

I Remember Me:

Memory and the Construction of Identity in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the construction of the self in two of Margaret Atwood's novels, Cat's Eye and Alias Grace. Both works explore the fallacies inherent in the convention that narrative, and autobiographical narrative in particular, can reconstruct the past. Through their narratives, the protagonists of these two novels struggle against the conflicting versions of self, and in very different ways: one is able to accept her self as fragmented and indeterminate, but the other fails to establish her version of her self. I will use a few narratological strategies in the discussion of these two different struggles toward self-discovery.

Chapter 1 will focus on the personal and more private construction of the self, through the character of Elaine in Cat's Eye. The presence of two distinct narrative voices for the single protagonist allows the reader to understand Elaine's layered and complex identity. Her attempts to mimic those around her, and her loss and regaining of memory, complicate her understanding of herself as separate from her surroundings. The nontraditional structure of her story allows the reader to understand Elaine as a composite of her past selves. I argue that it is only through her artwork that she is able to understand her self as multiple, as a hybrid of separate selves. Her acceptance of this indeterminacy of her identity frees her: unencumbered by her memory, or by what she has forgotten, she is able instead to accept her fragmented identity.

Chapter 2 will discuss Grace, the protagonist and title character of Alias Grace, whose struggle to define herself against varying versions of her is complicated by the fact that her story is part of a larger, more public system. Others' interest in her story corrupts her understanding of what she remembers, so that although the reader is able to see more of Grace than can any character, she never articulates her version of her story. Contaminated by her readings of others' accounts of her story, Grace's narrative is subordinated by secondary versions: she is limited by others' expectations of her, and imitates the person they believe her to be. Like Elaine, Grace struggles to define her self in the midst of multiple, varying versions of who she is. But unlike Elaine, she is not able to understand her self in spite of (or because of) varying versions of who she is. Ultimately, I argue, her professed loss of memory stifles her story, so that others' versions of her story and of her self become accepted as true history.

I will conclude by reviewing the ways in which these two protagonists struggle to establish their own sense of self amidst contradicting versions of who they are (or were). Although both characters grapple with their unsteady memories, Elaine is able to understand her self as multi-layered and indeterminate. Grace, because she allows external versions of her story corrupt her memory, is overwhelmed and her version of her self is ultimately defeated.

Without accepting the self as it is—complex, convoluted, unintelligible—one is lost.

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Short Titles

AG: Atwood, Margaret. Alias Grace. New York: Anchor Books, 1997.

CE: Atwood, Margaret. Cat's Eye. New York: Doubleday, 1988.

Introduction

“Here is the conundrum, for history and individual memory alike, and therefore for fiction also: how do we know we know what we think we know? And if we find that, after all, we do not know what it is that we once thought we knew, how do we know we are who we think we are, or thought we were yesterday, or thought we were—for instance—a hundred years ago?”

-Margaret Atwood,
In Search of *Alias Grace*

The only way individuals can attain and preserve a sense of identity is through what they can remember. But memory is intangible, unsubstantial. Memories, as they truly exist, are images, or sensory flashes, or emotions; rarely do they take the form of a linear, structured story. Memory, though, can only be expressed or understood through the form of narrative: *tell me your story*. The narrative that emerges, ostensibly the product of past experiences, is a reconstruction of one’s fragmentary memory traces, and thus inherently artificial. The nature of narrative, its artificiality, hinders the process of self-discovery: because of the conventionalized structure of narrative, pressures outside the self inevitably impose certain requirements onto what one remembers, and thus how self is defined.

In this thesis, I will discuss the two polar extremes through which Atwood envisions a resolution of this tension between memory and the forces working to (re)construct one’s self: Cat’s Eye offers a successful resolution of this tension, while Alias Grace examines another, darker possibility.

Atwood utilizes complex narrative strategies to illustrate the ways in which the individual struggles to define the self through the narrative of his/her past; these strategies are

best articulated through narratological terminology. The precision of such terminology outweighs whatever small difficulties readers unfamiliar with it may experience initially. To cite one instance, her characters absorb others' words in an attempt to redefine their identity: this absorption is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "double-oriented discourse."¹ Double-oriented discourse is the phenomenon that occurs when "a speech act not only refers to something in the world but also refers to another speech act. A great deal of what we say alludes to, echoes, responds to, argues with pre-existing discourse."² Both protagonists of Cat's Eye and Alias Grace conspicuously repeat certain words that others have used in their past. Of particular interest are those words that had especial meaning: a word of accusation, for example, or a word originally used to cause the listener pain. Atwood plays with these repetitions, exploring the ways the individual remembers, and forgets.

Heteroglossia also serves as a metaphor for Atwood's understanding of how self is bound to memory. Heteroglossia is another idea first theorized by Bakhtin; it is the effect of the innumerable sources of individual words, and the subsequent "combining of languages and styles into a higher unity."³ Atwood uses characters' connections with others' language as a means of connecting with one's individual history. Although the speaker may not remember the source of every word s/he uses, each word was once learned, once heard for the first time. The same idea applies to memory: everything has a context, whether or not one can conjure its memory. This is key to the idea of the artificiality inherent in autobiography: we do not (or cannot) consciously remember the contexts of such connections, but that does not mean that the contexts do not exist or are meaningless.

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics, ed. Caryl Emerson, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

2. David Lodge, Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 55.

3. Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263. Hereafter cited in the text as "Bakhtin 1981."

The structural components of these two novels illustrate further the confused and complex nature of the process of self-definition. Both novels are told by multiple, competing voices. This competition is analogous to the concept of polyphony, a term used to describe “texts or utterances in which more than one voice can be heard.”⁴ Cat’s Eye is temporally scattered, fracturing the singular narrator into double voices; this causes her confusion about the nature of her self. Alias Grace is a collection of competing versions of the same story, and this both produces a confused narrative voice as well as exemplifying the fracturing of the historical record, or public memory.

Much of Atwood’s works, and particularly her novels, have often been called “autobiographical fiction.” This term comes from her tendency to focus on a single character, or a few single characters, and their inner thoughts and opinions, their fears, and their development as individuals. This term, of course, is redundant, as all attempts to reconstruct one’s memory narrative, one’s *when I was younger...*, require the same kind of deliberateness and planned linearity as requires the creation of fiction.⁵

The attempted construction of retrospective narrative is deeply flawed, and unavoidably so. One’s memory of one’s own life is inherently unreliable, as it is produced and mediated by a “self”-interested presence. Understanding of the past is filtered through the dirty lens of the scope of one’s memory, as “every act of memory contains intentions of expectation whose

4. David Herman et al., eds., Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory (London: Routledge, 2005), 443. Hereafter cited in the text as “Herman.”

5. The term “autobiographical fiction” does not imply that Atwood’s novels are fictional representations of Atwood’s autobiography, but that the first-person narrators are telling the story of their autobiography. Throughout her career, Atwood has expressed great frustration with the tendency of some readers to connect her narrators’ voices with her own, and that critics “try to detect facts about Atwood’s life in what is supposed to be a fictional autobiography” (Coral Ann Howells, “Cat’s Eye: Creating a Symbolic Space out of Lost Time,” in Modern Critical Views [Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000], 173. Hereafter cited in the text as “Howells 2000a.”).

fulfillment leads to the present.”⁶ These many factors working to distort the memory of the past dooms the integrity of the individual’s memory narrative.

