. 499-500.
- <sup>217</sup> The word 'little' recurs in Chapter Thirty-six in the Commander's discourse to diminish Offred and undermine their transgression. 'Little' also refers to the fairy tale of Little Red Cap, where Offred is the protagonist and the Commander the rapist-wolf. She also speaks ironically of his 'little belly' (266) when he gets undressed in the hotel room.
- <sup>218</sup> Marta Dvorak, interestingly, highlights that the randomness of the arrangement of the tapes is 'an order in reverse, a deliberate de(con)struction of the orderly u/dystopian model'. Marta Dvorak, 'Subverting Utopia: ambiguity in *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Dvorak, *Lire Margaret Atwood*, pp. 73-86 (pp. 80-81).
- <sup>219</sup> Offred's costume is stained under the arms 'with some other's women's sweat' (242). She describes the party as 'a masquerade' with people 'dressed up in togs they've rummaged from trunks' (247). Moira's strapless outfit is too large, 'one breast is plumped up and the other isn't', and her tail looks like 'a sanitary pad, that's been popped like a piece of popcorn' (250-51).
- <sup>220</sup> See Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, pp. 273 and 277. The other clear references to 'Little Red Cap' are Offred's red dress, the basket she carries when she goes shopping and Serena's cloak with a hood that she wears when she goes to the ball at the brothel (244). Wilson also claims that Atwood inverts 'the Red Cap's forest world and the biblical Eden' and incorporates the ancient myth of the Triple Goddess' and the 'Triple Marys'. Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, pp. 272, 282-283.
- <sup>221</sup> See Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 54, and Arnold E. Davidson, 'Future Tense, Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*', in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, ed. by Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale and Edwards Ville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 113-121 (pp. 116 and 119).
- <sup>222</sup> The vulgar distortion of the word 'tail' referred to in Offred's story reflects Pieixoto's malicious attempt to discredit and eventually obliterate her voice. Arnold Davidson points out that the epilogue is pessimistic as 'the intellectuals of 2195 seem to be preparing the way for Gilead again', Arnold E. Davidson, 'Future Tense, Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*', in Van Spanckeren and Garden Castro, pp. 113-21 (p. 120).
- <sup>223</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. by C.J. Rowe (Warminster: Aris & Phillips LTD, 1998), 179a, pp. 29-31. Virgil, *Eclagues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), vv. 453-527, pp. 251-257. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1984), vol. II, vv. 1-85, pp. 65-67.
- <sup>224</sup> Cum subita incautum dementia cepit amantem, ignoscenda quidem, scirent si ignoscere Manes: resistit, Eurydicenque suam iam luce sub ipsa immemor heu! victusque animi respexit. Virgil, pp. 252-253.
- <sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254-255.
- <sup>226</sup> Ovid, p. 69.
- <sup>227</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Interlunar* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), pp. 58, 60 and 78.
- <sup>228</sup> Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 13. See also Sharon Wilson, where she quotes Du Plessis stating that Margaret Atwood 'writes beyond the ending' (Wilson, Friedman, and Hengen, p. 2). Lacroix and

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Leclair also state that the refusal of closure is 'la meilleure réponse pour combattre le silence et la nuit'. (The better answer to fight silence and the night.) My translation. Lacroix and Leclair, p. 16.

<sup>229</sup> Dominick M. Grace, 'The Handmaid's Tale: 'Historical Notes' and documentary subversion', in Bloom, pp. 155-166 (pp. 158, 160, 162 and 166).

<sup>230</sup> Bouson, pp. 137, 150. See also Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. 293.

<sup>231</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; London: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 211.

<sup>232</sup> Orwell, *Ibid.*, pp. 190-91.

<sup>233</sup> Orwell, *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>234</sup> See notes 58 and 59 in this chapter. Atwood claims that 'the mind-set of Gilead is really close to that of the seventeenth-century Puritans.' Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 223.

<sup>235</sup> Julia Kuznetski, 'Disempowerment and Bodily Agency in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale* TV Series', *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, March 2021, pp. 1-16 (p. 2), available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2021.1898108>> [accessed 25 March 2021].

<sup>236</sup> Orwell, *Ibid.*, pp. 198-99.

<sup>237</sup> Howells rightly points out that 'the witty heterosexual woman who cares about men' and about 'mother-daughter relationships', and about her friends, survives. Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 98.



## Chapter 5

### ***Cat's Eye: the power of sight***

To be lost is only a failure of memory.

Margaret Atwood, 'A Boat', *Interlunar*, 1984

An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.

quotation attributed to Gandhi

A visionary dimension of time and space is delineated in the fictional autobiography of Elaine Risley, whose traumatic experiences affect her perception of her past and define her future. The social rules are questioned in the intertextual connections proposing a creative reconstruction that, though fragmented similarly to Offred's, suggests alternatives. The novel does not offer definite solutions but allows experimentation. Thus, in the parodic and ironic use of intertexts and allusions, the narrative rewrites the protagonist's past in an attempt to search for possible options through her paintings and intertextual connections. This is chiefly revealed through sight<sup>1</sup> and encompasses a multi-layered retrospective reconstruction of her life that includes art, language and science, suggesting an alternative, creative view of being human.

### **Intertextual connections: a complex network**

I will consider Elaine's pictures as central intertexts; they are used in a reversed ekphrasis. They have a crucial role in the narrative because they complete Elaine's story.<sup>2</sup> According to Sherrill Grace, they are the 'verbal equivalent' of Elaine's pictures,<sup>3</sup> and for Fiona Tolan the paintings are manifestations of the protagonist's unconscious.<sup>4</sup> Elaine's pictures are visual references that the novel creates; they interweave with other texts, such as the *Eaton's Catalogue*, commenting on them. In the foreword, Atwood remarks that the pictures are influenced by a number of Canadian visual artists. Therefore, the created intertexts have analogous subtexts in the 'real' world. They are reversed ekphrases because they are depicted through language, which creates the image, instead of having direct referent pictures in the 'real' world. In the intertextual dialogue, they work like the other intertexts, that is, they comment on, subvert and parody the master narratives. They are also linked to Riffaterre's concept of verisimilitude, that is, a consensus about the fictional world created by the novel that

conforms with the norms and ideological model of the 'real' world. According to Riffaterre, they are 'signs of plausibility that make readers react to a story as if it were true'.<sup>5</sup> These signs 'constitute the system of verisimilitude'.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, 'fictional truth' depends on grammar<sup>7</sup> and is constructed inside the text.<sup>8</sup> I argue that these signs are part of the intertextual dialogue,<sup>9</sup> and that verisimilitude is not only created by conformity with linguistic norms and 'cognitive processes we use in everyday life'<sup>10</sup> but also in the 'dialogic thought' that connects with the intertexts, which are both 'tangible' and created texts within the main text.

*King Lear* and *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare are also important intertexts that the novel treats in different ways, engaging, parodying and rejecting them in part.<sup>11</sup> The *Eaton's Catalogue*, the myth of Icarus and 'The Arnolfini Marriage' by Jan van Eyck, with a special reference to the pier glass, are also crucial intertexts that interweave with the protagonist's paintings. The cat's eye marble has a symbolic meaning and acquires particular importance throughout the narrative, pointing to a progression that indicates Elaine's changing vision and her acquisition of knowledge and power.<sup>12</sup> Similarly to the *Eaton's Catalogue*, the marble is present in Elaine's paintings and therefore becomes an intertext reflecting her vision and commenting on the narratives of the dominant society. This progression prompts a multi-layered reading that suggests multiple visions that are described at the beginning of the novel via the image of a 'series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another'.<sup>13</sup> In the course of the narration, Elaine gives different versions of her self; she strives to attain a whole vision but it remains incomplete and blurred until the end.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the novel delineates a possible encompassing view that entails literature, science and visual art, suggesting an alternative way of being human. It is a work in progress that does not reach a final goal.

Through the intertextual dialogue, the novel exposes the debased and rigid prescribed roles of modern society that threaten and endanger the individual to the point of annihilation. These roles amputate the self and do not allow transformation. Consequently, the novel proposes an alternative vision that is multi-layered and polyvalent. This vision is connected to the disruptive function of the novel that challenges traditional narratives, which embody the paternal function. It is also associated with *écriture féminine*, which proposes a revolutionary approach that starts from the female body; this is expressed in the novel through Elaine's visual art.

According to Kristeva, the text is 'a force of social change' that is always in dialogue with other texts.<sup>15</sup> The 'semiotic *chora*' is the space where language and subject develop;<sup>16</sup> it is a female space where 'the subject is both generated and negated'.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the text implies 'the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations'<sup>18</sup> and is a means of transformation as well as resistance and dissent. This is also connected with the concept of heterogeneity and to the novel as a polylogue, as Kristeva claims:

This heterogeneous is of course a body that invites me to identify with it (woman, child, androgyne?) and immediately forbids any identification: it is not me, it is non-me in me, beside me, outside of me, where the me becomes lost. This heterogeneous object is a body, because it is a *text*.<sup>19</sup>

Within the text taken as a whole, which is neither poem nor novel but polylogue, both pulverizing and multiplying unity through rhythm, the unpunctuated but metrical sentence finds its justification. The subject of enunciation's motility, converting prelogical rhythm or crumbling logic into a polylogical rhythm, requires a different mode of phrasing.<sup>20</sup>

In the 'plural dialogue'<sup>21</sup> of the novel, where the subject 'is pulverized, dismembered, and refashioned according to the polylogue's bursts of instinctual drive',<sup>22</sup> the intertextual references and allusions work in polyvalent ways. In *Cat's Eye*, they are associated with the structure of the polylogue where visual art, language and science mesh in a comprehensive view in which different perspectives coexist.

This heterogeneous polyvalent approach is testified to by the complex intertextual network present in the novel that works in different ways and at different levels. The intertextual references to *King Lear* and *Macbeth* highlight an intertextual discourse that is based on reversal and parody of the Shakespearean texts, as will be seen later in this chapter. At the same time, this intertextual parodic dialogue interweaves with existentialist theories of nothingness alluded to in the link with Sartre's *No Exit*; this is a point of reference that underlines the alienation of the individual and the relationship with the Other as a *doppelgänger*. Other points of reference are the connections with

physics theories that are discussed in the novel, especially Stephen Hawking's ideas, whose work, *A Brief History of Time*, is quoted in the dedications, and Kristeva's concept of abjection. Science is included in the novel's new vision: biology, which is addressed through a dissecting procedure that Elaine learns at school, and physics, which is examined via discussions about physics that the protagonist engages in with her brother, Stephen. Nevertheless, science alone is not sufficient for understanding the complex narrative paths the novel proposes, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Kristeva's concept of abjection is crucial too to decode the breaking down of the self in the relation with the Other, where dissolution and the reaction to this dissolution occur. Fear and jouissance mix and the boundaries are broken in an unsettling approach that is connected to the disruptive function of the novel, its polyvalent quality and therefore to the intertextual conversation. The subject is created in motility; this disrupts language and creates an incessant movement of the subject. This is also linked to the semiotic *chora* that are in perpetual renewal, according to Kristeva. The subject is therefore multiplied and is heterogeneous. The poetic language destroys paternal logic and proposes a polyvalent logic that, in *Cat's Eye*, encompasses art, language and science in an alternative ontological vision. As Kristeva argues

The borders that define a sequence as a unit of breathing, meaning, and signification (grammatically made up as a concatenation of sentences) vary greatly and indicate the subject of enunciation's motility – his chances for resurgence and metamorphosis.<sup>23</sup>

The text functions as a plural dialogue, an illocutionary act, in relation to the very realm of language.<sup>24</sup>

The 'plural dialogue' is the intertextual dialogue where language divides and joins; it is 'sign-communication-sociality' where the subject is in movement.<sup>25</sup> This questions traditional narratives and confirms the coexistence of different simultaneous views.<sup>26</sup> In the novel, the concept of the polylogue in its multifaceted structure is revealed both in language and in visual art; it is mediated by the world of language created in Elaine's retrospective vision, that is, by her 'series of liquid transparencies', and is produced through the intertextual conversation.

The intertext of the *Eaton's Catalogue* is treated in a different way; it exposes the constricted roles of society but it also interweaves with Elaine's artwork, which is an intertext created in the novel. The practice of cutting images from catalogues and women's magazines reinforces the roles assigned to women in society, which are exposed and criticised in Elaine's paintings. She seems to comply with these roles in her girlhood but unconsciously rebels against them in her artwork. Her artwork is therefore the expression of her dissent, an ironic and ruthless critic of the prescribed roles. The paintings uncover hypocrisies and dissect the world and functions narrated in the novel in a figurative, neat painting style. Thus, Elaine's visual art voices her rebellion; it is a pre-language associated with *écriture féminine* that expresses her revolutionary thought through her body. The 'dialogic thought' therefore develops a complex conversation within the main text that reflects the blurred and uncertain 'subject in process' of the protagonist.

Other works involved in the intertextual conversation are 'The Arnolfini Marriage' by Jan van Eyck, the myth of Icarus, and, in a different way, the recurring image of the cat's eye marble. Similarly to the *Eaton's Catalogue*, they interweave with Elaine's paintings, commenting on and criticising the narrative of the dominant society; they allow Elaine a reinterpretation of this narrative and a personal transformation that aims for survival. Thus, the master narratives have failed; they threaten the self and force it into constricted rigid roles to the point of annihilation, that is, suicide and insanity. In a perspective of survival, alternatives are proposed in the novel through the intertextual dialogue that is highlighted in the development of the protagonist's artwork. Her creative products criticise and revolt against the traditional discourse and reinterpret it. The dominant society enforces destructive roles that need to be revised in order to preserve human beings and human culture. The dichotomous view as well as the rigid division between male and female roles amputate the self and bully and disempower the individual.<sup>27</sup> The novel does not give final solutions; on the contrary, the vision is blurred until the end, though eventually it is hopeful and open. Nevertheless, it proposes possible options where the intertextual dialogue is crucial in envisaging alternative paths in an encompassing vision that implies incessant transformation.

In my analysis I will not consider allusions such as songs, patriotic hymns, pieces of music and advertisements, comic strips, the Bible, W.H. Auden's poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts', Dante's *The Divine Comedy* or *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. I will consider other allusions to other works, such as the picture that relates to the myth of Icarus, 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, some of Shakespeare's plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, and the existentialist work *Huis Clos* (No Exit) by Jean-Paul Sartre. Allusions to fairy tales and folk tales are less relevant in this novel compared with those in the other Atwoodian stories. The Rapunzel syndrome is present, just like in the other novels, but is not specifically referred to, except in Elaine's view of Susie, who is described 'as a woman shut inside a tower' (306). There are connections with Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' and, above all, to 'The Little Mermaid', which has parallels with Elaine's wish to be integrated into a society that amputates her identity.

As will be seen in the analysis of intertexts and allusions, Atwood uses the subtexts in conversation with the main text in a parodic way, as often occurs in her work, to subvert and expose the incongruities and flaws in our society. At the same time, she acknowledges the importance and power of the intertexts in the narratives of the male-dominant society and attempts to change these narratives from within. In *Cat's Eye*, the intertextual references question the main narrative, and this questioning suggests a multi-layered perspective that contributes to a complex and multifaceted vision that is prompted by art in an alternative view of being human.

