

Who Is He?

The Missing Persons Behind the Pronoun in Atwood's *Surfacing*

One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—
One need not be a House—
The Brain has Corridors—surpassing
Material Place— . . .

Emily Dickinson

S*urfacing* opens with a woman looking out a car window and saying to herself: “I can’t believe I’m on this road again. . . .” In contrast to traditional literary rituals of quest and exploration, this protagonist is not engaged in “lighting out” alone.¹ Because she does not own a car and cannot drive herself, she is sitting in the back seat with the packsacks and Joe. Moreover, she returns with her lover and a married couple, David and Anna, to known territory: her childhood home near a northern town² on the border between Ontario and Quebec. Margaret Atwood’s voyager has set out unwillingly—and only in order to go back.

Through hints and partial allegations, she discloses the reason for her reluctant return:

The future is in the North, that was a political slogan once; when my father heard it *he* said there was nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either. Wherever *he* is now, dead or alive and nobody knows which, *he’s* no longer making epigrams. (9; emphasis added)

The identity of “he” is unequivocal here. The daughter identifies him in the clause preceding his pronominal replacements and so the phrase “my father” is, literally, antecedent. Her father disappeared from his isolated island cabin several weeks earlier. Hence he is wanted. Nonetheless, the words “dead or alive,” which resonate with the call to hunt out fugitive

criminals, are incongruous in relation to her reclusive and law-abiding father. (I shall return to crimes and/of fathers later.) The call to search for him—“Your father is gone, nobody can find him”—comes from without and sets her on the road north toward her past (24).

Unlike in the statements just quoted, sometimes the person behind the pronoun remains unnamed. Nobody expressly comes forward to fill in the vacant nominal spot. That is, whereas most masculine pronouns in the text conform to standard grammatical usage and replace an individual mentioned in a nearby clause, some appear without any specification. The context usually indicates that the referent of “he” is not the former generic representative “man”; rather, the pronoun apparently points to the protagonist’s father. In such instances, the problem does not seem to concern the lapse in referential specificity or, briefly, “who is he?” The repeated absence of specification itself is puzzling—and, then, the question of “why only he?” For only male antecedents are missing in *Surfacing*.

In addressing these questions which, as will be seen, are crucial to the disturbance of memory that structures the narrative, I propose to draw on several Freudian and Lacanian formulations about the interconnections between mental functioning and linguistic processes. The main theoretical basis for this analysis is, however, one of Jacques Lacan’s best-known dictums: the premise of an unconscious structured like a language (see, for example, “Agency of the Letter” 147 and *Four Fundamental Concepts* 20). My methodological claim is that to unravel the protagonist’s relation to the past and her aptitude for defensive revision requires a close examination of her selective omission of antecedents. More specifically, masculine pronouns that appear alone do not lack a referent but, on the contrary, have one too many. The narrating subject of *Surfacing* has acquired the habit of splitting masculinities in the process of defense against the pressures of a “forgotten” or banished past that threatens continually to invade the present. Certain pronouns thus function as symbolic expressions (or symptoms) of a duality of consciousness. Suspended from the unidentified *he*, *his*, or *him*, what Lacan calls the “censored chapter” of a personal history manifests itself (“Function and Field of Speech” 50). My questions have therefore to do with both that particular protagonist’s stake in those particular pronouns and the general implications of her verbal stratagems for the encounter with traumatic experience.

But before proceeding further in this direction, I want to examine some

alternative approaches to the cryptic appearances of “he” in Atwood’s novel. From a narratological perspective, the referential blanks or gaps could be read as a stylistic effect of an intra-homodiegetic narrator.³ Because *he* appears to be known to the *I* who narrates, there is no need for frequent specification. Statistically speaking, whereas the ratio used by most writers is 48 pronouns for every 100 nouns, Robert Cluett has found in a syntactic analysis of *Surfacing* that the ratio is an unusual 66 pronouns for every 100 nouns. Furthermore, from the opening assertion (“I can’t believe I’m on this road again”), the act of telling frequently coincides with the actual sequence of events. Simple present and continuous tenses combine with elided referents to produce an effect of immediate reportage. However, this functional explanation does not account for a striking rhetorical feature: the gender restriction of the narrator’s nominal gaps. In her story, as already noted, only male antecedents are missing.