The fact that memory is flawed, though, in no way deems it unnecessary. In fact, constructing a narrative of the past is the only way to understand one’s identity, and is crucial to the process of self-discovery and self-actualization.

The two novels I will discuss in this project illustrate diametrically opposed approaches to the dangers and the possibilities of autobiographical narrative. In Cat’s Eye, Elaine is able to take control of her identity by accepting the complexity of her narrative. Elaine’s deliberate forgetting is an attempt to redefine her identity, even if it hinders her process of self-discovery by denying parts of her identity. Her tendency to imitate patterns of speech and thought, her own and others, is a way for her to maintain a connection with her past, even when she cannot actively remember who or what she is imitating. Like deliberate forgetting, though, her imitation dilutes her identity, and she is locked in a struggle between her self and what she wishes she were. She is only able to take control of her narrative through her artwork: she recovers her memory, recovering with it many of the forgotten sources of her identity.

In Alias Grace, Grace loses control over her identity because the narrative of her past is overpowered by others’ versions. Like Elaine, Grace also deliberately forgets: her forgetting is an attempt to redefine her identity. But instead, others have control over her what she remembers, and she loses control over her ability to express or understand the narrative of her past. In an attempt to regain control over her circumstances, Grace mimics an innocent woman, thinking she has control over this imitation. In reality, it is others who dictate what she imitates:

6. Edmund Husserl, The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1964), 76.

she imitates what others expect her to be (a form of double-oriented discourse). She loses control of what she can remember, of how others see her, and, ultimately, of her narrative itself.

Paul de Man, in his essay “Autobiography as De-Facement,” discusses this question of the self as inherently connected to, but simultaneously distanced from, one’s narrative of the past.⁷ “Just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be.”⁸ He describes the disharmony between the desire to reconstruct one’s past, and the impossibility of doing so with any accuracy:

The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (De Man, 71).

No story of one’s past can define completely one’s self; the nature of the self, as fluid, indeterminate, makes such absolute definition impossible. And yet, the effort to understand self is unavoidable, inevitably human.

This idea is larger than literary: the process of self-discovery requires a reconstruction of the narrative of one’s past, but one must be conscious of the dangers of such reconstruction, so that the self is not defined by external pressures. Elaine and Grace struggle to establish their selves as independent, separate from the forces of their surroundings working to shape them. Of course, as it is impossible to separate oneself from one’s context, the two characters negotiate their identities within the restrictions of their surroundings, and within the limits of themselves.

7. Coral Ann Howells, Modern Novelists: Margaret Atwood (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 151. Hereafter cited in the text as “Howells 1996.”

8. Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” in The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 70. Hereafter cited in the text as “De Man.”

Chapter One: Self-Construction through Memory in Cat's Eye

"I'm working on my own life story. I don't mean I'm putting it together; no, I'm taking it apart. It's mostly a question of editing. If you'd wanted the narrative line you should have asked earlier, when I still knew everything and was willing to tell. That was before I discovered the virtues of scissors, the virtues of matches."

-Margaret Atwood, The Tent

Included just above the copyright information in the pages of Cat's Eye is a warning to the reader, a kind of guide to deciphering the novel: "This is a work of fiction. Although it is in the form of an autobiography, it is not one. Space and time have been rearranged to suit the convenience of the book."¹ This caveat introduces the complicated structure of the novel, which alternates between the two narrative voices and their two independent temporal sequences. The two sections of narrative in the novel, although narrated by distinctly separate voices, are in fact of the same character: Elaine Risley, the novel's protagonist. In her nontraditional, almost anti-chronological ordering of these two narratives, Atwood rejects the notion of time as linear: the two narratives interrupt one another, overlap, and eventually converge. This chronological disorder does not imply that Elaine's is an unfocused story.² The novel, though scattered, focuses on the protagonist's struggle to define herself through —and against—her memory of the past.

Cat's Eye explores this process of understanding the self through the narrative of memory. The first narrator, the narrative voice of the sections about Elaine's adult life in the

1. Margaret Atwood, Cat's Eye (New York: Doubleday, 1988), Copyright page. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "CE."

2. Sherril Grace, "Gender as Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical 'I,'" in Modern Critical Views: Margaret Atwood (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000), 201. Hereafter cited in the text as "Grace."

present, is attempting to establish her sense of her self by remembering. The second narrative, told by a younger Elaine, is the raw material: it is her story of the past.³ Both narratives are told in the first person and in present tense, ostensibly removed from one another. Seemingly, the second narrative has much more movement and progression, as it is essentially a *Künstlerroman* beginning with Elaine's eight birthday and chronicling her life into middle age.⁴ The first narrative, relating Elaine's return to Toronto for her retrospective art exhibition, seems stagnant in comparison. But both voices, as they converge at the close of the novel, form a model of the self and the ways in which the individual attempts to understand his/her identity. Elaine's struggle to define her self in the context of the selves she has been in the past comes to a climax at the close of the novel.

The novel's structure, the dual narrators and their separateness, invites comparison to the scattered quality of memory: the convoluted weaving from one time to the next, the confusion and gaps of forgetting resemble the pattern (or non-pattern) of memory. Of course, the true structure of memory is impossible to reproduce or even imitate; it is too abstract, a figment. But the act of conscious remembering, essential to self-knowledge, requires certain partiality. The self one wishes to be (or wishes one were) becomes the center of the memory, and truths are constructed to reflect the ideal, instead of the real.

3. For the purpose of clarity, I will refer to Elaine's narrative of the present as the "first narrative," and that of the past as the "second narrative." The two narrators will be denoted accordingly. This corresponds to Genette's discussion of levels of narration and orientation of secondary text (Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980], 228-9), and to Rimmon-Kenan's definition of textual order (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* [London: Routledge, 2002], 46-52.).

4. Molly Hite, "Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*," in *Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000), 132. Hereafter cited in the text with the short title "Hite." Also found in: Susan Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 184. Hereafter cited in the text with the short title "Strehle." Also found in: Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 108. Hereafter cited in the text as "Cooke."

This partiality of remembering is illustrated by the interaction between the two narratives. The first narrative is repeatedly interrupted by the thoughts, fears, anxieties of the second narrator. At nearly fifty years old, Elaine laments “I don’t want to be nine years old forever” (CE, 421). In the same way, the first narrator interrupts the second narrative, pushing her present knowledge onto what she knows will happen to her younger self. Elaine, at eight years old, is comforted by the simplicity of her friends’ girly game:

I don’t have to keep up with anyone... I don’t have to think about whether I’ve done these things well, as well as a boy. All I have to do is sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the *Eaton’s Catalogue* with embroidery scissors, and say I’ve done it badly. Partly this is a relief (CE, 57).

The irony of this “relief” is tremendous; even the reader, having this early in the text almost no knowledge about Elaine, can recognize such naïveté.⁵ The first narrator, with the knowledge that during the next two years of her life she will be tormented by the hidden expectations of the “life of girls,” colors the second narrator’s tone with her knowledge of the future (CE, 63). In her narrative of the past, she is incapable of separating what she knew in the past with what she knows in the present. Canadian critic Nathalie Cooke writes: “if the narrative of time illustrates the way Elaine’s past impinges on her present, the narrative of Elaine’s present-day experience in Toronto... illustrates the way Elaine’s present can influence her thinking in the past” (Cooke, 107). This idea is elemental to the artificiality of autobiography: what one chooses to remember is affected by what one knows about the future of the past, what one knows about the present, and what one wants for the future.