The novel is a *Künstlerroman*, and various critics link it with famous *Bildungsromane* such as *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time) by Marcel Proust, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, and to female *Bildungsromane* such as *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë.<sup>28</sup> I do not consider these connections to be relevant to my analysis. The *Bildungsromane* mentioned above are minor subtexts that I will not analyse in depth. The connections are weak as the subtexts are not interweaved with or highlighted in the main narrative. As Cooke argues, they constitute a genre that is positioned as a structural reference in the background of Atwood's novel.<sup>29</sup> *Cat's Eye* distances itself from them in its parodic use of the main intertexts and in its postmodern

perspective as well as in the shape-shifting and uncertain development of the female protagonist as a visual artist. None of the Bildungsromane mentioned above are Künstlerromans as they mainly focus on the development of the artist as a writer not as a painter.<sup>30</sup> Besides, both *Sons and Lovers* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* focus on the emotional development of the protagonist, on religious and political issues in Joyce's text and on family relationships in D.H. Lawrence's, and they explore the extent to which language becomes paramount in this development. Furthermore, bullying by peers is marginal in those stories. In the two Bildungsromane written by female authors, *Anne of Green Gables* and *Jane Eyre*, the female protagonists are not truly bullied by their peers and they are able to defend themselves. Anne is very popular among her peers and in her community, and Jane, though excluded by adults at first, is a strong character that openly speaks her opinions. Both characters are aware of the female role imposed by society, which is frequently ironised in Anne's discourse, and in part they interiorise society's rules, but, at the same time, they speak their voice clearly even during their girlhood. The blurred way in which the protagonist is portrayed and the parodic use of intertexts present in *Cat's Eye* is absent in all the Bildungsromane mentioned above. Interestingly, Carol Osborne claims that 'Atwood revises the structure of the traditional Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman, privileging what feminist psychoanalytic theorists have posited as a feminine way of achieving self-knowledge.'<sup>31</sup> She also adds that '[t]he Bildungsroman evolves [...] from a linear structure to a circular one that illustrates even in its form the interaction of past and present in a protagonist's psyche'.<sup>32</sup> I would add that this circular structure can be featured as a figure of concentric circles of memory that do not seem to have a common centre but nevertheless expand. This concept is associated with time as 'a series of liquid transparencies' (3) that is evoked at the beginning of the novel and with the multi-layered view that emphasises Atwood's subversive use of the novel as an instrument that violates conventions, that is, revises roles, myths and archetypes, to set up new conventions and provide multiple visions, as Kristeva claims concerning the disruptive and polyvalent function of the novel. As Atwood claims, '[A]rt has to do partly with the violation of conventions. [...] a convention is violated, new conventions are set up, masterpieces are produced and then conventions are violated all over again.'<sup>33</sup> Therefore, for the reasons mentioned above, I do not consider the Bildungsromane recently mentioned to be important in my intertextual analysis.

There are also connections to Atwood's poetry that was published in the same period, such as 'A Boat',<sup>34</sup> 'The Woman Who Could Not Live with her Faulty Heart' and 'The Woman Makes Space with her Faulty Heart',<sup>35</sup> and 'Tricks with Mirrors',<sup>36</sup> and there are parallels with the semi-autobiographical short stories in *Bluebeard and Other Stories*, such as 'Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother' and 'Hurricane Hazel'.<sup>37</sup> I will consider some verses of some of the poems in my analysis to underline how Atwood develops and clarifies her themes in different works, revealing a wider and more nuanced thinking. They are examples of works in which Atwood explores similar arguments to those that are examined in *Cat's Eye*. This gives a wider and deeper view and testifies to Atwood's conversation with her own work, which strengthens her arguments.

In interviews, Atwood claims that she was reading Hawking and was influenced by his theories of the physical universe while writing *Cat's Eye*,<sup>38</sup> she connects the narration to physics theories, as will be seen. This is shown by how Elaine integrates her brother's physics knowledge into her discourse by both quoting his words (3) and discussing physics theories with him (331-334). At the same time, Elaine prefers to relate to art, to its forms and colours, rather than to words, as is revealed in the episode involving the alphabet soup, when she vomits it up in the snow.<sup>39</sup> Atwood remarks that '[a]ll painters distrust words',<sup>40</sup> which means that the protagonist's narratives necessarily need to be completed via her visual work. In fact, her paintings visualise, comment on and parody Elaine's life events, revealing her unconscious fears and desires as well as her vengeful spirit long before she becomes aware of them. Even though her preference for visual art is clear, her 'rendering of time' in the retrospective fictionalised reconstruction of her life incorporates these three aspects: science, which is prompted by Atwood's research into physics; the language of her narration; and art in an encompassing vision. This is underlined in the intertextual connections that refer directly to major works of literature, such as Shakespeare's texts, and art, such as 'The Arnolfini Marriage' and Bruegel's 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' as well as to the intertexts the novel creates at the linguistic level in the description of Elaine's paintings, which is therefore a reversed ekphrasis.

Atwood gives some guidelines both in the foreword and in the dedications.<sup>41</sup> She claims that the paintings she is describing do not exist in the real world but that they were



influenced by a certain number of Canadian artists, most of them figurative artists. This position clearly refers to a 'real' world that the author connects to in which her fictional creation is not totally invented but is a 'fictional truth'. This fictional truth is a fiction that complies with the conventions present in the 'real' world, that is, in the world of language, as Riffaterre claims. The paintings evoke the 'real' world and connect the fictional creation with it. Atwood also says that she is indebted to Stephen Hawking and other physics academics for her notions of science and cosmology and quotes from *A Brief History of Time* in the dedications. This is a point of reference rather than an intertext that allows Atwood to connect science to art, linking Elaine's artwork with her brother's theories. In the dedications, Atwood introduces the theme of the double and also does so via the quotation from Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire: Genesis*, which is connected to the complicity between victim and victimiser. This theme is crucial when evaluating the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia and recurs throughout the narration, as will be seen later in this chapter. In this way, mythology and cosmology work together, 'both being attempts to assess how human beings exist in time',<sup>42</sup> suggesting a comprehensive view of being human that includes language and science as well as art in the artistic career of the protagonist.

In the narration, the process of coming and going between past and present underlines the shape-shifting quality of Elaine's character; she is a subject in progress who is connected to the intertextual dialogue. She has a blurred identity that maintains her uncertainties and multiple sides of her identity until the end of the novel despite her attempts to attain wholeness.<sup>43</sup> The projection towards the future is uncertain, however possible it might be, in a 'Unified Field Theory', which implies a realistic, contingent vision. In this progression, the cat's eye marble plays a major role in Elaine's development and is linked to the visual intertexts. Atwood considers the cat's eye marble 'the structural element in the book'; she claims that 'the marble is to *Cat's Eye* as the madeleine is to Proust' and links it to ancient Egypt's divination objects.<sup>44</sup> This not only emphasises the importance of the marble, which, starting from the title of the novel, recurs several times in the story and culminates at the end of it when Elaine sees her whole life through it; it also reveals its metaphorical and almost magical quality in the narrative. As in Proust's novel, it prompts the narrative and is a metaphor for the creative reconstruction itself.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the cat's eye marble insists on the importance of sight, which implies vision and surveillance, while Proust's madeleine is

linked instead to taste, smell and touch. For these reasons, I consider the cat's eye marble important in my analysis because it highlights Elaine's progression and is connected to the intertextual conversation in the novel.

Although Atwood is notoriously 'resistant to reconstructions of her life' and the 'Nosy Parkers' who use 'her life to read her Art',<sup>46</sup> *Cat's Eye* has been considered the most autobiographical of her novels.<sup>47</sup> The picture described at the beginning of Chapter Five resembles the picture on the cover of *The Door*, published in 2007, which looks like Margaret Atwood as a child. This links with two apparently contradictory concepts Atwood develops in her interviews. On the one hand, she claims that '[p]eople fictionalize themselves'<sup>48</sup> and constantly revise and revisits their own stories; on the other hand, she believes that 'there are no texts without life',<sup>49</sup> that is, texts reflect life as it is experienced by others and by the authors themselves. According to Atwood, in spite of the ambiguities of language and of subjective, multiple readings, it 'does not mean that the text has no meaning in itself'.<sup>50</sup> Storytelling is arbitrary; it is an invention, just as history is, and the writer is 'the licensed liar',<sup>51</sup> but, at the same time, the stories need to be believable and therefore are inspired by life. This connects to Riffaterre's theory of verisimilitude, that is, to 'fictional truth' as a linguistic construction that is performative, meaning that it is related to experience.<sup>52</sup> Verisimilitude follows conventions and, at the same time, points to 'the fictionality of fiction'.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the intertexts and allusions are crucial in the reading process. According to Riffaterre, the intertext 'is hidden like the psychological unconscious, it is hidden in such a way that we cannot help finding it'.<sup>54</sup> Hence, the intertextual reading is central in the process of making sense of the text and the intertextual dialogue implies a process of understanding that is also an experience of self-discovery.

In this perspective of verisimilitude, Atwood checked the lyrics of the Little Brownie's song before writing it down because when she tried to remember them, she was not sure her memory was accurate.<sup>55</sup> Hence, she believes that it is important to gain the trust of the reader through maintaining their attention and consistency, which means that an author must be considered 'not to be completely lying to them'.<sup>56</sup> The novel creates verisimilitude through Elaine's voice, that is, the voice of 'an adult going back' to the time of her childhood.<sup>57</sup> It is 'a movement back in time' that 'has to be indicated by the voice'.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the language of the text and Elaine's retrospective vision are

constructed by this voice, which has a more sophisticated awareness than the voice of a thirteen-year-old girl. This also links to Elaine's mistrust of words and to the concept of time, which is fundamental in every novel according to Atwood, and it is specifically paramount in *Cat's Eye*.<sup>59</sup> This is because '[t]ime is the fact of life. In some ways, it is *the* fact of life'<sup>60</sup> and in the novel the 'rendering of time'<sup>61</sup> is connected to the voice and, therefore, to language or language choices. The fictionalisation of life in the recollection of the protagonist's memories is constructed in language and involves time and visual art in the context of the novel; this concept is expressed in the image of 'liquid transparencies' (3). This connects to my argument, that is, to the attempt of the novel to create an encompassing vision that entails literature or language, science and art within the complex intertextual dialogue that engenders the novel as a polylogue.

### **Critical overview**

The critical analysis of the novel has mainly pointed out how sight and power<sup>62</sup> play a major role in the story at different 'ontological levels'.<sup>63</sup> The search for survival and identity, in a continuous tension between 'artifice and authenticity',<sup>64</sup> implies a mutilation that alludes to the story of the Little Mermaid, which involves the description of a condition women need to suffer to enter an alien universe, in this case the universe of man.<sup>65</sup> According to Susan Strehle, the cat's eye marble becomes 'a metonym for the one schoolyard game played by both boys and girls' and Elaine uses it 'to avoid feeling too much the pain inflicted by her "friends"'.<sup>66</sup> In this way, she amputates her emotions from her body, denying her 'affective life' that is at one with her 'sexed female body'.<sup>67</sup> This is linked to Kristeva's concept of the pre-Oedipal mother in an idyllic society without contradictions, a 'maternal' society,<sup>68</sup> which is reflected in the vision of the Virgin of Lost Things; she would heal the amputation and restore wholeness. This figure challenges the pervasive phallogocentric and controlling power of the panopticon, highlighted by Foucault's theories of power, where the 'docile bodies' of the inmates are controlled by a central power whose rules are subsequently interiorised. In the novel, this is personified by the Watch Bird that is present in the women's magazines and in the endless monitoring of women by women. The 'Paternal God of the Panopticon [...] continually needs more'<sup>69</sup> and there is no end to flaws.

I see that there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub, whatever you do, there will always be some other stain or spot on your face or stupid act, somebody frowning. But it pleases me somehow to cut out all these imperfect women, with their forehead wrinkles that show how worried they are, and fix them into my scrapbook. (138)

This reveals both the doomed destiny of women who are always surveilled and ‘need to control the look so that it will not kill’<sup>70</sup> and the fact that they are subject to impossible rules that they cannot obey. The young Elaine has an almost sadistic pleasure in cutting the images of the ‘imperfect women’ from the *Eaton’s Catalogue* without being aware that she is interiorising the rules at the same time and therefore she is unaware of the anxiety that these rules will produce in her when she becomes a woman. Furthermore, the rules are confusing and inexplicably changeable, which Elaine experiences, for example, when she answers the questions in the Sunday school tests. If she gives too many right answers she will be considered ‘a goody-goody’ by her friends; if she gives wrong answers ‘deliberately’, she will be called stupid (124). So Elaine asks herself the following questions: ‘Is it wrong to be right? How right should I be, to be perfect?’ (124). These are existential questions that involve her identity, her way of being human and her relation with the Other. They challenge the rules that society is imposing on her and expose these rules’ ambiguous, paradoxical side, which unsettles the individual and causes bewilderment.

Thus, woman is doomed to inadequacy and failure, like a stack of plates clashing noisily (171). The rules imposed on her always demand more and damage and amputate the self. For this reason, I consider the allusion to the Little Mermaid a significant connection that points to both the suffering that the female character undergoes to be accepted and the eagerness to be part of a society she feels she belongs to, or she would like to belong to. Elaine tries to fit into the female group and the female role without success and almost at the cost of her own life. At the same time, however, she unconsciously resists doing this as part of her refusal to conform and expresses this resistance in a ‘bodily language’ or a ‘non-verbal language’, that is, in her case, a visual language that is the expression of her unconscious and is therefore linked to the

subversive quality of *écriture féminine*. Therefore, as an alternative, she tries a different path that costs her a partial amputation in an attempt to reverse the gaze and gain control. In her paintings, Elaine tries to reverse the male gaze and attain power. Hite claims that, compared with Cordelia, 'Elaine succeeds better in reversing the direction of the gaze' and '[a]s a painter, if not as a female body, she is in control of how other people look'.<sup>71</sup> Becoming a painter and internalising the cat's eye marble vision does not necessarily imply a lack of empathy but certainly implies power. Hence, Elaine adopts a different point of view that grants her survival and excludes romance, which is instead present in the story of the Little Mermaid. The novel rewrites the fairy tale, and, though Elaine is a blurred figure, which links to the ending of the Little Mermaid when the protagonist dissolves into the sea, her paintings testify to a reconstruction that creatively delineates an identity, even though it is fragmented and temporary. Elaine, emphasising her creative vision, not only refuses to be a victim and becomes a creative non-victim, she also looks for and proposes an alternative path in a process of survival, or 'surviving',<sup>72</sup> that leads her to the reconstruction of her self through her traumatic memories. Though the trauma of the amputation will endure throughout her life in Elaine's recurring crisis of 'nothingness', as will be seen later in this chapter, she survives and, significantly, produces creative artwork that expresses her experience but does not provide solutions. The allusion to the Little Mermaid's story is significant because it highlights the amputation suffered by women. The ending of the story is reversed; Elaine does not dissolve into the sea – she survives thanks to her artistic vision and her attempts to follow a different path. The reference to the *Eaton's Catalogue* is therefore significant; it interweaves with other intertexts and with Elaine's paintings, emphasising the polyvalent quality of the intertextual dialogue in the novel.

Gina Wisker highlights the connections with William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as well as 'The Arnolfini Marriage' and the scientific research of Hawking.<sup>73</sup> Wisker also notes that Elaine has a positive creative capacity of transformation through art; this does not necessarily imply forgiveness and mercy, which are hoped for but almost unattainable in the context of this novel, but includes self-awareness. In spite of her 'hazy form',<sup>74</sup> Elaine, like Atwood's other protagonists, rewrites and reclaims her body and, therefore, her identity, which is an attempt to achieve the 'possibility of change'.<sup>75</sup> According to Davies,

Each image or disguise adopted by Elaine in her life as in her art constitutes an attempt to write a new self in a retreat from subjectivity. In this sense her body, like those of Joan and Iris, is a type of palimpsest, a manuscript on which old 'writing' has been erased to make way for the new: the old 'writing', however, may still be discernible if it is looked for closely enough.<sup>76</sup>

She fights for 'autonomy and articulation',<sup>77</sup> which is expressed and attained, though temporarily, in her visual art. The importance of the body in the novel is pointed out by Tolan as well. Tolan claims that the novel highlights the 'concept of the socially constructed gendered self',<sup>78</sup> which was explored by Butler in the 1980s and 1990s. This occurs in the emphasis on fashion throughout the narration that creates the individual as well as in the focus on 'internalised consumerism', which is connected with 'domesticity and femininity'.<sup>79</sup> Tolan also links Elaine's state to Kristeva's concept of the 'semiotic state of identification with the mother', the pre-Oedipal state which is a 'contradictory experience of loathing and desire',<sup>80</sup> that is, the experience of abjection, as will be seen later in this chapter. Elaine expresses herself in a subversive language that Tolan connects with *écriture féminine* and to Elaine's refusal to reduce the body to 'its cultural expression'. The body finally asserts itself, for example in the 'dangerous sensuality of Cordelia'.<sup>81</sup> During the course of the narration, Cordelia's body changes according to her different states of mind and personalities. She is attractive and lean, almost androgynous, when Elaine meets her for the first time, and then her body changes from fat to skinny, and her hairstyle and her clothes change too. This reveals the sensual essence of Cordelia's physical presence and the contrived use of the body as a disguise, a masquerade. The dejected woman's body comes to the foreground when Susie has an abortion (320) and when Elaine feels betrayed by her body and 'disgusted with it' (338) when she finds out she is pregnant. During her girlhood, she describes her female body as 'alien, bizarre, hairy, squashy, monstrous' (93), revealing an explicit refusal to accept womanhood. According to Tolan, at the end of the novel, which takes place on the bridge, Elaine tries 'to connect all the contradictory forces within her: Cordelia, her brother, mind and body'.<sup>82</sup> I agree with Davies's and Tolan's readings, though I would put more emphasis on the link

to Kristeva's concept of abjection being related to Elaine's relation to the female body. The protagonist rejects the role that her body has which she sees reflected in other women, for example in the model for the life-drawing sessions, as she is 'afraid of turning into that' (269), but takes pleasure from it in her sex relationships. Her body is a source of trouble and *jouissance* at the same time. Furthermore, in the expression of *écriture féminine*, which for Elaine is her visual artwork, she envisages a wider vision that completes her narration, that is, language, and encompasses science as well. Therefore, *écriture féminine* is the expression of her subversive thought, a rebellion against and dissent regarding the roles assigned to woman in society.

Wilson claims that the major intertexts of the novel are the Triple Goddess myth, the Bible, *King Lear* and the fairy tales of Rapunzel and the Snow Queen.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, Elaine's paintings have 'an eye for an eye' perspective and she needs to regain her body-feelings to have a whole vision. According to Wilson, Elaine needs to stop being Rapunzel or the Snow Queen and, in order to rescue herself, she has to 'remove the "glass"' from her eyes.<sup>84</sup> Though I find the connection to the Snow Queen rather forced, Wilson interestingly links the 'alien gaze or touch of the Other' to Sartre's and Beauvoir's works,<sup>85</sup> specifically to *Being and Nothingness* and *The Second Sex*, where there is a resistance to becoming Other. As will be seen in this chapter, the novel alludes to Sartre's *No Exit* and to the concept of nothingness both in Sartre's works and in *King Lear*. Furthermore, the deconstruction and remythologisation of the fairy tale intertexts do not necessarily bring the protagonist to 'an "I" with eyes and heart' in this novel, as Wilson claims,<sup>86</sup> but to different visions where the power of sight is dominant and where the body is creatively reposed in an artistic perspective. This is mainly highlighted by the intertext of Elaine's paintings, where she expresses 'what she cannot otherwise say'<sup>87</sup> and where she reconstructs her fragmented, traumatised self.

The process of self-mutilation and 'formative trauma' is also pointed out by Brooks Bouson,<sup>88</sup> which links both to the Little Mermaid and to the imposed feminine role expressed in the *Eaton's Catalogue*, where 'the female self is shaped and irrevocably damaged in the process'.<sup>89</sup> This provokes 'not only [...] loss and

yearning but also [...] fear and anger'.<sup>90</sup> Elaine feels inadequate and in danger as well as traumatised. Bouson identifies her reactions in the 'aggressive and transgressive dialogic speech' that 'openly challenges the "socially acceptable" voices of bourgeois culture'<sup>91</sup> and that elicits 'both an intellectual and emotional response from readers'.<sup>92</sup> I find this final remark interesting, although I believe that this novel deals with wider themes which entail science, language or literature and art and invites the reader to ponder over them rather than focus on women's anger. The novel certainly poses questions but does not expect responses. Compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, the questioning at the end of the novel is less pressing and the vision, though blurred, is less open.<sup>93</sup> Elaine will go back to her family in Vancouver, will live with them and probably will carry on with her art. Creativity expressed in visual art seems to be the answer to her anxieties, even though it is fragmented and temporary.

The crucial importance of Elaine's retrospective art is also highlighted by Howells, as is the connection with Hawking's work.<sup>94</sup> According to Howells, the cat's eye marble is both a talisman and Elaine's Third Eye<sup>95</sup> that makes her see differently and mercilessly.<sup>96</sup> If Elaine's 'narrative remains incomplete, her paintings offer different figuration',<sup>97</sup> probably a more complete one, or an attempt at a more complete one, which is expressed in a symbolic way via multiple possible readings. The boundaries between science and art are dissolved and her artwork shows 'one way in which a woman deals with the master discourse of science'.<sup>98</sup> This links to the novel's attempt to merge art, science and language or literature, which gives a wider polyvalent perspective that addresses and questions how to be human in a different ontological vision. Elaine asserts her individuality after the incident in the ravine in a different way from her former 'friends'.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, she explores multiple viewpoints in her artwork and in her 'simultaneity of time existence' that link to a 'Bakhtinian paradigm of multiplicity of perspective'.<sup>100</sup> This links to my argument and to Bakhtin's 'dialogic thought' that engenders multiple visions and challenges common narratives. According to Howells, the retrospective exhibition is 'a summa of all the elements of her life already contained in the narrative'.<sup>101</sup> This connects with the subversive and multiple use of the artwork intertext in the novel that proposes a different reading of Elaine's retrospective life and, at the same time, parodies and reaffirms, in the figurative



technique, the dominant discourse, which is 'a riddling version of the truth [...] invented by language'.<sup>102</sup> In line with this concept, as Howells claims, the paintings are 'truly subversive, uncovering the highly complex network of conflicting energies' and express an 'excess of signification that goes beyond the discursive narrative produced by her conscious mind'.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, the 'boundaries between the visionary and the visible' are dissolved, allowing an encompassing view.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Cooke remarks that for Atwood, 'art's role is not just to imitate and entertain, but rather to do these things for a particular purpose: to reveal, challenge, and thereby dismantle the flaws in our society', which in *Cat's Eye* 'have to do with the male-dominant artistic tradition, one in which women tend to be models rather than artists'.<sup>105</sup> Elaine's artwork is therefore in the foreground, revealing and enforcing the possible readings of the novel through the intertexts. They question and challenge the role of the female artist in a male-dominant society in an attempt to reverse the male gaze and encompass art, literature and science in a possible new ontological vision that is open to change.

Sherrill Grace offers a different and more univocal interpretation, because she sees in *Cat's Eye* a 'complex and deeply satisfying image of the female self' and claims that the 'cat's eye marble [...] captures the sense of harmonious completion-in-multiplicity'.<sup>106</sup> She identifies in 'Unified Field Theory' the self-portrait of the artist and finds 'Elaine's voice [...] confident and reflective compared to Joan and Offred'.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, she also remarks that 'the image of the self portrayed in this painting [Unified Field Theory] remains enigmatic and mysterious [...] where nothing is lost and everything connects'.<sup>108</sup> Connections and multiplicity are therefore the key words that summarise Elaine's vision expressed in her paintings, which, according to Grace, present a 'cyclical, iterative, layered narrative that invites exploration rather than arrival'.<sup>109</sup>

According to Davidson, Atwood rewrites Proust, Shakespeare and Dante, re-enacting 'a visual version of Marcel's tasting the madeleine', and refers to *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.<sup>110</sup> She evokes 'the darkness of the human heart' that is connected to the theme of betrayal in *Macbeth* and to the theme of nothingness in *King Lear*.<sup>111</sup> According to Davidson, Dante's *Inferno* is present at the beginning

of the novel when the narrator mentions being 'in the middle of my life' (13) and being 'dragged downwards, into the layers of this place as into liquefied mud' (13), evoking Dante's being lost in the dark wood at the beginning of the *Divine Comedy* and the atmosphere of hell. There are other echoes of the *Comedy* in the apparition of the Virgin Mary, who refers to Beatrice as a spiritual mediator, and in the stars and light that Elaine sees at the end of the story that refer to the final lines of the three books of the *Comedy* where Dante sees light again.<sup>112</sup> According to Davidson, this gives a 'moral sense' to the narration and shows 'not only the life of a past otherwise lost in time, but also what was lost by living that life'.<sup>113</sup> In addition, the '[e]choes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing' are linked to *King Lear*'s theme of nothingness, and the remark 'there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by' (421) suggests that after the questioning and decentring process of the master narratives produced by the novel, 'not much' is left.<sup>114</sup> I consider the allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy* a minor reference that Atwood does not develop in a critical, parodic or moral way but only in a literary sense that is not relevant for my approach. On the other hand, I find Davidson's thoughts about the connection to *King Lear*'s concept of nothingness that is present throughout the novel interesting; it underlines the fact that 'not much' is left after the acknowledgement of the failure and artificiality of the master narratives.

As will be seen later in this chapter, my analysis of the main intertexts confirms what the major critics have already pointed out in their works and emphasises how the novel's intertextual references play an important role in the development of the narrative, in the construction of characters and in the subversive quality of this novel. Its narrative proposes a possible alternative ontological vision that encompasses art, literature and science in the form of a polylogue. This structure emphasises the complexity of the intertextual network in this novel: its heterogeneity, its multi-layered perspectives and the motility of the subject.

### **King Lear: a problematic parallel**

The intertext of *King Lear* operates both as a parallel to and as a reversal of the main text. According to McWilliams, Atwood engages with Shakespeare's text in a complex intertextual dialogue that 'reveals her further engagement with – and rejects – the

incarnation of the Bildungsroman intent on singular personal development'.<sup>115</sup> The Shakespearean text provides an example which is distorted and debased in the context of modern society, thereby questioning the possibility of the coming-of-age kind of story and the development of personal identity. The ambiguity of the sign allows a multifaceted interpretation that suggests a transformation which is not allowed in the rigid roles of the male-dominant society and emphasises the precariousness of the subject in motility. The appropriation works as a bricolage in the sense that it appropriates material from different ranges of things that are available.<sup>116</sup> The debasing of the narrative and themes of *King Lear* in the context of modern society therefore implies that a consumerist approach is used in the intertextual practice.

The characters that connect most strongly to *King Lear*'s narratives, Cordelia and her father, are incapable of progress and transformation; they are caged in their roles. This links with what Atwood writes in her poem 'The Woman Makes Peace with her Faulty Heart':

How many times have I told you:  
The civilized world is a zoo,  
not a jungle, stay in your cage.  
And then the shouts  
of blood, the rage as you threw yourself  
against my ribs.<sup>117</sup>

Society's entrapping roles are highlighted by the image of the cage, which denies the possibility of total autonomous personal development and transformation. This happens not only to Cordelia but in part to Elaine as well; their progress remains only an attempt in the novel. Cordelia above all expresses the dark side of the double. She is incapable of real progression and her transformations are only external and fanciful; they do not suggest an interior change or a change in her understanding. Elaine, in her attempt to attain a new vision, succeeds as an artist and as an individual, though only partially and temporarily. The intertextual reference to *King Lear* is therefore used to highlight both the parallels with and the differences from Shakespeare's characters in the context of modern society and reveals the debased quality of its constricted roles.

Cordelia refers to and reverses the character of Shakespeare's play. She is the third daughter, is outspoken,<sup>118</sup> challenges conventions in the 'underwear game' (78) and provokes her father because of her desperate need for his approval. She is rejected by him and is never enough for him, not only because she does not demonstrate in words her love for him and her obedience to him<sup>119</sup> but also because she does not comply with the ideal woman's role that is dictated by the patriarchal society through rules implemented in the family and at school.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, Cordelia in the novel is not capable of self-sacrifice and her subversive honesty can be malicious and brutal, mirroring the rules and the role that are enforced on her. At the same time, she reverses them in her vain attempts to change her look, camouflaging herself in different versions of herself. Her sisters, Perdita and Miranda,<sup>121</sup> seem to live up to these roles by using contrived language<sup>122</sup> and they are personifications of the stereotypes of a blond and a brunette, one successfully practising ballet, the other music; they are more like showgirls or characters in advertisements than believable people. They are devalued versions of the Shakespearean characters that underline the parodic use of the intertextual discourse and comment on the constricted, rigid roles of modern society that do not allow vital transformation. In fact, Elaine cleverly remarks that '[w]hatever has happened to them, causing them to walk rather than run, as if there's an invisible leash around their necks [...] it may happen to us too' (93), which reveals the rigid, constricted role imposed on women in modern society. Elaine comments further:

I go to dinner at Cordelia's house. Dinners at Cordelia's house are of two kinds: those when her father is there and those when he isn't. When he isn't there, things are slapdash. Mummie comes to the table absent-mindedly still in her painting smock, Perdie and Mirrie and also Cordelia appear in blue jeans with a man's shirt over top and their hair in pin-curls. ...

But when Cordelia's father is there, everything is different. There are flowers on the table, and candles. Mummie has on her pearls, the napkins are neatly rolled in the napkin-rings instead of crumpled in under the edges of the plates. Nothing is forgotten. There are no pin-curls, no elbows on the table, even the spines are straighter.

Today is one of the candle days. Cordelia's father sits at the head of the table, with his craggy eyebrows, his wolfish look,

and bends upon me the full force of his ponderous, ironic, terrifying charm. He can make you feel that what he thinks of you matters, because he will be accurate, but that what you think of him is of no importance. (248-249)

The father rules the household, like Lear, but while Lear demands a demonstration of love and loyalty, in the novel, Cordelia's father expects outward perfection, the performance of stereotyped roles that conform with what is dictated in the male-dominated society. It does not matter whether women agree with the roles they have to play; the important thing is that they respect the rules and comply with their roles when he is present. Elaine describes his charm as mesmerising, threatening and absolute. Having a conversation with him is a demanding test that her friend Cordelia cannot put up with:

'Which one, indeed,' he says. 'That's very good.' This may be what he wants: a give and take, of sorts. But Cordelia can never come up with it, because she is too frightened of him. She's frightened of not pleasing him. And yet he is not pleased. I've seen it many times, her dithering, fumble-footed efforts to appease him. But nothing she can do or say will ever be enough, because she is somehow the wrong person.

I watch this, and it makes me angry. It makes me want to kick her. How can she be so abject? When will she learn? (249)

Cordelia is to her father what Elaine was to Cordelia when she bullied Elaine at school. Hite comments that Elaine 'is nearly sacrificed as a proxy "wrong person" in the symbolic economy of the little girls'.<sup>123</sup> Cordelia is enthralled and subjugated by her father; she is terrified and abject, and she will never please him.<sup>124</sup> Her position is the reverse of that of the Shakespearean character, who maintains her autonomy from her father as well as her independent view. This emphasises the dejected quality of the Atwoodian Cordelia – her abjection in modern society whose constricted and constructed roles are rigid and threatening and do not allow transformation.

Cordelia's father has a wolfish look and the family is completely dominated by his presence. He has not given up his authority or part of his kingdom, like Lear; on the

contrary, he is in total control, dictating roles and rules. Elaine describes him as adamant, tyrannical and implacable like Lear, but he has no tender spots and is incapable of change. His tyrannical power is inflexible and ruthless, and he is unable to adapt or feel compassion. His rules are enforced on his daughter, trapping Cordelia to the point of insanity. Unlike Lear, the father of Atwood's Cordelia and all the other fathers in the novel are incapable of understanding and of transformation and do not undergo any crisis or show any kind of weakness or compassion towards their daughters. They are static and, therefore, stereotyped: they are frightening and monolithic figures. This reveals the novel's engagement with the intertext, testifying to the lack of capacity for change in modern society that engenders constricted, rigid roles, thereby denying renovation, which is vital. Furthermore, fathers in the novel are associated with night-time as they are only at home in the evening after they return from work (164). Elaine comments that 'their ways are enigmatic' and that they have a 'real, unspeakable power' (164). This could be linked to some kind of abuse, though in the novel there are no allusions to sexual abuse, only to verbal harassment and physical beating, which happen in Carol's family (48, 164).