5. Of course, ideas about a unitary, universal reader are as artificial as the conception of the self as fixed or unified. “There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work... [but] the literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text... Out of this complex process emerges a more or less organized imaginative experience” (Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* [New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995], 24.). This “imaginative experience,” as it is produced by the text, can be approximated.

For the reader, then, the novel is a kind of guide to understanding Elaine's identity. Through Elaine's process of working toward self-awareness through her past, the reader gleans understanding of Elaine's self. In fact, because of the nature of the two narratives, the reader has more complete information available to him/her than does Elaine. Critic Coral Ann Howells argues that as a result of the reader's access to such a mass of information, this novel "paradoxically expose[s] the limits of autobiography and its artifice of reconstruction" (Howells 1996, 160). Because of her natural (and non-natural) processes of forgetting, much of what the reader understands from the second narrative is lost to Elaine, remaining only a shadow of memory.

I. Losing her Self

Elaine's struggle against her gaps in memory is fundamental to the understanding of her story. Throughout the first narrative, Elaine admits having lost large pieces of her memory: "I've forgotten things, I've forgotten that I've forgotten them" (CE, 213). Certainly, every individual forgets details of his/her life, but Elaine's memory blanks are deliberate. Her loss of memory is an attempt to protect herself from pain.⁶ Through forgetting, Elaine strives to un-experience her experiences, redefining her identity.

Her moment of most painful trauma is the first instance of this deliberate loss of memory. Having been quietly and apologetically victimized by her three "friends" for two years, Elaine finally stands up to them, pushing them out of her life. Almost immediately, she forgets everything about them.

I've forgotten all of the bad things that happened. Although I see Cordelia and Grace and Carol every day, I remember none of these things; only that they used to be my friends, when I was younger,

6. I use the word "loss" here because there is no better word to describe what happens to the memory of her experiences. But "loss" is not quite the right word; Elaine eventually recovers much of what she had "lost."

before I had other friends... Time is missing (CE, 213).

Elaine forgets her childhood trauma to reestablish her identity: unhappy with the self she had been, she forgets to allow herself the freedom to be someone else. Her memory loss of her time spent victimized, embarrassed and confused allows her to become more aggressive and powerful. Her mother's references to her "bad time" make her uncomfortable, because "I am not the sort of girl who has bad times, I have good times only" (CE, 213). She can only understand her identity in the context of what she can remember. So, shedding the memory of her "bad time" allows her to shed the weak, frightened, victimized self she had been before.

Critic Susan Strehle writes that, unhappy with the weakness and confusion of her past self, Elaine "tries to cast out her own base qualities... dividing herself; she would distance and expel a defiled, bad side" (Strehle, 176). It is for this reason that Elaine switches places with her past tormentor, Cordelia, transforming from the victimized to victimizer. Her lack of compassion for those weaker than she, her "mean mouth," are her means of protecting herself from becoming the victim again.

Although she is able to establish her self as stronger and more self-assured, the feeling that she has forgotten something about herself lingers. Walking through the cemetery, the site of much of her ridicule, Elaine has a "quick memory" of the place. "I forget about this immediately. Nothing about the cemetery is frightening, I tell myself. It's too pragmatic, too ugly, too neat. It's only like a kitchen shelf, where you put things away" (CE, 274).⁷ Though she is unable to push away her feelings of inadequacy completely, Elaine's loss of memory frees

7. Ideas about gender and femininity, for this and many of Atwood's works, are central to the understanding of characters' social contexts. Here, Elaine's childhood struggle against her friends' expectations of her femininity is echoed in her first narrative: she is constantly conscious of the social expectations imposed on her self, as a girl or as a woman. For more on the gender politics of *Cat's Eye* and other Atwood works, see Sunaina Singh, *The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study in Feminist Perspectives* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1994).

her from her friends' scorn. The cost of this freedom, though, is that she has tried to deny a part of who she is, her self.

In the process of shedding her old self, Elaine not only loses the memory of the "bad things," but she forgets things that had been meaningful to her before her transformation. Only months after her renouncing of her friends' torment, she rejects those possessions that had meant so much to her: her prided red plastic purse, photographs she "can't recall taking," her drawings of ladies that had been so precious. "I don't like looking at things connected so closely with my life as a child. I think these drawings are inept: I can do much better than them now" (CE, 216). Her extreme reaction to what she had been—sentimental, pliable, dependent—hardens her, even to those things she had considered important. As a teenager, she is alienated from the hormonal "antics" of her peers. Although she realizes that she is supposed to be "caught in a whirlwind of teenage emotions," she remains "calm," unaffected. "Occasionally I do cry for no reason... but I can't believe in my own sadness, I can't take it seriously" (CE, 220).

It is here that the distance between what the reader understands and what the first narrator understands becomes more complex: the reader is able to remember what Elaine has forgotten. Elaine recognizes that she is different than she had been "as a child," but it is only later, in her young adulthood, that she begins to realize what she may have lost.

She notices others' forgetting before her own. As an adult, seeing her brother Stephen for the first time in years, she realizes she expects him to be the same person he was when they were children. Not only has he changed, but he has forgotten much about the person she remembers as her brother. She begins to understand the connection between lost memory and lost self: "It disturbs me that he can remember some of these things about himself, but not others; that the things he's lost or misplaced exist now only for me. If he's forgotten so much, what

have I forgotten?" (CE, 349). Her anxiety about what she may have forgotten is founded in the universally human need to understand her self through memory.

In an effort to protect herself from painful memories, Elaine has chosen to imitate the person she believes others expect her to be, or the person she wishes she were. As a child, she imitates Cordelia: she is cruel, unsympathetic and manipulative. As an adult, though, different ideas about who she should be emerge. Regardless of who or what she is imitating, her imitation is a way for her to be able to connect with her past, even when she cannot actively remember the source of her imitation.

Atwood illustrates Elaine's imitation symbolically: she absorbs others' words. It is in this absorption that Bakhtin's double-oriented discourse becomes important.⁸ Her repetition of someone else's words is the product of her desire to imitate him/her. And, through such repetition, she is able to hide the self she wants to suppress among others' words.

As a child, forced by her friends to follow the strict rules of their legislated femininity, Elaine imitates what she understands to be the correct behavior of a feminine girl.⁹ Her friends' lessons to her about proper conduct teach Elaine the tremendous power of the pedagogue. Elaine's ignorance of basic ideals of femininity, and their power of explaining, delights her friends, who are "more and more gratified the more bewildered I am" (CE, 354). Instead of learning the lessons her friends try to force on her, she adopts their instructive tone, connecting patronizing instruction with power.

Elaine's tour of Carol's house exemplifies this absorption: her description of the house is doubly oriented:

8. This term is discussed in greater detail on pp. 1-2 of this text.

9. Alice M. Palumbo, "On the Border: Margaret Atwood's Novels," in Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 82. Hereafter cited in the text as "Palumbo."

The living room has a sofa and two chairs and matching drapes, all of a flowered rose and beige material Carol says is chintz. She pronounces this word with awe, as if it's the name of something sacred, and I repeat it silently to myself: *chintz*. It sounds like the name of a kind of crayfish, or of one of the aliens on my brother's distant planet (CE, 51).