In the novel, Cordelia only plays minor roles and imitates rather than acts.<sup>125</sup> She shifts and is ever changing; she has 'a tendency to exist', as Stephen says (242) and Elaine repeats at the end of the novel. She is finally silenced – reduced to nothing after being devoured by her father, the wolf – and is left incapable of real transformation.<sup>126</sup> On the contrary, Shakespeare's character is heroic in her devotion and loyalty to her father and in her unjust death. Therefore, the parodic quality of the intertext shows a rewriting of Shakespeare's themes that reinterprets *King Lear*'s discourse, exposing the rigid and threatening roles the male-dominant society imposes on women and the consequent incapacity for transformation. The novel intentionally devalues the figure of Cordelia through the intertextual reference, revealing her dark, vulnerable sides in the novel and commenting in this way on the Shakespearean character as well as on the effects of the enforced patriarchal rules on young girls.

If Atwood's Cordelia is inadequate in regard to her father, she is, in turn, more than 'adequate' with Elaine, with whom she performs her father's role; she enforces on Elaine the rules of the patriarchal society to the point of torturing her. In this personification, Cordelia echoes her father's discourses, which she has internalised,<sup>127</sup>

and reflects them onto Elaine. Similarly to Toronto, Cordelia is '[m]alicious, grudging, vindictive, implacable' (14). Only in her retrospective vision, envisaged in her paintings, can Elaine reinterpret this traumatic experience from an ironic, more detached angle, though the effects of this experience will endure throughout her life.

The recurrent theme of suicide and Cordelia's and Elaine's attempted suicides are again a debased version of Shakespeare's Cordelia's heroic death at the hands of her enemies.<sup>128</sup> This is reinterpreted in the novel as suicide and self-harming; the latter is a self-effacing and self-punishing practice that is often carried out because the person feels unable to live up to the roles and expectations of modern society. In the novel, Cordelia cannot live up to her father's rules and attempts suicide. Elaine's practice of peeling off the skin of her feet or biting her lips, fingernails and cuticles and the fantasised torture of the wringer<sup>129</sup> reflect the damaging effects of the anxiety produced by the pressure of the enforced roles. They are traumatising experiences that affect the individual throughout their lives.

As Elaine notices, Cordelia's destiny is already present in the choice of her name, a weight hanging 'around her neck' (263). The stake is too high and she is incapable of living up to it, because she is incapable of endurance and real transformation. She is evanescent, shifting and playing ever-changing roles; she is an actress.<sup>130</sup> The subversive use of the intertext exposes the inflexible rules of the modern patriarchal society that control the individual from within, as in Bentham's panopticon,<sup>131</sup> and do not leave human beings any space for freedom or for the possibility of vital renovation. They eliminate apparent pain but control the soul. Foucault claims that it is no longer the body that suffers – 'it must be the soul. The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations'.<sup>132</sup> In Cordelia's case this is fatal, while Elaine manages to break free, at least in part, and survive, thanks to the development of her capacity to see clearly through the cat's eye marble and to her creative potential.

The theme of sight is crucial in the novel, as it is in *King Lear*. But while in the play the emphasis is on the acquisition of an interior, spiritual and insightful way of seeing, in the novel it is a detached way of seeing which dissects the object<sup>133</sup> and controls and judges the individual.<sup>134</sup> This occurs both in Elaine's first approach to biology and then

in her approach to painting; this way of seeing is prompted by the progressive vision of the cat's eye marble. It is also clear in the men's gaze that constantly watches, controls and judges women.<sup>135</sup>

This also connects to what Berger claims about women being the object of men's gaze; it is a point of reference that clarifies women's condition in the novel that is associated with sight, men's gaze and consequently surveillance. Berger remarks that '[a] woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself [...] From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.' Her self is split in two because she is the surveyor and the surveyed, and the most important thing is 'how she appears to men'.<sup>136</sup> Similarly to Bentham's panopticon, and to the Rapunzel syndrome,<sup>137</sup> this surveillance is internalised and constitutes a woman's being; it is an alienation enacted by men and through women's surveillance of other women. In this play of mirrors, 'women watch themselves being looked at'<sup>138</sup> and lose their subjectivity. Elaine feels continually watched both by her friends and by a supposed male audience (121, 125, 128, 294, 304). She tries to escape from this vision in her high school years and afterwards, starting a journey from an exclusively narcissistic self towards a more autonomous one.<sup>139</sup> Her way of seeing becomes a choice, an artistic choice that treats the Other as an object, as she was treated, and implies a search for a clearer vision, as in the picture 'Life Drawing'. This is enhanced by her training in the observation of nature prompted by her father's work and the visits to the laboratory. Her skills in dissecting and drawing animals' interiors highlight her tendency towards an objective observation as well as her role as a victimiser. Elaine's attempt to reverse her position from being an object of man's gaze to the subject of it is partially prevented by her loss of memory, which she tries to recover in her paintings. Her power of sight is finally regained at the end of the novel when she looks through the cat's eye marble.

In this way, Elaine feels constantly watched and judged by her best friends, who have internalised the rules and roles of the patriarchal society that are dictated in school and in the family and are symbolised in the novel in the pictures of the *Eaton's Catalogue* and of other women's magazines.<sup>140</sup> This provokes anxiety and a constant state of alertness in the young Elaine, who feels inadequate without being aware of what is wrong with her. The same occurs to Cordelia, as Elaine will discover later on, and she is



inflicting on Elaine the same treatment she is undergoing at home. In the novel, Cordelia behaves like Goneril and Regan, betraying and torturing Elaine without an apparent reason other than her thirst for power.<sup>141</sup> In the intertextual dialogue, the flaws of the master narratives are therefore exposed; the novel proposes alternatives that suggest the motility of the subject and the aim for survival.

Sight is therefore reinterpreted in *Cat's Eye*; it is a powerful means of knowledge but it is not, as in *King Lear*, a means to acquire spiritual growth or insightfulness. It dissects individuals and objects and eventually allows Elaine to have a more realistic and objective vision of the world that surrounds her. The intertext is rewritten from a different angle that emphasises the ruthlessness of sight in modern society. It is a powerful sense that dissects rather than heals, and judges and entraps but does not have any spiritual outcomes and does not allow vital transformations.<sup>142</sup>

The other recurrent theme that links the novel to the play is the emphasis on 'nothingness'.<sup>143</sup> In the play, the search for identity and the characters' need to be meaningful is constantly challenged by Cordelia's 'nothing'. Humans' status is put into question through the apparent love and loyalty that are reversed and turned into fraud and betrayal in Goneril and Regan. Everything seems lost at the end and nothingness dominates. Nevertheless, through his acknowledgement that he is nothing, Lear acquires a new vision and awareness. This transformation is absent in the novel; its oppressive society annihilates individuals, reducing them to nothing and shattering their identities. This connects to Kristeva's concept of abjection, which is a useful point of reference that explains the progression of the characters that connects with the disruptive intertextual dialogue and the revolutionary quality of *écriture féminine*. The degradation and refusal caused by Elaine's friends' bullying is a 'weight of meaninglessness' that crushes the individual; it is an expulsion of the self that establishes a new, different self.<sup>144</sup> It is 'a process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death'.<sup>145</sup> This is a border condition that is similar to Elaine's when she intentionally faints and self-harms. The borders of the world blur and the social rules are not clear; they become impossibly demanding and exclude her. At the same time, she self-excludes unconsciously, refusing to comply inwardly with the role imposed on her. She separates and 'strays', as Kristeva remarks.<sup>146</sup> This provokes a double reaction in the subject because the period of abjection is double: it is a time of 'oblivion and thunder, of veiled

infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth'.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, Elaine's excluded position allows her to reject the role imposed on her during the process of abjection and to envisage alternatives. Nevertheless, this reveals a contradictory effect on the subject; it is both suffering and trouble, but it also provokes jouissance, according to Kristeva. It is 'a sublime alienation, a forfeited existence'.<sup>148</sup> The 'victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones' as well.<sup>149</sup> This condition is based on ambiguity, because it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it. Therefore, the Other possesses the subject and 'through such possession [allows the subject] to be'.<sup>150</sup> Such is Elaine's state when she feels subjugated by Cordelia; she is enthralled by her and, ambiguously, cannot stand up for herself until the episode that occurs in the ravine. Subsequently, she interiorises the traumatic experience, and this will have consequences throughout her life, causing the recurring episodes of nothingness, the loss of memory and the attempted suicide. Elaine's abjection is therefore double-edged; she is complicit in being the victim of the abjection, which causes sufferance but also jouissance, but it also allows Elaine to form an alternative vision in her artwork that rejects what is proposed by the male-dominant society. In this rejection there is jouissance and pain at the same time, which cannot be separated. There is also an attempt to reach wholeness through a creative expression that encompasses language, science and art, as is testified to by the narrative, her artwork and science theories. Therefore, there is a vital transformation in Elaine that takes place through the experience of abjection that does not occur in Cordelia. Cordelia is trapped in her shifting, constructed roles. Abjection eventually annihilates her without causing a transformation. She impersonates the Other in her relationship with Elaine, causing pain and jouissance, but in the relationship with her father she is totally destroyed. The analysis reveals the threatening and lethal consequences of the constricted roles that erase the individual. Elaine survives thanks to her creativity, which leads her to search for alternative paths.

Elaine reconstructs her self through the recollections of her memories that are mirrored in the retrospective exhibition of her paintings after the traumatic experience she has in the hole, where she lost her power (107); it is a 'time marker' with a 'before' and an 'after', which she has momentarily erased from her memory:

Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep of the hole in Cordelia's backyard. I'm wearing a black dress and a cloak, from the dress up cupboard. I'm supposed to be Mary Queen of Scots, headless already. They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight air disappears, and there's the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful. Inside the hole it's dim and cold and damp and smells like toad burrows.

Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror.

When I remember back to this time in the hole, I can't really remember what happened to me while I was in it. I can't remember what I really felt. Maybe nothing happened, maybe these emotions I remember are not the right emotions. I know the others came and got me out after a while, and the game or some other game continued. I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing, a square like a door. Perhaps the square is empty; perhaps it's only a marker, a time marker that separates the time before it from the time after. The point at which I lost power. Was I crying when they took me out of the hole? It seems likely. On the other hand, I doubt it. I can't remember. (107-108)

The episode that took place in the hole symbolically connects to the experience of being a woman, which means being reduced to nothing by the practice of modern society. Therefore, 'to be female is to be dead, to be buried beneath the weight of social expectations'.<sup>151</sup> Elaine needs to find an alternative door to go through to escape the black square of nothingness that Cordelia and society have forced her into. The trauma will echo throughout her life, causing indelible consequences. The emphasis on using language to produce a traumatic emotional effect, such as 'daylight air disappears', 'dirt hitting the board, shovelful after shovelful', 'the darkness pressing down on me; then

terror', or 'a black square filled with nothing', highlights the dramatic condition that annihilates the individual in an agony that is almost unbearable. The pace of the passage is slow; it seems to last forever, and the description is detailed to emphasise the internal sufferance. As the narrative points out, women undergo torture-like experiences meant to force them to comply with prescribed roles. Being a woman means 'being consumable and expendable',<sup>152</sup> like Susie, who is compared to a chicken after her induced abortion, and as Elaine's fellow artist Jody states by incorporating the sign MEAT LIKE YOU LIKE IT in her mannequin installation.<sup>153</sup> The fear of becoming a consumable product without a voice, of becoming nothing, buried and symbolically dead, is present in this passage and throughout the narrative in the reversed and parodic intertextual references and allusions. The constricted, rigid roles imposed by society result in damaging consequences for the individual. Elaine eventually survives thanks to her creative side.

Consequently, the references to 'nothing' and 'nothingness', echoing the discourse of Shakespeare's play, are linked to the shattering consequences of the enforced roles and constant surveillance present in modern society. Elaine's experience in 'the deep hole' dug by Cordelia is marked by 'a black square filled with nothing', and this ripples throughout the novel, taking the shape of the poisonous nightshades, 'the flowers [...] infused with grief' (108). It becomes a constant presence in Elaine's life: 'the days of nothing', when she 'lies on the floor in the dark' (114) and in her darkest moments when she realises she is pregnant as well just before her attempted suicide.<sup>154</sup> She re-experiences the trauma of being buried alive and feeling 'inadequate, and stupid, without worth' (372). In her drawing course with Joseph Hrbik, she needs to start from nothing, which seems to mean taking a fresh approach but actually implies that she needs to comply with the roles dictated by men, because the teacher claims that she is 'an unfinished woman [...] but here you will be finished' (272).

Nothingness is also connected to the philosophy of existentialism alluded to in the posters of the works of Beckett, (*Waiting for Godot*) and Sartre (*No Exit*) that Elaine hangs on the walls of her room (287). This is a point of reference that underlines the existential journey that Elaine is embarking on in an attempt to transform herself into an autonomous individual. This can only happen if her existence is reconstructed in the act of existing, that is, living her past and present at the same time and thus creating her

essence. As Sartre claims, 'existence precedes essence';<sup>155</sup> this concept eventually constitutes Elaine's identity. In fact, her experiences shape her self and constitute the subject in motility in dialogue with the Other. The process is generated by the intertext of her paintings, a reversed ekphrasis that recreates through language a rebellious vision of her past and present in a projection towards the future. In a wider ontological perspective on possible changes and encounters with others, this also provides an alternative interpretation and rewrites a woman's role as a creative non-victim.<sup>156</sup>

This existential view is connected to the thought of Sartre and Beauvoir concerning individuals choosing their essence in the process of existing, which is also a process of growth and openness.<sup>157</sup> When these practices collapse, the individual falls into nothingness. In the search for autonomy from her own family and from the enforced roles of society, Elaine chooses to confront the Other, an experience she has to undergo but that ends up being damaging for her self-realisation and eventually for her own survival. Nevertheless, she endures it and reacts positively after the incident in the ravine when she almost freezes to death. She is aware she needs the dialogue with the Other, the mediation of another human being to become an individual, but in the patriarchal society of the novel this experience is almost self-effacing. Relationships are conflicts, Sartre claims, that jeopardise the self but cannot be avoided.<sup>158</sup>

Elaine needs to take responsibility for her choices and behaviour both as a victim and a victimiser, and as a woman. This is an important concept in Beauvoir's work, especially in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and in the final part of *The Second Sex*. She claims that individuals, and women in particular, must assume the ambiguity of their condition that is their finitude and at the same time their infinite desires. They need to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.<sup>159</sup> This is what Elaine does eventually, and this is shown in the main text through the dialogue with the intertextual references and allusions, suggesting a broader view that inscribes her narrative in an ontological vision and expands her story in a wider perspective that includes literature, art and science. As a woman, Elaine must assume her situation of oppression and objectification and revolt against it in a creative process that subverts and rewrites the male-dominant narratives, thereby surpassing the objectification and abjection and affirming herself as a subject.<sup>160</sup> She progresses from being a 'docile body' that complies with the roles imposed by society, a victim of the bullying behaviour of her

best friends, to adopting a rebellious, subversive attitude in her artwork and in her mean-mouthing phase that leads her to a creative path, and to what Beauvoir calls 'transcendence'.

At the end of the novel, the feelings of 'wrongness, awkwardness, weakness' are transferred to Cordelia 'as they always were' (419), delineating the progress of Elaine's journey in reconstructing the essence of her shattered self through the recollection of her past and the creative practice of her painting. In the appropriation of *King Lear*'s narrative as a bricolage, the novel exposes the desecration of Shakespeare's text in modern society, where the inflexibility of the rules imposed by patriarchy do not allow transformation, caging the individuals in roles that efface their personality and reduce them to nothing. Elaine can attain a progress towards a more autonomous and credible self thanks to the power of her vision, which becomes creative art and suggests alternative views of being human.