Carol's understanding of the names she is explaining to Elaine is very specific: her parents have given her a similar explanation of their living room décor, and Carol has learned to equate the word "chintz" with something removed from the fabric itself. Luxury, perhaps, or glamour. The second narrator, as she is exposed to Carol's parents' speech only indirectly, understands the word "chintz" as Carol does: the fabric is awe-inspiring, compelling somehow. Her desire to be the "right" kind of girl requires absorption of others' speech in this way; she admits to fearing always that she will say or do the "wrong thing" (CE, 122). At the same time, she connects the word to her life before she came to the city: the "kind of crayfish" her father might tell her about, or the "aliens" of Stephen's drawings. Her meaning for the word "chintz," then, is demonstrative of the confusion she feels about who she is, and who she should be. Later in her life, in the first narrative, Elaine uses the word nonchalantly, never considering what it meant to her once (CE, 406).

Her doubly oriented words are not limited to her imitation of femininity; some words are absorbed and resurface after decades. Her invoking of the pet name "Mummie" demonstrates her imitation of adulthood. Fascinated by Cordelia's relationship with her parents, the second narrator writes of the fondness Cordelia and her sisters have for their mother: "All three [daughters] call their mother Mummie, and speak of her with affection and indulgence, as if she's a bright but willful child who has to be humored" (CE, 77). The childlike quality of Cordelia's mother is striking to the second narrator; her friend's Mummie is nothing like her own mother.

Later in her life, in her relationship with her own daughters, Elaine resurrects the term without recognizing its origin, without even realizing its origin exists. Hoping to protect her daughters from “certain things about myself,” Elaine puts herself in the position of the “willful child” as mother: “I would say, *Mummy has a headache. Mummy’s working*” (CE, 122). Without realizing it, Elaine is expressing her desire to be the kind of parent Cordelia’s mother had been: silly but lovably bumbling. But because she does explain this connection to her reader—she is unaware of it herself—the echo goes almost unnoticed.

This phenomenon of absorbed words is analogous to Bakhtin’s theorized heteroglossia, which reasons that every word an individual uses comes from some source, it was learned from someone, once. The effect is that no word is one’s own; even if the original source is forgotten by the speaker, each word remains linked to every use of the word that the speaker has ever understood (Bakhtin 1981, 262-265). The concept of heteroglossia can be translated to Elaine’s condition in the same way: she cannot remember the source of a word or behavior or attitude, but has absorbed someone else’s speech or behavior into her own. Words are the most significant way that she performs this imitation of absorption, but not the only way: images from her past emerge as well in her adulthood, unrecognized and unremembered. As an early painter, she finds herself haunted by the images of household items.

I know that these things must be memories... They arrive detached from any context; they are simply there, in isolation, as an object glimpsed on the street is there. I have no image of myself in relation to them. They are suffused with anxiety, but it’s not my own anxiety. The anxiety is in the things themselves (CE, 353).

Elaine cannot remember, but the reader does. The images of the coffee percolator, the wringer washer machine were objects in her childhood home: attempting to escape her friends’ torment,

she spent hours in the kitchen, “helping” her mother with the work (CE, 128).¹⁰ Through her non-memories, Elaine is able to connect to a forgotten emotion: the anxiety, the fear she felt as a child. But still, even as an adult, the first narrator is unable to replace the emotions where they belong; they are still “in the things themselves.”

Her imitation as an adult, an attempt at repeating (or correcting) the experiences of her past to recover the self she has lost, continues to fail throughout her life. She imitates the people of her past, remembering some and not others, in an attempt to connect to her past, to make it real again. But she cannot recover anything through such imitation; it only serves to confuse her, distance her from what she wants. Elaine’s sense of self is lost in the multiple, competing selves she has attempted to imitate and become since she was a child.

II. “Self” Portrait

As Elaine is a painter, a large part of the first narrative centers around her “retrospective” art exhibition. The first narrator describes each painting, drawing on images and characters familiar to the reader from the second narrative. Here, again, an important distance between the reader and Elaine emerges. Elaine is completely confused about what her own paintings mean, at first only describing the way they look. The reader, though, is able to interpret each with some insight. The source of every image is included in her narrative; the reader has not forgotten her past, but Elaine has lost much of it, so to her the paintings’ significance is a mystery (Hite, 147).

At the exhibition’s opening, Elaine fantasizes about destroying all of her paintings, frustrated at their secret: “I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have came out of me. I’m what’s left over” (CE, 431). Going through the supplemental catalogue written by the gallery’s manager, she recounts what others understand in each of her works. Here, again, she absorbs others’ speech as she reads the explanations of her

10. See note 7 about the role of gender politics in this and other works of Atwood.

artwork, and the words of the catalogue become double-oriented. But this time, she absorbs others' words to her own advantage. There is conspicuous difference between the catalogue's explanations and what the reader, and in many ways, what Elaine, knows to be true. She says of one painting's interpretation: "[i]f I hold my breath and squint, I can see where she gets that" (CE, 428). Another painting includes three images, each of which the reader understands to correspond to one of her three childhood friends.¹¹ But Elaine only says of them: "[t]hey are in fact the logos from old gas pumps in the forties. By their obvious artificiality, they call into question the reality of landscape and figures alike" (CE, 428). Her irony is palpable; she had not intended to convey such meanings.

Critic Molly Hite argues, however, that the catalogue's description of her artwork is not necessarily invalid. Even though Elaine doesn't recognize these interpreted meanings, argues Hite, does not mean that they are wrong (Hite, 147). This point, while very interesting, raises the question of the meaning of art, and the objective of producing a work, as opposed to the paintings' meanings for Elaine. As this novel focuses on the protagonist, her memories and struggle to define her self, the interpretations of most interest here are Elaine-centered: the question is not "What do these paintings mean?" as much as it is "What do these paintings mean *to Elaine*?" I doubt that Hite would argue that the painter would agree that she intended the meanings postulated in the catalogue. Many of her paintings are taken to be making feminist or other political statements; but days before the exhibition's opening, Elaine has told an interviewer that she is not a "feminist painter," stating simply "I hate party lines" (CE, 94).

The presence of the catalogue's explanations forces Elaine to actively attempt to interpret their meanings in the context of her life, something that the reader has been able to do already because of his/her access to her narratives. Elaine can no longer "tell them what to mean" to

11. "A red rose" for Carol; "an orange maple leaf" for Grace; "a shell" for Cordelia.

others, but she can try to understand what she meant when she produced them, and what they mean to her. Eventually, Elaine is able to see in her paintings what the reader sees in her narrative: she recovers her memory, recovering with it the forgotten sources of her identity. The paintings act, for the reader, as a “counter-discourse to the memoir narrative,” providing him/her with some idea of the ways that Elaine has responded, perhaps without realizing it, to her past.¹²

By looking at her paintings, Elaine is able to take control of her narrative of the past, having “recuperate[d] her past” and what she had lost (Palumbo, 82). She is able to reflect on her experience in a way that she could not before: her memory, her desire to redefine herself had blinded her in the past. The recovery of her memory allows her to understand what she could not as a child. She understands her past, and her self, by looking into her paintings. Newly able to understand her memories outside of the context of her perspective, to see herself as others must have seen her, Elaine looks at her “Three Muses,” a depiction of three adults who were kind to her during her years of torment. She sees them differently, in the context of her life but also out of it: “God knows what they really saw in their own lives, or thought about... To them I was incidental, their kindness to me casual and minor; I’m sure they didn’t give it a second thought, or know what it meant” (CE, 429). Her ability to step outside of her self, seeing what she could not before, allows her to understand her identity in the context of others’ lives, in the context of the real world.