### **'Fair is foul and foul is fair'**

The other important Shakespearean intertext is *Macbeth*. This text is mainly treated in a parodic way in a pastiche of high and low culture. At the same time, the narratives of the main text confirm certain discourses of the intertext, such as the presence of evil, the equivocation that 'Fair is Foul, Foul is Fair'<sup>161</sup> and the enthralling charm of the evil hero, in this case Cordelia, but also Elaine when they exchange roles in the cemetery (233). The play is parodied in the scene involving the cabbage,<sup>162</sup> where Cordelia's clumsiness is exposed. Thus, the atmosphere of fear and terror that is present in the performance, and indeed is present throughout the novel in its undertones of Gothic romance, is undermined.

But when Macduff comes in at the end and tosses down the cabbage in the tea-towel, it doesn't hit once and lie still. It bounces, bumpity-bump, right across the stage like a rubber ball, and falls off the edge. This dampens the tragic effect, and the curtain comes down on laughter.

It's Cordelia's fault, for replacing the cabbage. She is mortified. 'It was *supposed* to be rotten,' she wails backstage. Where I have gone to congratulate her. 'So now they tell me!'

The actors have made light on it; they tell her it's a novel effect. But although Cordelia laughs and blushes and tries to pass it off lightly, I can see she is almost in tears.

I ought to feel pity, but I do not. Instead, on the way home from school the next day, I say 'Bumpity, bumpity bump, plop,' and Cordelia says, 'Oh, don't.' Her voice is toneless, leaden. This is not a joke. I wonder, for an instant, how I can be so mean to my best friend. For this is what she is. (245-246)

The episode is humiliating for Cordelia, and Elaine, now in the role of victimiser, does not miss the opportunity to refresh her memory. Cordelia remembers this episode when she meets Elaine while working for the Stratford Shakespearean Festival (302). This reveals her weak position despite the fact that she had changed her camouflage, that is, her clothes. The scene parodies Shakespeare's text and points to Elaine's vengefulness as well. The tragic atmosphere of *Macbeth* is ironised in a modern perspective that is emphasised by the repetition of 'Bumpity, bumpity bump' in the passage that diminishes the individual who is pointing out the unacceptability of imperfections.

*Macbeth's* three witches are also parodied in Elaine's painting 'Three witches', in which three witches represent three sofas, one of which is displayed at the retrospective exhibition. The picture is figurative, that is, realistic and reminiscent of the pictures in women's catalogues, in this case the *Eaton's Catalogue*. Significantly, the triptych recalls Elaine's girlfriends: Carol as the chintz, dirty rose sofa, Grace as the maroon velvet sofa with doilies, and Cordelia in the middle, apple green with 'an egg-cup, five times life-size, with broken egg shell in it' (337). This reconnects with the episode when Cordelia made Elaine believe that she needed 'to put a hole in the bottom of the shell' of the egg 'so the witches can't put out to sea' (72), which reveals Elaine's enthrallment with Cordelia's discourse; likewise *Macbeth*, who is fascinated by the witches' prophecy. This also shows Cordelia as the collector of egg shells, which symbolise some form of power but, simultaneously, her fragmented, broken personality. Her 'witch role' is confirmed in the story in her wish to play the first witch in *Macbeth*, when she disturbingly quotes the first two lines of the play. As a matter of fact, the three witches evoked do not include Elaine, as in the episode involving the alphabet soup in

Chapter Twenty-six, Elaine sees 'the three of them, very dark, walking towards me. Their coat almost black. Even their faces when they came closer look too dark, as if they're in shadow' (136-137). She is their victim; her fate is dictated by their will or prophecy that, in this case, has lost the magic power it has in Shakespeare's play and is only a fabrication. Nevertheless, it is 'real' for Elaine as long as she listens and needs to believe in it, as Macbeth does, accomplishing what the witches prophesy. They hold up a mirror in which Macbeth recognises his fate. In a similar way, Cordelia holds up a pocket mirror, saying to Elaine: 'Look at yourself! Just look!' (158), making her believe that she is inadequate, wrong – that she is nothing. The narratives of the main text therefore parody the play, reinterpreting its dark atmosphere and exposing the fabricated quality of fear and terror. In the novel, the attitude of the 'three witches' threatens Elaine's integrity and her personal development; it has a dangerous repercussion in her future life. Therefore, *Macbeth's* narrative is subverted, parodied and confirmed in its dangerous capacity to influence and entrap personal narratives.<sup>163</sup> Atwood flags up and parodies the intertext to underline its alluring, frightening and fabricated qualities; the witches' prophecy is only a made-up, deceptive discourse in modern society. This emphasises the necessity of an intertextual dialogue that challenges the master narratives in order to allow the individuals' progress, transformation and therefore survival.

References to *Macbeth* in this double vision are also found in the recurring presence of Cordelia as a ghost<sup>164</sup> and as a disturbing double<sup>165</sup> and in the three friends in Halloween costumes, Carol as a fairy, Grace as a lady and Cordelia as a clown. Elaine is a vanishing ghost at this stage, like Banquo. The costumes underline the enforced roles they are impersonating and, in Cordelia's case, her artificial, ludic and performative characteristic. The dialogue with the Other, text or doppelgänger, is questioned at the root. In the world of the language of the text, it is an imaginary interchange where the individuals are caged in constructed roles that shift from having a ludic to an existential attitude. On the one hand, believing in the witches' prophecy is a personal choice, but on the other hand, the rules and roles of modern society are so enthralling and internalised that it is almost impossible to break free.<sup>166</sup>

Therefore, through the intertextual references Atwood exposes the fabricated quality of the roles impersonated by the characters and of their discourses. They also confirm the



threatening quality of the narratives of modern society that endangers the development of the individuals to the point of suicide.<sup>167</sup> The intertexts and allusions create a map, indicate guidelines for a rewriting that is subversive, and eventually incomplete, and aims for survival, or surviving. They are useful references to chart this world of language, but are also necessarily illusory, temporary and subject to rewriting. The motility of the subject is therefore vital in the intertextual conversation within the novel that exposes the rigid counterfeited roles that are proposed by society but also suggests a different vision of these roles in an encompassing multi-layered view.

This perspective is confirmed in the recurring presence of 'blood'; the blood that cannot be washed away in *Macbeth* is a symbol of a clearly identified guilt and of death. In the novel, blood signifies pain and is intentionally produced in Elaine's real or fantasised self-harming practices,<sup>168</sup> and in her suicide attempt. Blood symbolises guilt about the female 'curse', but this sense of guilt is never clear or precisely identified; menstruation is ambiguous and disturbing, smelling of 'decaying flowers' and looking like 'dried gravy' (93).<sup>169</sup> It is 'unspeakable' (229) and is related to the female body and to sex as disgusting and monstrous.<sup>170</sup> This is also indicated in the miscarriage suffered by Elaine's mother and above all in Susie's abortion, which is as terrifying and horrifying as a murder. Women are once again forced to practice self-harm by the inflexible rules of society. Elaine herself falls into a state of terror and nothingness when she realises she is pregnant. The reference to blood is therefore a reference to guilt that is not the consequence of a murderous act, as in *Macbeth*, but is a fault inherent in the female body that cannot be washed away. It is a fabricated guilt, unjustified and terrifying.<sup>171</sup> This discourse entraps women again in prefabricated, frightening and dangerous roles they need to acknowledge and defend themselves from.

The theme of the double is present throughout the novel in different versions of twins: twin beds, twin sets, Miss Lumley's recipe for symmetry and in the horror story of the two sisters in the comic book; twins are also evoked in the picture 'Half Face'.<sup>172</sup> Elaine and Cordelia 'are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key' (411). They are both in need of a dialogue with the Other to complete and understand their split self. This dialogue, which is inherent in the intertextual exchange,<sup>173</sup> suggests different perspectives but also seems full of anger, hate and retaliations that have been prompted, once again, by the enforced narratives of the patriarchal society.<sup>174</sup> As a

double, Elaine changes place with Cordelia at the cemetery; she becomes the victimiser but at the same time is constantly influenced and haunted by her friend's presence.<sup>175</sup> This 'doubleness and division' also reflects and underlines the painful social construction where 'some crucial aspects of the self have been lost or repressed',<sup>176</sup> as is clear in the intertextual references to women's catalogues and magazines.

From this perspective, the analysis of the intertext of the *Eaton's Catalogue* shows the effect of the enforced roles of the patriarchal society on women. They are simulacra, an image of an image, as Baudrillard claims,<sup>177</sup> that create the tower where the different Rapunzels of the story are entrapped. This is also echoed by allusions to other catalogues and magazines, such as *Housekeeping*, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Chatelaine*, and colouring books too.<sup>178</sup> The content of the catalogue is treated with 'reverence' but is also parodied, as the pages of the catalogue were used as toilet paper up in the north (53). Elaine is aware of the artificial quality of the role she is performing and of the accumulation of the objects she adds in her scrapbook, which are symbolic of the consumerist society, but at the same time she is eager to enter this world – the girls' world – a world of illusion which is alluring and pleasant, a 'relief' (54). Actually, it is a temporary and deceiving relief, like being an 'apprentice in nothingness',<sup>179</sup> that will eventually expose the girls to a continuous sense of inadequacy. Elaine wants to improve in her role of 'good girl' in modern society and temporarily becomes a 'docile body'.<sup>180</sup> This implies a rejection of the innocent world of the wilderness where she spent her childhood, where her mother did not 'give a hoot' (214) about the social conventions – an attitude she partially maintains in the city<sup>181</sup> – and where the family could enjoy a freer life. However, in the isolated life in the wilderness, it is not easy to have a dialogue with the Other, which Elaine is eager to accomplish instead.<sup>182</sup> Through the pictures Elaine glues into her scrapbook and the images of saucepans and domestic tools she cuts out at Grace's home, she is in dialogue with the role of a woman that society wants her to personify, which she seems to prefer to the isolated existence she had with her family in the north. The intertextual reference underlines the fact that Elaine repeatedly chooses contact with the world of girls to form her identity and, at the same time, exposes the enforcement of the rules of the patriarchal society imposed since childhood, mainly on girls but on boys as well.<sup>183</sup> The effect is traumatic, alienating, displacing and self-effacing. This not only underlines the suffering, abject aspect of the prescribed roles imposed by society but also has parallels with imperialistic and

postcolonial ideologies, which imply backlashes. The boys play at war and the girls are always inadequate in a consumerist society that asks for more in a cannibalistic, never-satiated perspective. The society they live in is dominated by colonial rule and sexism that produces 'an "other" to whom one can do bad things without judging oneself to be bad for doing so',<sup>184</sup> as Cordelia and Elaine do in turn to each other in their double, interchanging roles of victim and victimiser. The *Eaton's Catalogue* is therefore an important intertext that emphasises the rules implemented by society that are eventually internalised by the young girls. The novel challenges these rules in the dissent expressed in Elaine's paintings.

The *Eaton's Catalogue* comes back in Chapter Seventeen and in Chapter Forty-two,<sup>185</sup> when Elaine and Cordelia make fun of the Smeaths, calling them 'The Lump-Lump Family' (230), which is a reference to their humble life. At the cemetery, Cordelia concludes that '[t]he *Eaton's Catalogues* are buried in there' (232), which is a symbolic way to dismiss, maybe too easily, what she considers to be out of fashion and her role of domestic woman. The apparently innocent women's magazines also contain the disturbing phrase 'This is a watching bird watching YOU' (138, 397), which refers to the fact that women are always watched by men as well as being surveilled by other women.

The *Eaton's Catalogue* is also present in Elaine's paintings in a pop art style that Jon dismisses as too figurative, not spontaneous and lacking energy and that Elaine defines as 'a random sampling from the Housewares Department of the *Eaton's Catalogue*' (327). This underlines the importance of the intertext in the formation of her personality as an individual and as an artist. A collage using magazines is also present in 'Pressure Cooker', a series of six images of her mother that she defines as 'a double triptych or a comic book' (150). The illustrations are debased in the description of the colours as 'rancid greens and faded blues and dirty-looking pinks' (150). Significantly, the second part of the series depicts her mother in 'her slacks and boots and her man's jacket' (151). This is in contrast with the artificial role she impersonates in the city that is represented in the images of women's magazines.<sup>186</sup> The intertext is therefore used to comment on the narrative of the dominant society, exposing its counterfeited imposed roles that constrict and damage the individual. It is a society that is never satiated and asks for more without giving clear and well-defined rules.

In her search for alternative paths, Elaine complies with this world only in part in spite of all her apparent efforts. Using the *Eaton's Catalogue* intertext and the allusions to other magazines, the novel exposes the artificiality of such publications and traces the traumatic experience of the protagonist in her retrospective reconstruction both from an artistic and a personal point of view that is her attempt to encompass a wider experience of being human. This implies an attempt to rewrite the narratives of the male-dominant society through intertexts and allusions to expose the shattering consequences of imposed roles and suggest alternative, creative and personal solutions in a universe that reflects humans' wish to explore and expand.

Elaine confirms this vision in the description of her paintings, as will be seen later in this chapter. Howells claims that 'socially accepted codes of seeing are challenged by the eye of the artist' in the novel; therefore, Elaine also 'introduce[s] further dimensions of meaning' through her artwork, which proposes different visions at conceptual and factual levels. According to Davidson, '[i]n these "multiplicities" of meaning, the paintings become "sub-versions" in the perspective of Elaine's life.'<sup>187</sup> This is only in part acknowledged by the protagonist. The most detailed descriptions of the pictures are, significantly, present at the end of the novel as a metaphoric conclusion of Elaine's journey of retrospection and a metonymical reconstruction of the complex puzzle of her life, a wholeness that the protagonist has tried to put in place. The pictures also connect to the different sections of the novel, except for the first and the last sections: 'Iron Lung', where Elaine has lived almost until the end<sup>188</sup> and where she fantasises Cordelia is living, and 'Bridge', which may refer to 'Unified Field Theory' or to the final factual description of the bridge in the ravine, a source of trauma and redemptive vision but which eventually turns out to be only a material landscape. Some of the pictures are anticipated in the narration and are connected to their symbolic meaning in the final part of the novel. Partial descriptions of some of the pictures are present in some of the sections, such as for Mrs Smeath's 'Empire Bloomers' series in Chapter Forty-one or 'Pressure Cooker' in Chapter Twenty-eight. In some cases, they also allude or refer to other texts within and outside the main text. For example, 'Picoseconds' alludes to Bruegel's picture 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' as well as 'One Wing'; both refer to her brother Stephen's death and to the myth of Icarus. The myth of Icarus is also present in 'Falling Women', providing a parodic and debased angle to women's

condition. 'Cat's Eye', the self-portrait, refers to 'The Arnolfini Marriage', which is also present in the main text. The 'Three Muses' alludes to the classical Graces as displaced persons; the 'Unified Field Theory' connects with the incident in the ravine and to Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Mrs Smeath's pictures reveal Elaine's unconscious hatred and also allude to the Bible, exposing the desecrating and hypocritical use of biblical quotations and concepts present in the novel. The naked, vengeful and grotesque Mrs Smeath exemplifies these empty norms that Elaine has to learn by heart but that no one lives by or follows; in fact, they are impossible rules that are parodied in Mr Smeath's versions of grace.<sup>189</sup> Jesus's rules are 'always putting in things that were impossible to do really, such as giving away all your money' (181); they are too demanding, like the rules of the male-dominant society, and do not tolerate transgressions. Forgiveness is therefore denied in the narrative, not only by Elaine, who remarks that she is a heathen and cannot forgive (180), but also in the context of the novel, where vengeful, ruthless behaviours seem to be the norm.