This detachment allows Elaine to understand others around her, most markedly Cordelia, in a completely different way. Thinking of the only portrait of Cordelia she ever painted, she remembers her trouble creating it:

12. Coral Ann Howells, “Transgressing Genre: A Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood’s Novels,” in Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 146. Hereafter cited in the text as “Howells 2000b.”

“It was hard for me to fix Cordelia in one time, at one age. I wanted her about thirteen, looking out with that defiant, almost belligerent stare of hers...

But the eyes sabotaged me. They aren't strong eyes; the look they give is tentative, hesitant, reproachful. Frightened.

Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture” (CE, 239).

Understanding only through her painting what she could not understand in her life, Elaine is able to forgive the little girl who has haunted her throughout her life (Strehle, 182). She is able to feel compassion for Cordelia, who after all was only imitating a stronger self, exactly what Elaine had attempted to do.

Of course, the problems inherent in textual autobiography are the same in artistic expression of the self: the expectations and desires of the subject of written self-expression can work to corrode the authenticity of another form of expression. Thus, there are some problems with interpreting Elaine's artwork as the means to understanding her self. As is the case with the construction of the narrative of one's past, Elaine's paintings may have been created with intention: Elaine may have produced her art to achieve self-knowledge (Strehle, 144).

Her self-portrait, “Cat's Eye,” is particularly revealing of the possibility that her art-inspired revelation could be false. The self-portrait is significant here, as it is the closest to a visually represented autobiography. In this painting, Elaine admits to “cheating” in her honest rendering of herself: “I've put in the incipient wrinkles, the little chicken feet at the corners of the lids. A few gray hairs. This is cheating, as in reality I pull them out” (CE, 430). In “Cat's Eye,” Elaine paints a self that is more authentic than her true self, a self-contradiction and a ‘self’-contradiction.

It is possible that Elaine could have painted her works with self-understanding as her objective; such intention could obviously make her personal interpretations as invalid as those of

her exhibition catalogue. And, it is equally possible that Elaine's paintings only seem to have deeper meaning: perhaps her crisis of identity has made her look at her artwork for answers that are not there. She could be, then, misconstruing her memory to fit her understanding of the painting. These are both plausible alternatives to the understanding of Elaine's art reflecting her lost past. For this discussion, however, I limit my perspective to what the reader can know, what s/he observes: Elaine understands more about her self through her paintings.

Elaine's revelation, of course, is not the sole answer to the many questions posed by the textual narratives. The artwork "supplements the original insight [of the narrative]; it does not supplant it," and certainly does not resolve all of Elaine's confusions and lost memory (Hite, 142). It is the key, though, to her understanding of the indeterminate nature of her identity. For the first time, she is able to understand her identity as it is: changing, layered, fluid.

The penultimate section of the novel is entitled "Unified Field Theory," a term borrowed from Stephen's discussion of quantum physics.¹³ Throughout the novel, Elaine (and the reader) has been searching for her unified field theory, the concept or connection that coheres every part of her self, every memory she has. By the novel's close, once the second narrative has caught up in time with the first, the fundamental question emerges: will Elaine, or will the reader, be able to find her "single framework" that unifies her identity?

The question of whether any discernible climax is present in the novel is disputed by many critics (Grace, 202; Strehle, 166). Howells writes: "[t]here is no unified textual identity for Elaine's autobiographical self here, nor does this novel itself have a unified generic identity. Instead, the text roams across borders between past and present" (Howells 2000b, 147). The

13. Although never defined in the novel, this term is very significant. Unified field theory (also called *unified theory* or the *theory of everything*) is a hypothetical connection of all existing theories, "describ[ing] all four forces and all of matter within a single framework" (Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* [New York: Bantam Books, 1988], 208). See also Stephen Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell* (New York: Bantam Books, 2001).

answer that Howells and others fail to consider here is that Elaine's unified theory of her self is that there is no such theory: she is a solitary self, unified and whole in her layeredness.

The reason why many do not recognize a climax of Cat's Eye is that the novel does not conform to the traditional definition of plot or climax. Elaine's story has a beginning and end, but is not driven by the plot; what is important is not her story, but her struggle to define her self. The climax, then, is her moment of self-understanding. At the end of the first narrative, and at the end of the novel, Elaine returns to the neighborhood where she remembers feeling so confused and alone. For the first time, though, she is able to see the familiar places as they exist. Since she was a child, she had been afraid of her own weakness, displacing her emotions and projecting them onto objects and other people, and instead adopting what she understood to be a safer, stronger but false self. Now, she understands her true identity as layered: "the self [Elaine] loses at nine reappears unchanged at forty-nine" (Strehle, 167). She is still the scared child, still the frightened teenager, still the sad mother. Her understanding of her identity is much like the analogy she makes at the beginning of the novel in an effort to understand time:

Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space... I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You didn't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away (CE, 3).

The "series of liquid transparencies" is the way that Elaine is able to understand her self: she is a composite, an amalgam of all of the selves she has been in the past.

The novel ends with Elaine's return to Vancouver. Significantly, the novel literally "ends in midair"; Elaine is in an airplane mid-transit in the last moment of the story (Strehle, 188). Her

tone has not changed, despite her revelation, and she is still haunted by Cordelia's presence. The novel concludes in almost the same way it begins:

Now it's full night, clear, moonless and filled with stars, which are not eternal as was once thought, which are not what we think they are. If they were sounds, they would be echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago... echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing. It's old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by (CE, 446).

This last image is a metaphor for Elaine's newfound clarity, newfound understanding of her self. She has taken control of her memory narrative; she has come to understand her identity as fluid, layered, indefinite. She may not remember the source of every "echo," or understand everything about herself, but what she does see is "enough to see by."

Chapter Two: History and the Self in *Alias Grace*

“When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.”

-Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

The structure of Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, written eight years after *Cat’s Eye*, is very similar: multiple narratives interrupt one another, forming a cacophony of separate and competing voices. In contrast to *Cat’s Eye*, though, Atwood explores in *Alias Grace* the defining of one’s self against external forces: instead of attempting to understand the converse layers of her self through her own memory, the story’s protagonist struggles to define herself amidst divergent accounts of her story. The protagonist of *Alias Grace* is Grace Marks, a woman convicted of accessory to murder and the focus of dozens of varying texts. Her struggle to establish her self as independent of, or at least separate from, others’ understandings of who she is the center of the novel. Like Elaine, Grace speaks in the first person in her narrative, and questions about the reliability of Grace as a narrator are reminiscent of the problems inherent in Elaine’s remembered narrative.¹ But unlike Elaine, Grace’s is not the only voice playing a part in the narrative of her past: she struggles against the other interested narrators of her story.

1. The term “narrative,” because of the structure of *Alias Grace*, is slightly complicated. Grace’s narrative is her first-person account of her story addressed to some unknown reader. The narrative of Grace’s past, though, is the story she creates conceptually to understand her self through her memory.

Essentially a collection of newspaper articles, poems, letters and memoirs that revolve around Grace and her story, Atwood's Alias Grace illustrates the power of competing versions of truth. Atwood writes "What does the past tell us? In and of itself, it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first, before it will say a word, and even so, listening means telling, and then retelling."² This novel is, like Cat's Eye, a fictional autobiography. The entanglement here is that Grace is not the only character with control; she, and every other character in the novel, has a voice in her story. The story of her crime, because of the "sensational" circumstances surrounding the victims and the accused, was "extensively reported."³ At the time the narrative begins, Grace has been accused, and convicted, of assisting her fellow-servant, James MacDermott, in the murder of their master, Thomas Kinnear, and Nancy, his mistress. Grace has been a model prisoner at the Kingston Penitentiary for years, still the center of public interest and attention. Central to this novel are the problems inherent in telling any story of the past, and, most importantly, the question of whether truth can survive the process of constant rewriting: "telling, and then retelling." In her struggle against others' versions of her story, Grace loses control over her memory, and over the way others see her. Ultimately, she is defeated; she loses her power over the narrative of her past, and she is denied the ability to define herself.

On the surface, the most important uncertainty in this text is the question of Grace's guilt or innocence: in a novel whose protagonist is accused of murder, the reader cannot with certainty know whether she is a deceitful murderess or an innocent victim of public opinion. Critic Barbara Hill Rigney observes: "It is the perverse aspect of this novel that neither [Simon, her

2. Margaret Atwood, In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997), 37. Hereafter cited in the text with the abbreviation "Search."

3. Margaret Atwood, Alias Grace (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 461. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "AG."

doctor], the reader...,⁴ nor Atwood herself ever learns the ‘truth’ from Grace, who tells her story only to keep from being returned to the Kingston Penitentiary.”⁵ Grace denies her complicity in the crime numerous times in her discussions with other characters in the novel, as would be expected of a prisoner with any hope of freedom, but she does not confirm or deny her guilt in her own narrative.

While the question of Grace’s guilt or innocence is important, especially in terms of the reader’s relationship with Grace, it is not the fundamental issue in this novel. The more important question of the novel is whether Grace is able to establish control over her narrative of the past. Her freedom, after all, is only contingent on others’ belief in her innocence; as long as they believe her to be innocent, the truth is unimportant, and thus unnecessary in relation to her story.

Some critics argue that Grace’s is a perfect demonstration of an individual’s triumph over competing truths. Critic Susan Becker claims: “Grace points to the workings of private voyeurism and public constructions, and to ways of subverting them.”⁶ This seeming subversion implies that Grace is ultimately able to dictate her own story; but there are good reasons to believe that she is not. Grace attempts to forget the story of her crime; but what she remembers of the murder is restricted by others’ versions of her past, and also by the memory she claimed in the past to have lost. Howells makes a similar point, arguing that Grace is able to “elude” the other characters’ pursuit of the true story. But this professed evasion is empty: her refusal to tell

4. Omitted text: “(and maybe not even Grace, given the possibility that she is truly insane [as many characters suspect] and therefore does not recognize her own reality)”. The question of Grace’s insanity, although raised many times by Grace’s observers throughout the novel, is not the focus of my analysis in this project. Although characters around her maintain that she is a lunatic (her lawyer, past doctors, her alleged co-conspirator, Susanna Moodie), the methodical ordering of her own narrative in no way suggests insanity on Grace’s part. And, her “amnesia,” although it disrupts readerly assurance of the veracity of her narrative, does not establish insanity with any certainty.

5. Barbara Hill Rigney, “Alias Atwood: Narrative Games and Gender Politics,” in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 158. Hereafter cited in the text as “Rigney.”

6. Susanne Becker, “Margaret Atwood and the Media,” in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 38. Hereafter cited in the text as “Becker.”

her story makes it certain that her version will be overpowered. She tries to imitate the person she feels she should be, to empower herself to freedom, but her imitation is dictated by others' terms: she ends up imitating others' vision of who she is, or who she should be. Both of these attempts prove ineffective: at the close of the novel, she has lost control completely, resigning her identity to be defined by others.

I. Grace amidst Polyphony

The structure of the novel serves to exemplify Grace's confusion, her inability to define her identity. The core of the novel is Grace's narrative, in which she addresses an unnamed reader. Hers is ostensibly the closest account to the truth, as every other version of her story is mediated by one (or more) corrupting agents. Her narrative, though, like any autobiographical account, is motivated. And, her motives for fabricating her narrative are clear: she wants to take control of her situation, namely be deemed innocent and set free. What is always unclear is the extent to which her story is fabricated.

Grace's is not the first or the last voice of the novel; this weakens her position in the text.⁷ Also significant about her narrative, unique to her sections of the novel, is the complete absence of punctuation denoting dialogue. This absence makes it difficult for the reader to be able to distinguish between her thoughts, her speech, and what others are saying to her. The effect of this confusion is that others' voices are absorbed into or possibly contaminate Grace's own voice.

This novel is not limited to Grace's narrative. In fact, the most important structural aspect of the text is its polyphony, what Bakhtin calls the "plurality of independent and

7. The first text of the novel is an excerpt from Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearing* (CE, 3); the ultimate voice in the text is that of the "Author's Afterword," in which the compiler (who may, or may not, be Atwood; narratological scruples forbid me from making this connection certain) chronicles her/his process of researching Grace's story (CE, 461-465).

unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1984, 6). The numerous intertexts⁸ of the novel, representing the voices of other characters, play against Grace’s narrative. Because hers is a first-hand account of the crime, her narrative seems to subordinate others’ versions. But the mere presence of intertexts in the novel challenges the authority of her narrative; through the intertexts, the reader (and other characters) are able to understand a larger version of Grace’s self, one she may be attempting to conceal. This struggle among competing accounts exemplifies the larger struggle inherent in the writing of any history. Appleby et al. write: “history always involves power and exclusion, for any history is always someone’s history, told by that someone from a partial point of view.”⁹ Every intertext, and Grace’s narrative, is “someone’s history,” partial and subjective and written for a specific purpose. As critic Klaus Peter Müller writes: “[i]t is obvious from the beginning of the novel that people’s versions of reality, what they call the truth, and how they see other people, are always constructions strongly influenced by the criteria applied and by the interests involved.”¹⁰ The central question of this novel is which version overpowers the rest, and which should be excluded.

Not only are the numerous accounts of Grace’s story varying, but one source builds from the next: the intertextual accounts are grounded in what Grace has said, and what has been gleaned from others to be truth. Simon, the doctor charged with her examination at the time of her narrative, speaks with a colleague about a particularly important intertext: that of Susanna

8. The term “intertext” was originally theorized by Kristeva (Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980]). The term is controversial among narrative theorists: some theorists define intertextuality to be a text embedded in another, larger text; others (including Kristeva herself), have labeled “absolute intertextualists,” understand it to be an “intrinsic, universal attribute” of all texts (Herman, 257). For the purposes of clarity, my use of the term refers to the former: intertext as texts enclosed in a larger work. This usage corresponds to Palumbo’s discussion of the influence of intertextuality in Atwood (Palumbo, 82).

9. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, et al., Telling the Truth about History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 11. Hereafter cited in the text as “Appleby.”

10. Klaus Peter Müller, “Re-Constructions of Reality in Margaret Atwood’s Literature: A Constructionist Approach,” in Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2000), 242.

Moodie. Moodie's book, Life in the Clearing, includes a chapter entitled simply "Grace Marks,"¹¹ in which she writes of Grace's story, her confession to the murder, and her insane evil.¹² Simon responds to this chapter:

'I am not sure how to question [Moodie], without casting aspersions on the veracity of what she has set down... There are discrepancies that are beyond dispute.'...