### **Elaine's pictures: reversed ekphrases**

The pictures are created texts that refer to analogous products that are present in the 'real' world. They are verbalised in the novel as reversed ekphrases, that is, described through language. Similarly to the other intertexts, they refer to and comment on the narrative in a subversive dialogue that challenges stereotypical images in advertisements, catalogues and magazines, dissecting 'reality'. They reveal a multi-layered perspective and present a complete but fragmented vision that encompasses the literary, scientific and artistic threads of the novel in an attempt to rewrite the narratives at wider comprehensive levels. They acknowledge the lack of perfection, the necessity of assuming one's responsibilities both at a universal and at a personal level, and the need for multiple visions.

The connections with *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking interweave with the literary view and the artistic vision present in the novel. This is a point of reference that is highlighted in the novel to give a complete view that encompasses all human experience from literature to science and art, a perspective that entails an alternative interpretation of being human. The space-time dimension, or fourth dimension, is present from the first page of the novel as the main referent of the protagonist's

retrospective reconstruction of her existence that is projected into the future. The two interconnecting places of space and time are reflected in the layering of memories of the narrative that are 'like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another' (3), as well as in the overlaying of intertextual references and allusions, where 'nothing goes away' (3).<sup>190</sup> This posits a converging of retrospective narratives, scientific connections and intertexts that suggest a comprehensive vision. The theories explained in Hawking's text are a point of reference that is used to underline and expand Elaine's vision. According to Hawking, the universe is positively expanding and is populated by intelligent beings who are in a continuous quest to describe and set the laws that govern the cosmos.<sup>191</sup> He believes that these laws should manifest in a unified theory (Unified Field Theory).<sup>192</sup> As nothing can travel faster than the speed of light, the reference frame from which you measure time and space is fundamental. It is a dynamic experience that can be met in different ways. In my argument, Elaine's blurred vision can be linked to the 'uncertainty principle' that established 'an unavoidable element of unpredictability or randomness into science'.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, this inherent predictability in measuring the universe can be seen as an imperfection.<sup>194</sup> From an ontological viewpoint, these concepts are connected to Elaine's story that is revealed in her blurred vision of travelling backwards and forwards in space-time trying to combine the randomness of her shattered condition with the world that surrounds her; this is symbolised by her lying on the floor, that is, being in contact with the ground, or 'reality', in her moments of darkness.

In the universe, positive, intelligent human beings continue to develop by looking at the cosmos from different perspectives, formulating multiple approaches that attempt to answer fundamental ontological questions about the nature of the universe and humans' place in it. The novel reaches a similar conclusion in Elaine's story, emphasising the openness at the end when Elaine steps into an uncertain future with '[e]choes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing' (421). The universe is expanding into what seems to be nothingness. This emphasises both the importance of witnessing and existing and the creative projection into an expanding future. The novel rewrites the narratives that combine scientific, literary and artistic perspectives in an attempt to reveal a new ontological vision that comprehends all human knowledge and, consequently, empowers Elaine. The protagonist attempts to reconstruct her split identity from

memories as an alternative to the counterfeited roles enforced by patriarchal narratives to attain a wholeness and to survive.

Some of the pictures are particularly interesting in this perspective and in Elaine's personal story, such as the series of pictures featuring Mrs Smeath.<sup>195</sup> They ironise her role, exposing her faults, hypocrisies and ugliness by using a realistic pictorial technique involving egg tempera, which is flat and clear.<sup>196</sup> They reveal Elaine's unconscious thought that she expresses through art, thereby becoming a creative non-victim in the pictorial production. She merges different traumatic experiences in these pictures that caused her to feel a persistent hate towards Grace's mother, such as the 'dying turtle heart' in 'White Gift', or Mrs Smeath's sadistic attitude in 'Leprosy'.<sup>197</sup> The most desecrating one is 'Erbug, The Annunciation', which shows Mr and Mrs Smeath mating like two insects (225). The religious allusions present in these pictures expose the contradictory and rigid quality of the biblical narratives that Elaine experiences at the Smeaths' as well as echo the offensive pun erbug-bugger that Cordelia prompts Elaine to use when referring to her father in Chapter Twenty-five. The word is finally uttered by Elaine, who feels betrayed by her friends but betrays her father simultaneously. At the same time, she is also aware of the power of words as well as their ambiguity and lack of definite meaning, which testifies to her distrust of words again. The paintings reveal and comment ironically on what Elaine could not remember when she painted them; they also release her hatred and have a therapeutic function. At the same time, the paintings are interweaved in the narration, giving clues about Elaine's feelings – her anger and her difficulty in forgiving. In Chapter Seventy-one she revisits these pictures, looking at Mrs Smeath's eyes that now seem 'defeated ... uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty' (405). A different point of view is suggested by alluding to the words of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest,  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest, it becomes  
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself,  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.<sup>198</sup>

And an alternative viewpoint is suggested by the inclusion of a quotation attributed to Gandhi: 'An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness' (405). The quotation is rather ambiguous in this narrative, because although Elaine recovers sight of her past by looking through the cat's eye marble, she is still blind to some parts of her past-present state and her future is undecipherable. Furthermore, Portia, after her wise and compassionate speech about mercy, is pitiless with Shylock, confiscating his possessions without any mercy.<sup>199</sup> Therefore, in the open-ended closure, forgiveness is a form of hope that is postponed in an uncertain future, and is perhaps another created image, or simulacrum, to soothe the damaged self.<sup>200</sup>

The myth of Icarus is evoked in 'Picoseconds' and 'One Wing', which are both related to Elaine's family. The heroic act of Icarus flying too high and challenging the gods is re-contextualised in the novel, where high and low culture are merged in a patchwork that juxtaposes apparently isolated images. In 'Picoseconds', Elaine's parents are painted as a snapshot in a Canadian landscape. Elaine compares this painting to Bruegel's 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' in which the emphasis on the landscape scene with the peasant ploughing in the foreground underlines the indifference of the ordinary world to heroic actions. The tragic end of Icarus is understated in his marginal position in Bruegel's painting. This also links to 'One Wing', the picture described afterwards, in which Stephen-Icarus is instead depicted in the central panel. In 'Picoseconds', the artificiality of the scene is highlighted by the symbols painted beneath: 'a red rose, an orange maple leaf, a shell' (406). Their symbolic meaning is denied as they are 'logos from old gas pump of the forties'. Therefore, the heroic interpretation of the myth is reversed, confirming the fabricated representation. The picture is also linked to Stephen's lecture in which he says that 'everything up there and indeed everything down here is a fossil, a leftover from the first picoseconds of



creation' (332). This underlines once more the parodic use of the intertext that highlights the debased effect of symbolic images in modern society. Similarly to the intertexts of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, Elaine's pictures are used to point out the artificial and trivial essence of the symbols and referents in modern society. Their flat surfaces have no depth and do not allow development or transformation, or any spiritual insight; they only exist in a perpetual reduplication of images that are cut out and reassembled at random. It is a pastiche that acquires partial signification in the context of Elaine's story, whose pieces are painfully reassembled in an attempt to reconstruct a wholeness that is provisional in the polyvalent context of the novel, which is a transgressive polylogue.

A similar anti-heroic depiction can be seen in 'One Wing', which is dedicated to the death of Elaine's brother, Stephen. Once again, the counterfeited quality of the intertext is highlighted in the representation of the aeroplanes in the side panels, while the central panel, where Stephen-Icarus is falling while holding a child's wooden sword, points out the vain and contrived quality of the unjust and useless sacrifice. Significantly, the brother has 'one wing' – he cannot fly, as is pointed out in the narrative (24, 129). His vision is univocal and does not allow him to survive. Differently from Bruegel's picture, in which only Icarus's legs are visible in the water, Stephen-Icarus is central in Elaine's painting. This not only underlines the centrality of her brother in Elaine's memories, but also her interpretation, in which the drama of the individual becomes central; it is important in the story but is alienated from the environment or landscape. Furthermore, Elaine's view is more comprehensive and multiple compared to Stephen's perspective, and therefore allows transformation and survival. The myth is rewritten, showing a different angle that loses its symbolic and heroic quality and suggests alternatives in the debased context of modern society. Elaine's vision is an attempt to give a different ontological view of being human, which seems to be more pragmatic and exposes the contradictions and artificiality of the constructed roles of modern society, suggesting alternatives. The individual acquires knowledge and awareness, experiencing everyday life through a recollection of the past and a hopeful projection into a future that is accidental and enigmatic.

The cat's eye marble prompts a multi-layered reading that Elaine rewrites in the course of the narratives, modifying its symbolic meaning and using it as a tool that she needs in

order to come to terms with the threatening, puzzling world around her. In Elaine's journey towards maturity, the cat's eye marble functions as a talisman that has the power to guide and protect her against her girlfriends, as Howells remarks.<sup>201</sup> It is her favourite marble that acquires a symbolic meaning from the beginning: 'the eyes of something that isn't known but exists anyway' (62). It makes her see in an objective and less involved way which guarantees her temporary survival. It is her rescuer, the helper or donor of fairy tales.<sup>202</sup> Its function is to help her survive through a clearer vision which is an 'impartial gaze' (155) that helps Elaine develop her artistic, subjective gaze.<sup>203</sup> She sees people and things in shapes and colours; this makes her acquire power in a moment of dumbness and enthrallment. The cat's eye marble is consequently symbolically internalised once she decides to ignore and rebel against Cordelia's, and patriarchal, dominance; it is 'something hard [...] crystalline, a kernel of glass' (193) inside her. It makes her aware of her power and is a clearer vision that makes her challenge Cordelia and subsequently the rules of the patriarchal society. Elaine puts it away in the red purse and into the steamer trunk once the marble has completed its function (203). Nevertheless, it comes back throughout the narration when she dreams of it as a hidden treasure<sup>204</sup> and in the pier glass of 'The Arnolfini Marriage', the round mirror like an 'eye, a single eye that sees more than any one else looking' (327).

The cat's eye marble is also present in 'Life Drawing', testifying to Elaine's artistic vision, which is objective, detached and personal; it reflects the woman's gaze, which is directed at men this time, inverting man's gaze from a woman's viewpoint. In the picture the marble acquires an intertextual quality as it occurs with the *Eaton's Catalogue*, commenting on the narratives. The men in the picture, Joseph and Jon, are naked and are painting their artificial interpretation of the woman sitting. The focus of the picture is on the woman's head, 'a sphere of bluish glass' (366) that is, significantly, round, autonomous, pure and self-sufficient. It personifies the cat's eye marble that has now acquired the capacity to see more and in a clearer way, which is Elaine's way of seeing.

Furthermore, the marble is present in the 'Cat's Eye' painting, a self-portrait. It is recalled in the pier glass in which the back of Elaine's head is visible together with three small dark figures. The allusion to 'The Arnolfini Marriage' shows that the witnessing presence is interpreted not as evidence but as an uncanny surveillance that threatens the

protagonist.<sup>205</sup> The portrait also suggests the importance of memories that need to be recollected and acknowledged in spite of their traumatic quality in order to acquire self-knowledge and identity, as happens in the poem 'Boat':

It is touch I go by,  
the boat like a hand feeling  
through shoals and among  
dead trees, over the boulders  
lifting unseen, layer  
on layer of drowned time falling away.

This is how I learned to steer  
through darkness by no stars.

To be lost is only a failure of memory.<sup>206</sup>

The poem echoes Elaine's state of mind, her lost memory and her fumbling in the dark, the dark square of her traumatic experience in the hole. The connection between darkness and memory is significant and partially resolved at the end of the novel when the protagonist says that there is enough light 'to see by' (421).

In 'Cat's Eye', the eye is a retrospective gaze, the eye of memory. The self-portrait is also linked to the poster that says RISLEY IN RETROSPECT and features Elaine's photo, in which she has a curled moustache reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's 'L.H.O.O.Q, Mona Lisa with moustache';<sup>207</sup> the photo is, significantly, an *objet trouvé* (found object). It is a self-parody, a pastiche, whose desecrating intention is emphasised in the phrases that are written underneath: '*Kilroy was here*' and '*Fuck Off*' (20), which echo, in a debased way, the phrase in 'The Arnolfini Marriage': '*Johannes de eyck fuit hic*'. The eye-witnessing quality of van Eyck's portrait, which records and endorses the union of the couple, is reinterpreted. Being in the public eye also means being ridiculed and eventually defaced, as Elaine points out at the end of the novel: 'I can no longer control these paintings [...] I'm what's left over' (409). This remark reflects and comments on works of art in general and their relation with the producer or author. Literary and art works are therefore disconnected from the maker and are left to the manipulation and criticism of the audience. This emphasises once more the parodic use

of the intertext that devalues and trivialises symbolic and heroic readings, thereby pointing out the contingent and ordinary quality of modern society's narratives. They debase and degrade heroic myths, artwork and literary oeuvre in a consumeristic perspective. At the same time, these references are revised in the novel, proposing alternative polyvalent views.

Significantly, the last painting of the retrospective exhibition, 'Unified Field Theory', summarises Elaine's journey, recalling her most traumatic experience, which was when she almost froze to death in the ravine. She was saved by the apparition of the Virgin of Lost Things, who holds 'an oversized cat's eye marble' (408) in the picture. This underlines the importance of the object in the course of the narration both in terms of its size and in terms of its position at the centre of the image, where the Virgin Mary's heart should be. It is the source of vision as well as the instrument that has allowed Elaine to have a clearer, more realistic view. Thanks to the marble, she could acknowledge her traumatic experiences and transform herself from being the controlled object of the Other's gaze to becoming the subject of this gaze; looking through the marble, she recalls her memories, projecting her self into a more hopeful future. In fact, the cat's eye marble comes back at the end of Chapter Sixty-nine and becomes the magic lens through which she sees 'her life entire' (398), remembers her lost memories and reconnects her past to her present, reconstructing her space-time dimension and defining her future, though temporarily.

According to Howells, the cat's eye marble is the 'Third Eye'<sup>208</sup> that allows Elaine 'a vision' in a different dimension. It can be 'merciless, especially when wounded'<sup>209</sup> but allows Elaine to see an alternative 'truth'.<sup>210</sup> This 'is not the only truth' but is a way of seeing, *her* way of seeing, which allows her transformation and makes her a subject, an individual. Furthermore, in the self-portrait, the cat's eye marble takes the place of the Virgin's heart, which was pierced by seven swords in the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help,<sup>211</sup> an image of endured grief and sorrow which reflected Elaine's state at the time.<sup>212</sup> The multifaceted reading therefore encompasses different qualities: it is a talisman that protects the protagonist, a lens through which to see and acknowledge her past and to enable her to have a more objective view of her present, which is eventually internalised, and finally a heart that is also an eye that can be given as a gift symbolising mercy and forgiveness.

Atwood seems to suggest that the Third Eye has a witnessing quality that grants survival in a vision that can be merciless but is also more realistic, in part disillusioned and opposed to the vision of simulacra proposed in modern society. It is a personal alternative vision that is attained after a journey through traumatic experiences, failures and a subversive dialogue with roles, traditions and texts. The journey is lonely because the double, Cordelia, though she represents a need, an obsession and source of abjection, is revealed to be a simulacrum, an image created by the self and a function that is used in the course of the narration to attain survival through the Other. It eventually fades away and the protagonist steps alone into the dim light of the expanding universe. Forgiveness, mercy and friendship remain in a state of 'hope', a suggestion the Virgin Mary offers as a gift that is projected into a future but is difficult to attain in the ruthless power struggle that takes place in modern society's relationships.

The protagonist recovers from her childhood trauma caused by enforced roles through her artistic creation that is linked to accurate scientific observation. This gives the novel the opportunity to question and redefine scientific theories and the artistic process, merging their approaches in a different vision that attempts to rewrite the male-dominant narratives in a new ontological perspective in search of wholeness. As in the previous novels, this goal is never completely attained – it is in progress. The ending remains open and uncertain. Elaine is a contradictory blurred figure until the end, and eventually she goes back to live in her 'cage'.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, she has recollected her past, although she is not completely aware of all its implications and is open to the future, in which there is enough light 'to see by' (421).