'How shall I put it? Mrs. Moodie is subject to influences' (AG, 190).

What remains relatively unacknowledged by every character in the novel save Grace is that the writer of every single intertext is "subject to influences" in the same way, able to impose his/her own agenda into his/her version. Instead of engaging exclusively with Grace's account of her story, many of the intertexts work against one another. The effect is cyclical, and deteriorative: once a judgment of what is fact has been written down, it too is considered truth, primary text, an account as true as those that came before it.

In an effort to maintain control over her narrative, Grace, like Elaine, deliberately sheds sections of her memory. Her ostensible forgetting is an attempt to redefine her identity; perhaps if she cannot remember what happened on the day of the murder, she will not have to think of herself as a murderer, a prisoner. In her narrative, Grace describes a dream she remembers having immediately after the murder:

It was as if my own footsteps were being erased from behind me
all the traces of me, smoothed over and rubbed away as if they had

11. Susanna Moodie, Life in the Clearings (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1959).

12. Moodie's account of the story, not taken to be much more credible than most of the reporters' accounts, is the most coherently presented and least fragmented of all of the outsiders' versions included in the novel. And, at the same time, her narrative is exemplary of the mistaken and very often self-contradictory information presented as fact: her account of Grace's "confession" is quoted as three-times removed from Grace's actual words, listed in the novel as "'Confession of Grace Marks,' James McDermott to Kenneth MacKenzie, as retold by Susanna Moodie in Life in the Clearings" (AG, 285).

never been... It's as if I never existed, because no trace of me remains, I have left no marks. And that way I cannot be followed. It is almost the same as being innocent (AG, 342).

Here, Grace makes a clear connection between her remembered past and her identity: perhaps persuaded by her guilt, she expresses a desire to lose what she can remember about her past, referring to “what I wish to forget” (AG, 333). Grace does forget, in an effort to protect herself from what she wishes she did not know. After all, she says, “when you are sad it is best to change the subject” (AG, 68).

But Grace does not have absolute control over her memory; other characters dictate the terms of what she can remember, or what she says she can remember; even her lawyer makes this distinction, implying that truth is fluid, subjective. During the trial, she recounts to Simon, her lawyer instructed her on how she should present her self: “I was to leave out the parts I could not remember... And I should say what must have happened, according to plausibility, rather than what I myself could actually recall” (AG, 357). She has learned to understand her gaps in memory as implausible, unbelievable. This simple act of false remembering is powerful here, as Grace has already come to connect her memory with the way she understands her self.

In her life at the Penitentiary, Grace is not only confined by intertext, but she is also surrounded by characters with an interest in her story: the Warden's wife and daughters see her as an exotic treasure, a social commodity but potentially dangerous; Simon hopes to “rescue” her from her loss of memory, and is colored by romantic fantasies about her; the Committee set on establishing her innocence sees her as a noble and worthy cause, but also as a means to power. As her interaction with other characters has become intensely political and strategic, her narrative becomes the only means through which she can express an authentic, true self. But much of Grace's narrative—most if it, in fact—is the story of her life she is telling Simon. Thus, Simon's

conspicuous interest in “what you can remember” (AG, 307) shapes her narrative. Trying to disentangle her past lies from her true memories, she becomes confused. She worries what to tell Simon about what she remembers about the crime:

I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not even say to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well. And what McDermott said I said, and what the others said I must have said... I said that I remembered some of the things I did. But there are other things they said I did, which I said I could not remember at all (AG, 295).

Her confusion about what she remembers demonstrates that she has lost complete control over her memory of the past: she is no longer the dictating force that decides what is remembered, and what is forgotten.

II. Self-Conscious Truth

Constantly conscious of the way that others see her, and with good reason, Grace attempts to take control of the way she is understood. She is most interested in the imitation of a “romantic figure” (AG, 25), which is how the Warden’s daughters have come to see her. Grace thinks that she has control over who or what she is imitating; she suppresses every urge she has to laugh because she does not want to “spoil their romantic notion of [her]” (AG, 25). Having lost control of the circumstances of her life (as she is imprisoned), and having almost no power over what she remembers or forgets, Grace clings to the idea that she can control the way she is understood. Having revealed in her narrative that she is withholding from Simon, Grace reasons: “I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself” (AG, 101).

In reality, though, it is others that dictate her imitation; to empower herself in any real way, she can only imitate one very specific self: the sad, pure, simple victim of circumstance, the Grace that others expect her to be. Müller agrees: “Grace sometimes acts in a certain way because she knows or thinks it is expected of her, and that it serves a specific function” (Müller, 242). Grace is fixated on others’ accounts of her in the intertexts. Recounting the variety of names she has been called, conflicting characteristics that have been attributed to her, she considers: “I think of all the things that have been written about me—that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim... that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot.” Her amusement with at the ineptitude of the intertextual renderings of herself, and of her story, is short-lived, and empty: these intertext, ridiculous as they may be, have at least some control over her narrative. She betrays a confusion in her wondering: “how can I be all these things at once?” (AG, 23). Suddenly no longer entertained, Grace begins to question what she knows, in favor of intertextual accounts, in effect conceding her power over the way she understands her identity.

Throughout her narrative, there is always a struggle between Grace and the intertexts, a struggle for power over what will come to be understood as history. But, not all of her interaction with the intertexts is response: she uses her knowledge of every intertext available to her to manipulate other characters’ opinions. In telling her story to Simon, she “corrects” her story by paying attention to the details purported by the intertexts. When Simon begins to trust her story, impressed with her ability to account for “every button and candle-end” (AG, 185), a colleague warns him of the possibility that she is “corroborating,” not remembering: “‘How did you check her facts? In the newspapers, I suppose... Has it occurred to you that she may have derived her corroborative details from the same source?’” (AG, 373).

Like Elaine, Grace absorbs others' words and uses them in her own context, changing their meanings. Many of the words of her narrative become double-oriented as a result. The most striking example is her reaction to the label "celebrated murderess," a term used by Moodie and perhaps by other intertexts.

Murderess is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word—musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper it over to myself: *Murderess*, *Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor. *Murderer* is merely brutal... I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices (AG, 23).

Using a word that had been accusatory in its original context, Grace redefines the word; for her, it is simply what she has become, having almost nothing to do with who she has been, or what she has done. She has been deprived of her agency, unable to establish for herself who she is; her acknowledgement of her "only choices" demonstrates as much. Stripped of the ability either to forget or to define her self on her own terms, Grace's self is struggling against what others want her to be; what *she* wants to be, or what she is, is completely ignored.

In Cat's Eye, Elaine is able to understand her self because of her dual narrative: through her memories of the selves she has been, she can be self-reflexive and define her identity. Grace is not afforded such access to her past, and neither is the reader: her narrative is told from a point in time after much of her life, the crime, and the trial have passed. Grace's consciousness of the intertexts of the story is the only way she is able to be self-reflexive: she relies on intertexts to understand and to define her own identity.

The Grace depicted in the intertexts, though, gives Grace a voice that she cannot control; the "Confession" printed in the *Star and Transcript* and attributed to her gives her this voice quite literally (AG, 95; 235; 285; 328; 347). Grace denies the Confession as her own, comparing

the truth of her story to what has been printed as her words. Grace maintains that only pieces of the Confession are true: “what it says at the beginning of my Confession is true enough” (AG, 103). The majority of the remainder of the Confession, like the other intertexts, is disputed by Grace as fabricated.