At the end of the novel, the protagonist realises that there was no Virgin Mary and no double; she recognises the phenomena around her as factual: 'The bridge is only a bridge, the river a river, the sky is a sky' (419). She is her own rescuer from the tower she imprisoned herself in and realises she is inhabiting a decentred universe where roles are shifting and uncertain. The result of this exploration is a fragmented, vulnerable self with a tendency to fantasise and construct imagined roles, soothing figures (the Virgin Mary), antagonists to target (Mrs Smeath) and doubles (Cordelia), an obsession she maintains until the end. The novel does not give definite solutions but suggests an open

and honest act of witnessing, giving space to personal stories that reflect, and are examples of, the big story of the universe and of the essence of being human that is simply existing in this universe. The commitment and hope expressed in this witnessing make the novel's view partially shift from a postmodern perspective towards a seriously engaged involvement in the major issues of our society in an ontological quest.<sup>214</sup> This is developed throughout the narrative in the intertextual conversation that suggests a polyvalent vision of being human that encompasses art, science and literature. The subject is in progress and constantly engaged in a 'plural dialogue' that engenders identity in motility. The novel as a polylogue confirms this vision that produces alternatives to the rigid, endangering roles of society and aims for survival.

In her existential journey, highlighted by the intertextual reading, Elaine creatively recovers her subjectivity, reconstructing her memories retrospectively in a space-time that grants her survival. She transforms her self from object to subject via her artistic sense of sight that encompasses a rewriting of her role as a woman and artist and a rewriting of the nature of being human. This takes place in an expanding universe that allows multiple perspectives to be open to intelligent beings that are aiming for a clearer vision which might entail mercy and forgiveness. The nondisjunctive function of the novel is therefore confirmed and opens to further developments within the network of intertextual connections.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what Sharon Wilson claims, Elaine's new vision does not involve touch ( see Sharon Wilson, 'Eyes and I's', in *International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers*, ed. by Robert L. Ross (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1991), pp. 226-39 (pp. 227-29)), but mainly sight, as Howells claims, Coral Ann Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', in *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Colin Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 204-18 (pp. 210-11). Besides, the fairy tale 'The Snow Queen' is not an important intertext in this novel and Elaine does not personify the Snow Queen; instead she undergoes the experiences of Kay and Gerda. Sharon Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Sherrill Grace, 'Gender and Genre: Atwood's autobiographical 'I'', in Nicholson, pp. 189-203 (p. 200).

<sup>4</sup> Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-86. Riffaterre claims that 'fictional truth spurns referentiality' (p. 84) and links intertextuality to the unconscious described in fiction. In fact, he remarks that 'the intertext is hidden like the psychological unconscious' (p. 86).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> McWilliams, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> See: Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (1998; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 111 and Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', pp. 205, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (1988; London: Virago Press, 1990), p. 3. Further references to this text will be placed in parentheses following quotations.

<sup>14</sup> See: McWilliams, p. 114 and Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Payne, *Reading Theory: An Introduction to Lacan, Derrida, and Kristeva* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell Press, 1993), p. 180.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylogue', in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 159-209 (p. 163). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>27</sup> Boys and girls have separate entrances at school and separate spaces in the playground (45-46), though Elaine comments ironically that they finally meet inside in the hall. Besides, the marble game is played in the common playground and includes both boys and girls (62), which is a comment on the possibility of occasional transgressions.

<sup>28</sup> Some critics refer in general to *Cat's Eye* as a Bildungsroman or Künstlerroman (see Cooke, p. 107, and McWilliams, p. 115); other critics refer to specific Bildungsromane. See: Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 100-101, Arnold E. Davidson, *Seeing in the Dark: Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1997), pp. 14, 17 and 69, Coral Ann Howells, 'A generic approach to Margaret Atwood's novels', in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. by R.M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), pp. 139-56 (p. 144) and Carol Osborne, 'Constructing the Self Through Memory: *Cat's Eye* as a Novel of Female Development' in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 14 (1994), pp. 95-112 (p. 96).

<sup>29</sup> Nathalie Cooke traces the main points of Elaine's initiation and development in the female role and as an artist; see Cooke, pp. 107-08.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* is a painter but his work is never described in the novel and the whole narration is focused on language and on words not on pictures.

<sup>31</sup> Osborne, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'The Ancient Mariner Experience of Writing and Reading', in *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Earl G. Ingersoll, (Princeton NJ: Ontario Review Press, 2006), pp. 164-71 (p. 169).

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Interlunar* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), pp. 97-98.

<sup>35</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Two-Headed Poems* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 15-16 and 85-86.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Atwood, *You are Happy* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 24-28.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Bluebeard and Other Stories* (1983; London: Virago Press, 1988), pp. 11-29 and 31-59.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>39</sup> Madeleine Davies, 'Margaret Atwood's female bodies' in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Carol Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'To Write is to Wrestle with an Angel in the Mud' in Earl G. Ingersoll, pp. 172-76 (p. 176).

<sup>41</sup> Atwood highlights the importance of dedications she carefully chose in Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A thematic guide to Canadian Literature* (1972; Toronto: Anansi Press, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Davidson, p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> Davies, p. 58; see also Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 122.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'The Beaver's Tale', in Ingersoll, pp. 153-63 (p. 160).

<sup>45</sup> Nathalie Cooke claims that the cat's eyes marble is 'an anagogic metaphor – an object that stands for a number of related things'. Cooke, p.107.

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- <sup>46</sup> Ingersoll, p. x.
- <sup>47</sup> Gina Wisker, p. 99.
- <sup>48</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'Finding the Inner Silence to Listen', in Ingersoll, pp. 177-85 (p. 184).
- <sup>49</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'There are no Texts without Life', Ingersoll, pp. 125-38 (p.138).
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- <sup>51</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'Fifty-Two Ways of Making Butter', in Ingersoll, pp. 236-52 (pp. 243-244).
- <sup>52</sup> Riffaterre, pp. 13, XIV and 19.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- <sup>57</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'Struggling with your Angel in the Mud', in Ingersoll, pp. 172-76 (p. 173).
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- <sup>59</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'The Beaver's Tale', in Ingersoll, pp. 153-63 (p. 160).
- <sup>60</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'To Write is to Wrestle with an Angel in the Mud', in Ingersoll, pp. 172-76 (p. 195), emphasis in the original.
- <sup>61</sup> Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'The Beaver's Tale', in Ingersoll, pp. 153-63 (p. 160).
- <sup>62</sup> Sharon Wilson claims that 'Cat's Eye focuses on vision: in the title, in characters' description, and in cinematic memory scenes'. Sharon Wilson, 'Eyes and I's', p. 239. See also Madeleine McMurrough-Kavanagh, *Cat's Eye: York Notes Advanced* (London: Longman York Press, 2000), p. 72.
- <sup>63</sup> Molly Hite, 'An Eye for an 'I': the disciplinary society in *Cat's Eye*', in *Various Atwoods*, ed. by Lorraine, M. York, (Concord, Ontario, Anansi, 1995), pp. 191-206 (p. 191).
- <sup>64</sup> Wisker, p. 99.
- <sup>65</sup> Hite, p. 201.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- <sup>68</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Unes Femmes', in *Le Cahiers du GRIF*, 7 (1975) pp. 22-27 (pp. 22-23) available at <<https://www.persee.fr/authority/29955>> [accessed 31 July 2019].
- <sup>69</sup> Hite, p. 203. See also further references to Foucault's theories and to the Panopticon in Hite, p. 197-98.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- <sup>72</sup> Atwood claims 'It's a gerund. We are in the process of surviving, but we don't know whether we've done it yet'. Interview with Margaret Atwood, 'Letting the Words Do the Work', in Ingersoll, pp. 222-35 (p. 235).
- <sup>73</sup> Gina Wisker, pp. 100-04.
- <sup>74</sup> Davies, p. 67.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>78</sup> Tolan, p. 174
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-86.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- <sup>83</sup> Sharon R. Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 295.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303-304.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.
- <sup>87</sup> Roberta White, 'Northern Light: Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*' in *Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Harold Bloom (1992; New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp. 159-182 (p. 165).
- <sup>88</sup> Jane Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts, 1993), pp. 164 and 166.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.



- <sup>93</sup> Regarding open endings, Atwood claims that leaving the ending open gives the reader more choices and that any ending in life is artificial as 'Life doesn't end', in an interview, 'Awaiting the perfect storm', in Ingersoll, pp. 253-64 (p. 261).
- <sup>94</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 110.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- <sup>99</sup> C.P. Ravinchandra, 'Memories of Resistance: Reading *Cat's Eye*', in *Margaret Atwood the Shape-Shifter*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells and Coomi S. Vevaina (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998), p. 61.
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- <sup>101</sup> Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', p. 205.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212. See also McMurrough-Kavanagh, p. 7.
- <sup>104</sup> Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', p. 212.
- <sup>105</sup> Nathalie Cooke, p. 98.
- <sup>106</sup> Grace, 'Gender and Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical 'I'', pp. 199-200.
- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- <sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- <sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- <sup>110</sup> Davidson, pp. 17-19.
- <sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>112</sup> *Inferno*, canto XXXIV, 139: 'e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle' (and so we emerged, to see—once more—the stars); *Purgatorio*, canto XXXIII, 145: 'puro e disposto a salire a le stelle' (pure and prepared to climb unto the stars); *Paradiso*, canto XXXIII, 145: 'l'amore che move il sole e l'altre stelle' (the Love that moves the sun and the other stars). The English translations are in <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/> <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/commento-baroliniano/> in the section 'Commento Baroliniano' [accessed 1 August 2019].
- <sup>113</sup> Davidson, p. 19.
- <sup>114</sup> Davidson also refers to Lily Briscoe's vision in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Davidson, p. 20.
- <sup>115</sup> McWilliams, p. 115.
- <sup>116</sup> See Oxford reference <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095526906> [accessed 1 August 2019].
- <sup>117</sup> Atwood, *Two Headed Poems*, p. 85.
- <sup>118</sup> pp. 4, 71, 78; Elaine also says: 'Carol tame. Grace, tame as well...Cordelia, wild, pure and simple' (130).
- <sup>119</sup> Joseph Hrbik, Elaine's art teacher, makes a similar request for total love from her (p. 305). The text points out the absolutely impossible nature of this demand.
- <sup>120</sup> As Elaine comments, the rules of a patriarchal society are not clear and are unattainable: 'I am just not measuring up, although they are giving me every chance. I will have to do better. But better at what?' (117). See also: 'I know that nothing I could make with them would be worthwhile' (182).
- <sup>121</sup> Cordelia's sisters' names allude to Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* and to Miranda in *The Tempest*, but with debased implications.
- <sup>122</sup> See pp. 72, 93, 209 and 210.
- <sup>123</sup> Hite, p. 192.
- <sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- <sup>125</sup> In the performance of *The Wind in the Willows*, Cordelia is one of the weasels (p. 127), and she is one of Prospero's attendants in *The Tempest* (p.302). Elaine cannot see Cordelia, which both diminishes her friend's role in the plays but is also uncanny, because she can be everywhere. In addition, Cordelia has a trunk full of costumes and her sisters say that she wants to be a horse when she grows up (73).
- <sup>126</sup> Cordelia, significantly, quotes from *Measure for Measure* (I. 4. 12-13), commenting: 'Speak, hide face, show face, shut up' (302), which underlines her silenced role.
- <sup>127</sup> Cordelia echoes what her father and her sisters say to her (210, 252), tormenting Elaine (86, 171, 193). At a certain point, Elaine uses the same words against Cordelia (258). See: Theodore F. Sheckels, *The Political in Margaret Atwood's Fiction. The Writing on the Wall of the Tent* (England, USA: Ashgate, 2012), p.101.
- <sup>128</sup> See pp. 41, 74, 141, 154 and pp. 358, 373.
- <sup>129</sup> See pp. 9, 113-14, 122-23.

<sup>130</sup> Cordelia's affected attitude is pointed out throughout the novel (see pp. 43, 45, 192, 204, 243, 258, 300, 355). Nevertheless, Elaine plays dressing-up too in her accurate choice of clothes that fits with the trends and in her role in society, highlighting the importance of camouflage in women's lives. This is also pointed to in her comment on Susie ('She is just a nice girl playing dress-ups', p. 320) and in the importance given to clothes by the press in the description of the girl who is raped and murdered in the ravine (192).

<sup>131</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; London: Allen Lane Penguin Books, 1977), p. 200 and 204.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>133</sup> See: White, p. 175.

<sup>134</sup> See: Hite, p. 194.

<sup>135</sup> See: p. 121, 124-5, 128, 138, 312, 397 and 419.

<sup>136</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972; London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 46.

<sup>137</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, p. 236.

<sup>138</sup> Berger, p. 47.

<sup>139</sup> Sheckels claims that Elaine 'complies outwardly but resists in her thoughts'; Sheckels, p. 103.

<sup>140</sup> 'This is a watching bird watching YOU' (138, 397).

<sup>141</sup> Elaine's father comments that '[t]here are no limits to human greed' (131). Greed is attributed to most of the female characters, Elaine included (see: pp. 131, 153, 194, 276 and 303), and is linked to revenge, the 'eye for an eye' precept.

<sup>142</sup> According to Davidson, the dissecting marble vision reflects 'Mrs. Smeath's earlier treatment of Elaine', Davidson, p. 33.

<sup>143</sup> See pp. 41, 107, 108, 114, 115, 117, 136, 182, 199, 254, 272, 336, 372, 377, 419, as well as the allusion to Sartre's and Beckett's work, p. 287.

<sup>144</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2, available at

<<http://frankenstein200morning.qwriting.qc.cuny.edu/files/2018/02/Kristevapowersofhorrorabjection.pdf>> [accessed 19 March 2020].

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>151</sup> Davidson, p. 47.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>154</sup> See pp. 336 and 372.

<sup>155</sup> 'l'existence précède l'essence [...] il faut partir de la subjectivité', Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme', 1946, available at

<<http://prepagrandoumea.net/hec2015/TEXTES/SARTRE%20L%20existentialisme%20est%20un%20humanisme.pdf>> [accessed 20 January 2019], p. 1. See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*: 'Consciousness is a being whose existence posits its essence, and inversely it is

consciousness of a being, whose essence implies its existence', in ed. by Robert Denoon Cumming, ed. by, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London: Meuthen & CO LTD, 1965), p. 108.

<sup>156</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, p. 35.

<sup>157</sup> Paul Foulquié, *Existentialism* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1948), pp. 64-66 and 74.

<sup>158</sup> 'L'enfer, c'est les Autres' (Hell is other people), Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1947), p. 93. See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*: 'By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgement on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other', and 'I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me', in Cumming, p. 189.

<sup>159</sup> Terry Keefe, 'The ethical concept of 'assuming' in the existential philosophy of Sartre and Beauvoir' in *French Existentialism*, ed. by James Giles (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), p. 95.

<sup>160</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 640-50. See also Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', in Nicholson, p. 204-05.

<sup>161</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 1. 12.

<sup>162</sup> See p. 245-6.

<sup>163</sup> See p. 113. *Macbeth*'s narrative is confirmed and subverted, reflecting the deceitful and counterfeited discourse of modern society.

<sup>164</sup> When Elaine goes back to Toronto for the retrospective exhibition, she feels Cordelia's presence almost everywhere, haunting her like a ghost (see: pp. 20, 44, 226, 386, 400, 411, 413-14 and 421).

<sup>165</sup> Cordelia and Elaine are doppelgängers ('Half Face') and exchange places at the cemetery (233).

<sup>166</sup> The mythic quality of prophecy and biblical discourses is parodied in the title of the Sunday sermon Elaine notices on a church billboard, which is similar to a supermarket advertisement: '*Believing is seeing*' (312), highlighting the commercial and consumerist characteristics of both religion and prophecy in modern society. Elaine comments that while in the past you expected 'just deserts', now it is just desserts.

<sup>167</sup> See Brooks Bouson, pp. 164-66.

<sup>168</sup> Elaine chews her fingers (9), peels her feet (114), and imagines squashing her arm in the wringer (122-23)

<sup>169</sup> Davidson points out Elaine's fear 'of the adult female body and adult female sexuality', Davidson, p. 46.

<sup>170</sup> After speaking about menstruation, Cordelia also describes men's sex organs as 'carrots between their legs' (94).

<sup>171</sup> Blood is also evoked in a ludic way in Stephen's wooden guns and blades, where 'Some blood is orange, from when he ran out of red' (24), and when he turns water into blood with his chemistry set (104). It is also suggested in the walls of the Sub-Version gallery (86) and when Elaine loses her virginity (295).

<sup>172</sup> See: pp. 50-51, 128, 169, 211-12 and 276. See also Wisker, p. 103; and McMurraugh-Kavanagh, p. 75-76.

<sup>173</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel' in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 66, 71.

<sup>174</sup> Anger, frustration and revenge are present in the feminist meetings Elaine attends.

<sup>175</sup> Cordelia and Elaine 'need each other's reflection to function', McMurraugh-Kavanagh, p. 76. See also pp. 13 and 74 about twins.

<sup>176</sup> Davidson, p. 15.

<sup>177</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 2, 6, 19-20.

<sup>178</sup> See p. 52, 138. Sheckels claims that 'she not only cuts images from the *Eaton's Catalogue*, she also desires them', Sheckels, p. 99.

<sup>179</sup> Davidson, p. 40.

<sup>180</sup> Foucault, pp. 136-38. About power see also Sheckels, p. 98-100.

<sup>181</sup> Elaine's parents disguise themselves in the city (34) and wear more comfortable clothes when they are back in the north (65).

<sup>182</sup> When she moves to Toronto, Elaine feels that her family and her house are not up to the expectations of modern society's stereotypes.

<sup>183</sup> The narratives of the patriarchal society insist on boys being tough and dressing like soldiers (102). See also Margaret Atwood's interview 'The Beaver's Tale', in Ingersoll, pp. 153-63 (158-59), where she points out that 'boys have much more stable hierarchies than girls do'. Girls are 'more manipulative and conspiratorial', they 'whisper and exclude rather than fight'. She also claims that the feminist opinion that 'women were born into sisterhood – is no more true than to say that women are born into motherhood'.

<sup>184</sup> Davidson, pp. 16-17.

<sup>185</sup> See pp. 92 and 230.

<sup>186</sup> The *Eaton's Catalogue* is also present in 'White Gift', where Mrs Smeath is described 'in her back-of-the-catalogue Eaton's flesh coloured foundation garment' (352).

<sup>187</sup> Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', pp. 206, 214. Davidson, pp. 27-28.

<sup>188</sup> Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 112. Atwood also comments on the pictures, claiming that they 'display an excess of signification that goes beyond the discursive narrative produced by her conscious mind. They are truly "sub-versions", uncovering that highly complex network of conflicting energies, conscious and unconscious, which make up any individual's subjectivity', pp. 117-18. See also Davies, pp. 71 and 73.

<sup>189</sup> See p. 110 and 125.

<sup>190</sup> Davidson, p. 35.

<sup>191</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Toronto, New York, London, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam Books, 1988), pp. 14-15.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>195</sup> See pp. 86, 225, 338 and 352. According to Roberta White, Mrs Smeath's name is 'a portmanteau of "Smith" and "Death" representing "the forces of anti-art"', White, p. 175.

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<sup>196</sup> Significantly, Elaine uses simple pictorial techniques linked to domesticity, such as drawing with pencils, and she paints with egg tempera, implying the use of food and pots (p. 326). Her figurative style is mocked by Jon, whose abstract pictorial approach and use of acrylics are considered 'pure painting' (317). See also Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (1950; London: Phaidon Press, 2006), p. 179.

<sup>197</sup> Elaine's hatred is the consequence of Mrs Smeath's backing Cordelia's bullying attitude towards Elaine, saying that it is 'God's punishment' that 'serves her right' (180).

<sup>198</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, IV. 1. 181-94.

<sup>199</sup> Portia carries out different judicial procedures in which the judgment of the Common Law courts is mitigated by the equity of the Court of Chancery during the Elizabethan period. She suddenly changes her interpretation of the bond between Antonio and Shylock, starting with the literal interpretation of the Common Law courts, which agrees with Shylock's request for a pound of flesh, then she interprets it according to the Court of Chancery, pointing out the omission of the word 'blood', a quibble that is endorsed by the court of Venice. Finally, she rages against Shylock, forbidding him to cut more than a pound of flesh or he will die.

<sup>200</sup> Elaine says 'I'm afraid of becoming Cordelia', because they changed places and Elaine became vengeful and greedy like Cordelia. She is also afraid of failing in her life, as her friend did.

<sup>201</sup> See p.141. Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', p. 211.

<sup>202</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928; Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975), p. 39.

<sup>203</sup> Davidson remarks that Elaine needs 'cat's eyes to see into the darkness of the pain and the past she will years later narrate', Davidson, p. 44.

<sup>204</sup> See p. 250.

<sup>205</sup> See Gombrich, p. 180.

<sup>206</sup> Atwood, *Interlunar*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>207</sup> The translation of the title 'L.H.O.O.Q' is 'She has a hot ass', which is echoed in what Elaine says about Jon and Joseph describing 'Life Drawing' (p. 366).

<sup>208</sup> 'Instructions for the Third Eye', in Margaret Atwood, *Murder in the Dark* (London: Virago Press, 1994), pp. 111-14; Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 116.

<sup>209</sup> 'Instructions for the Third Eye', in Atwood, *Murder in the Dark*, p. 113.

<sup>210</sup> Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 138.

<sup>211</sup> See p. 182.

<sup>212</sup> Elaine also paints the Virgin Mary in two other pictures. In one of them she has the head of a lioness, 'fierce, alert to danger, wild' (345), and Christ is depicted as a lion cub. In the other picture, the Virgin is a housewife holding paper bags 'full of groceries' (345). The two images and the Virgin in 'Unified Field Theory' recall the three goddesses of the Triple Goddess myth in a new, challenging interpretation.

<sup>213</sup> See: Howells, 'Cat's Eye. Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art', p. 216.

<sup>214</sup> Davidson points out the 'gain and losses of her different answers', Davidson, p. 103.

## Concluding remarks

A word after a word  
after a word is power.

Margaret Atwood, 'Spelling', *True Stories*,  
1981

It's as I always told you:  
the best ones grow in shadow.

Margaret Atwood, 'Blackberries', *Dearly*, 2020

The research presented in this thesis has closely examined four Atwoodian novels written during a period of about twenty years: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Cat's Eye* (1988). The arrangement of the thesis is chronological, with an introductory chapter that sets out the theoretical framework. I initially drew on the ideas of theorists such as Bakhtin and Kristeva; their theories on the intertextual thought and conversation that exist between texts has been crucial in the development of my analysis. The text of a novel, considered to be 'a mosaic of quotations',<sup>1</sup> highlights the 'novel's nondisjunctive function', which is 'an agreement of deviations'<sup>2</sup> and is at the core of the sign's semiotic practice.<sup>3</sup> This leads to the notion of intertextuality as the 'absorption and transformation' of one text into another<sup>4</sup> and points to the 'dialogic thought' where identities are constructed in the dialogue with the Other. Riffaterre's distinction between syllepsis and intertext as well as his concepts of ungrammaticalities and verisimilitude have been useful in my research. Hutcheon, Foucault and Eco are the other philosophers of language and linguistic theorists that I drew ideas from in my reading. I adapted their theories to Atwood's oeuvre by following the intertextual discourses that the novels propose. In my reference to *écriture féminine*, I also took into account feminist writers such as Woolf, Cixous, Irigaray and Beauvoir; their concept of women's writing as revolutionary is connected to the language of the novels and to the disruptive function of semiotic language, which is the function that Kristeva claims it has. In chapters 2 to 5 inclusive, I have analysed the four novels and have paid particular attention to the 'dialogic thought' that is expressed in the intertextual conversations within the texts. This reveals a reshaping of traditional narratives in the novel when it is viewed as a polylogue.

My primary purpose has been to explore the relationship between the novels I chose to analyse and the intertextual references; this engenders a discussion that questions societal narratives in a world of language and attempts to change them from within. The novels problematise female roles in society and suggest alternatives that are open to further developments and in progress. The intertextual references merge with the theoretical discourse in an ongoing dialogue that assumes the involvement of the reader, who might alter their views and take a stand. The moral commitment of Atwood's oeuvre does not exclude ambiguities, backlashes and possible tragic scenarios. Nevertheless, her emphasis on possible alternatives reveals hopeful visions that are open to transformation and other perspectives that reach beyond the ends of the novels.

In *The Edible Woman*, the threatening roles proposed by the consumerist society have cannibalistic undertones that are disguised in alluring commercials and are referred to in the theme of the eaten heart in fairy tales and in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Other important intertexts are *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, which are commented on in the novel. The presence of the female body is crucial; it speaks a rebellious language that opposes the societal rules and forces the protagonist to look for different paths. Marian's final negotiation with her body implies acceptance and renewal and complicity and awareness in a final cannibalistic act of eating the woman-shaped cake that implies recovery from her eating disorder, but the ending of the novel does not envisage a definite change in society.

*Surfacing* proposes alternative Canadian narratives that are linked to indigenous legends and to the wilderness. They highlight the protagonist's quest after she underwent traumatic experiences in the civilised world of the city. As she comes to understand her past narratives, the surfer becomes aware of the damaging dichotomous view and opts for a multi-faceted vision that is in flux. This process of self-consciousness is communicated through the myth of Demeter and Persephone and the Callisto myth, which are reinterpreted in a female perspective. The language adopted in the novel is between prose and poetry, which highlights, at a linguistic level, the revolutionary function of the text. This connects to *écriture féminine*, which proposes different social visions that start from language.

Transformation characterises the intertextual dialogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, where survival in an oppressive society requires a continuous adaptation and reshaping of the self in an interior dialogue with the Other. The parodic interpretation of the discourse of the regime exposes the dangerous incongruities of its narratives that aim to control the subject via propaganda. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the model that Atwood adopted to write about her female dystopia, which highlights a vision that inwardly opposes the regime in a self-reflexive way while outwardly yields to its practices.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the question at the end of the novel engages the reader in rethinking the narratives and suggests taking a stand, which 'may lead to change'.<sup>6</sup>

A broader human vision is proposed in *Cat's Eye*, in which literature, art and science are connected in an encompassing view that is multiple and in flux. The intertexts of *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and the *Eaton's Catalogue* underline the constrictive quality of the roles proposed by society that do not allow vital transformations and cause alienation until the point of suicide is reached. The creative alternative path that the protagonist develops is a temporary alternative but ensures her survival despite her traumatic experiences. The novel therefore exposes the menacing effects of societal rules and offers alternatives in a possible encompassing and multi-layered vision.

In my dissertation, I have endeavoured to discuss and disclose the intertextual network in Margaret Atwood's oeuvre. The complex intertextual references in her novels includes both 'tangible' intertexts and created intertexts in a conversation that goes beyond the ending. This confirms the polyvalent characteristic of the Atwoodian novel, that is, the novel as polylogue, as Kristeva claims:

*Language possesses a transfinite element [...] ; it is the expanse beyond the sentence limits that, preserved, open up on a sundered continuity where a precise interval (the sentence) holds the value of meaning and signification – but their true power is built up only on the basis of the numerated, phrased infinity of a polylogical 'discourse' of a multiplied, stratified, and heteronomous subject of enunciation.*<sup>7</sup>

The polyvalences and ambiguities of the sign open the possibilities of the subject to multiple interpretations and attitudes that are 'transfinite', that is, they are heterogeneous and go beyond the finite meaning of the sentence. Their significance is multiple in time and space according to the different contexts and interpretations. The semiotic experience takes place in language,<sup>8</sup> where the body expresses itself in the semiotic *chora* which are linked to the revolutionary practice of *écriture féminine* and to the disruptive quality of the novel. The 'speaking *subject*' is therefore 'a questionable *subject-in-process*',<sup>9</sup> a shifting identity that is open to the change that is available in the different possibilities offered by the diverse contexts that the individual traverses. New possible interpretations are therefore envisaged that echo traditional narratives but also produce alternative meanings that represent a creative though temporary and fragmentary attempt at renewal.

Atwood as a storyteller engages with these discourses. In her poem 'Beauharnois iii' ('Four Small Elegies'), she writes:

A language is not words only,  
it is the stories  
that are told in it,  
the stories that are never told.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the novels are a constructed world of language, a 'cultural world'<sup>11</sup> where art's function is 'an essential human activity [...] a way of explaining or controlling the environment'.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, art is related to hope in terms of its creative quality;<sup>13</sup> the same act of creation and therefore production stimulates hope and renewal. It is an open process that resists closure and offers 'hesitation, absence or silence' but also new possibilities.<sup>14</sup> The storyteller's road is 'a dark road'<sup>15</sup> they need to pursue to speak their voices, like the Sybil,<sup>16</sup> a voice that urges that it must be heard in a world where writing is necessarily 'political' and where the intertextual dialogue reflects the power relations of societal narratives.<sup>17</sup> These power relations are not absolute and can be changed, because 'power is ascription'.<sup>18</sup> Hence, Atwood's attempt to rewrite traditional narratives and suggest alternatives is her political and artistic response to the incongruities and flaws of our system.



Her denial of dichotomous views and her insistence on multi-layered perspectives give prominence to the voices of marginalised groups, such as women, as Atwood reveals in the poem 'Spelling':

My daughter plays on the floor  
with plastic letters,  
red, blue & hard yellow,  
learning how to spell,  
spelling,  
how to make spells

\*

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.

\*

I return to the story  
of the woman caught in the war  
& in labour, her thighs tied  
together by the enemy  
so she could not give birth.

Ancestress: the burning witch,  
her mouth covered by leather

to strangle words.

A word after a word  
after a word is power.

\*

At the point where language falls away  
from the hot bones, at the point  
where the rock breaks open and darkness  
flows out of it like blood, at  
the melting point of granite  
when the bones know  
they are hollow & the word  
splits & doubles & speaks  
the truth & the body  
itself becomes a mouth.

This is a metaphor.

\*

How do you learn to spell?  
Blood, sky & the sun,  
your own name first,  
your first naming, your first name,  
your first word.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, women's language, or literature in general, starts from the body – from the bones, that is, from the skeleton of a human being. It becomes a voice, a 'double voice', like in Atwood's poem 'The Double Voice', in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*<sup>20</sup> and in Kristeva's notion of poetic language, which is 'at least *double*'<sup>21</sup> – but it is, nevertheless, the possible 'truth' that humans can spell. It is a 'truth' that is constructed in words and using which the individual learns to spell and name in a dialogue with the Other and between texts that reveals an identity in flux that is open to revision and transformation. This vision is explained and developed in Atwood's work, where the

word is split and doubled and 'the body/itself becomes the mouth'; this is a metaphor for the polyvalent quality of the novel, which is expressed in the intertextual dialogue, and for the essence of woman's narratives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Word Dialogue, and Novel', in Julia Kristeva *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 64-91 (p. 66).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 36-63 (p. 51). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, 'Word Dialogue, and Novel', p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary Canadian Fiction* (1988; Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Conversations* (1978; London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 55; for the reader function see pp. 169 and 227.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylogue', in Kristeva *Desire in Language*, pp. 159-209 (p. 173). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to Another', in Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 124-47 (p. 135). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Two-Headed Poems* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> See: Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 53, and Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: La Cooperazione Interpretativa nei Testi Narrativi* (Milano: Bompiani, 2016), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 220.

<sup>14</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002; London: Virago Press, 2003), p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> Atwood, *Conversations*, p. 137.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Atwood, *True Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), pp. 63-64.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970; London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 'Journal Two 1840-1871', pp. 44-45.

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel,' p. 66. Emphasis in the original.

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