In her narrative, Grace is unable to reconcile what she says and what is printed in the intertexts. There is an important distinction between her spoken words and what is printed, one fundamental to the understanding of the intertexts. When one narrates a story in person, one has almost complete control, able to “change the details or modify their meaning every time they give a rendition” of their story.” In a written narration of a story, though, “the text itself becomes an object with properties of its own” (Appleby, 226). What Grace fails to understand is the power she relinquishes in her telling interested others her story. Her confused response to others’ distortion of what she has told them leads to her powerlessness; her momentary confusion of a detail, or her claim to have forgotten becomes a written truth, an account considered as valid as her own. She reflects on her time spent with Simon, recounting her story: “Sometimes I imagine that whatever he is writing down, it cannot possibly be anything that has come out of my mouth, as he does not understand much of what I say, although I try to put things as clearly as I can” (AG, 243). Unable to negotiate the difference between what she says and what is written, Grace loses control of what is written about her.

Grace is only able to respond to intertexts; she never actively establishes her identity, even through her narrative. She challenges her alleged co-conspirator’s account of her guilt, “who told you such a lie?” (AG, 257), but she fails to resolve most of the intertexts’ contradictions. Frustrated with her inability to remember the crime, she considers:

There are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right into your mouth for you too; and that sort

are like the magicians who can throw their voice, at fairs and shows, and you are just their wooden doll. And that's what it was like at the trial... I was shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice could not get out. " (AG, 295).

Her voice is "shut up" and lost, perhaps, even to herself. Even in her narrative, her attempt to recover control over her story, she fails to answer the question of her guilt with any definitiveness.

Her account of the crime, the "centre" of Grace's narrative, is disappointing for Simon, as neither her guilt nor her innocence can be resolved. Her version of the crime is limited by what she claims not to remember, and what she has "remembered" in the past. And, significantly, her narration of the story of the crime (AG, 320; 329-334) is included in Simon's narrative; the reader cannot access her thoughts while she tells her story. This dilutes the power of her story. As in her own narrative, Grace repeatedly admits to withholding from Simon, as she has "every practical reason" to lie to him: "he is among the few who can argue for her sanity, her innocence, her freedom" (Rigney, 157). Howells contends that Grace is able to "elude [Simon's] insistent probing for truth" (Howells 2000b, 152). The result of her self-censorship, though, is that by withholding from Simon, she withholds from the reader as well. As s/he can only understand her story through her narrative, and through the intertextual accounts, Grace's silence in her own narrative of what she truly remembers of the crime deprives the reader of her "truth."

Having been declared innocent and set free, Grace's letter to Simon is her last chance at disclosure. Still, though, she refuses to reveal her secret. Instead, she leaves it to the intertexts (and to the reader) to determine unaided. In this letter, Atwood uses metaphor to demonstrate this resignation. Grace reveals her suspicion that she is pregnant. Fearing that her physical condition may be caused by a tumor, Grace writes: "It is strange to know you carry within

yourself either a life or death, but not to know which one... time alone must tell" (AG, 459). Clearly, the unknown "life or death" within Grace is troubling to her; the question of her guilt, and subsequent question of her evil nature, is not resolved at the novel's close. Stripped of any control she may once have had over her story, she has been defeated in her struggle against the intertexts, others' versions, and she resigns the decision of her guilt, and the defining of her identity, to "time."

Grace struggles to regain control of the forces defining her identity, but she cannot; her ideas (and others' ideas) about what she should remember impede her from connecting with her past, and her desire to empower herself forces her to subscribe to an ideal of who she should be that is not her own. Ultimately, her story is decided, and her identity defined, by historians whose sources are limited to accounts of accounts of what she said. The narrative of her past, then, is reconstructed by intertext, and her self defined by others.

Such irresolution at the end of the novel leaves the reader impotent: unable to make any judgments about Grace and her story, s/he is forced to accept its indeterminacy, its inconclusiveness. The final voice in the novel, that of the "Author's Afterword," is a final affirmation of this indeterminacy: while the author is free to include some substantiation of Grace's guilt or innocence, or even a speculation, she writes instead of the unanswered questions surrounding Grace's story. This problem broadens: the story of Grace's crime, treated as historically uncomplicated by some of the intertexts in the novel (AG, 183; 439), demonstrates the uncertainty inherent in any account of the past (Howells 2000b, 151). Through Alias Grace, Atwood reminds the reader that "it is nearly impossible to expect one single 'true story' to emerge" (Palumbo, 85). This impossibility dooms any attempt to set down accurate history; but, argues Atwood, we cannot stop trying.

Conclusion

“The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date... Impossible, of course.”

-Margaret Atwood, The Blind Assassin

Both of these novels chronicle the ways in which the individual defines the self against (and through) memory. The central difference between these two novels lies in the complex relationship between reader and text: reader's access to the protagonist, and to her struggle toward/against her self, is allowed in drastically different ways. In Cat's Eye, the reader knows more about Elaine than she knows about herself; this distance allows her process of self-recovery to be completely visible to the reader, and thus inevitable. In Alias Grace, though, the reader knows less than Grace seems to know, and less than the writers of the intertexts: the reader is given fragments of truths, pieces of varying versions of what should be the same story. It is probable that Grace knows more about her self than the reader is allowed to know, as Simon fears: “[s]he knows; she knows... buried deep within her, the knowledge is there” (AG, 291).

In both of these novels, the unconventional distance of the reader from the text serves to reject traditional notions about truth, and about what can be known absolutely.

Much of Atwood's autobiographical fiction incorporates the power of others' control over one's narrative. In The Handmaid's Tale, the protagonist's narrative is followed by a second, temporally removed narrative voice, and the truths of her narrative are questioned and

subordinated by his analysis.¹ In Life Before Man, Atwood plays with the power of perspective on memory, and the ways in which narrative constructions of the same story can vary.² And, in Surfacing, the protagonist's struggle to define the self against external (and internal) forces causes her to reject the notion of her self as separate from the world around her.³ In all of Atwood's works, the reader is always limited in his/her understanding of narrative.

In her works, Atwood explores the boundaries of narrative, the limits. Narrative emerges as a revision, a corrected version of truth: the reader, like the narrating self, cannot know the "whole" story; there is no "whole" story. There is no singular meaning of narrative; what is meaningful is the process, the search for the unattainable, for what one cannot know.

1. Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

2. Margaret Atwood, Life Before Man (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

3. Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (New York: Anchor Books, 1998.)

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Addendum: A Constructed Version of Memory

I met Margaret Atwood.

First, I should mention how much I love her work: so much I decided to try for a more complete understanding of what she was trying to say in her fiction.

Well, not what *she* was trying to say, what her narrators try to say.

That's one of the things she spoke about in her talk that day: the "eternal triangle" that links author to narrator, and narrator to reader. "Don't look at me," she said. "I'm not the one who wrote that book you read. That was me then, the me of some other time. I'm different now."

Very narratological.

It was last fall; my mother and I went together. Mom told me later she had been expecting someone younger: "frail-looking" was the term she used. She's ten years younger than Atwood was then, that day we saw her speak.

I'm glad Atwood warned me that she wasn't the one I had been expecting. Otherwise I might have been disappointed; I shook her hand, told I was writing about her narrators. She smiled mechanically and that was it.

The moment was anticlimactic. But I shouldn't demand climax; my life is not a novel.