Turning from narratological to thematic considerations, these omissions might be regarded as correlative to the motif of the father’s absence.⁴ “He” alone evokes the space into which the object of the daughter’s quest has vanished. Ellipses may also symbolize a relational discontinuity: namely, the literal and other distances separating this daughter who left home for the city from her father who stayed on the island and close to nature. The lack of explicit reference implies that the word “father” has become somehow difficult for her.

Yet these explanations for the silences surrounding the father prove to be only partially satisfactory. *Surfacing*’s detective plot, revolving around the disappearance of the father, gradually yields to a psychological plot, revolving around the struggle with, and eventual triumph over, trauma and denial. To solve the mystery of the specific missing person (“Who is he?”)—and also to address the overall psychological conundrum posed by the narrator’s practice of selective omission (“Why only he?”)—requires distinguishing three types of psychical division.

First, the narratorial position shifts between two temporally distinct states of consciousness: the one belonging to the now of the action sees things, more or less, as they are; the other belonging to the past is troubled and deluded. “Do you have a twin? . . . some of your lines are double,” Anna remarks while reading the protagonist’s palm (8).⁵

Second, the text gradually discloses a split between “he” who is unnamed yet

accessible to consciousness, “my father,” and “he” who is unnameable. *Third*, the unnameable one is also divided between a married lover and an unborn child. He, without antecedent, might evoke any of the following absentees: father, lover, child.

These complications invite the reader to engage in a pursuit comparable to the search that motivates the journey narrative: *where*, the daughter asks—and *who*, the reader asks—is he? The antecedent inferred on first reading correlates with the avowed but unnamed subject of the elliptical pronouns (the father); however, on second reading the antecedent may be linked to a disavowed and unnameable subject (the lover or the child). In other words, the first-time round only one referent is evident to the reader when “he” alone appears. But for each unattached pronominal substitute, two points of reference need to be taken into account. One is present to the protagonist’s consciousness and immediately apparent to the reader, whereas the other is denied or hidden from view until the protagonist fully retrieves the fragments of her past and the reader returns to the text for a second time.

To advance, then, another psychoanalytic presupposition that informs this discussion: the “free-floating” or assumptive masculine pronouns in *Surfacing* are the product of an elaborate mental condensation. As used here, the category of “condensation” entails a mechanistic sense that has a certain resemblance to the photographer’s method for producing composite pictures. “[B]y projecting two images on to a single plate,” Freud writes, “certain features common to both are emphasized, while those which fail to fit in with one another cancel one another out and are indistinct in the picture” (*Interpretation of Dreams* 4: 293). A structural analogy may thus be drawn between the assumptive pronouns of *Surfacing* and the double or multiple images forming one photoplate.⁶ In terms of the road unwillingly taken, they represent points of intersection where someone or something in the present meets with someone or something previously encountered. In particular, temporality is canceled out so that individuals inhabiting the zones of then and now might be convened. Anger and fear take over as more than one antecedent comes forward to stand at the textual intersection called “he.”

The Father. While still travelling northward, Atwood’s voyager suddenly arrives at an impasse: “The road ought to be here,” she complains, “but instead . . . the way is blocked” (12).⁷ She finds herself literally obstructed,

neither able to move forward nor yet ready to go back. The blocked road elicits a dense reactive monologue, ostensibly in excess of her actual situation. This monologue is paradigmatic of the nominal gaps and other rhetorical evasions that she devises in defending against the invasion of memory:

Nothing is the same, I don't know the way any more. I slide my tongue around the ice cream, trying to concentrate on it, they put seaweed in it now, but I'm starting to shake, why is the road different, *he* shouldn't have allowed them to do it, I want to turn around and go back to the city and never find out what happened to *him*. I'll start crying, that would be horrible, none of them [her companions] would know what to do and neither would I. I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the knife-hard pain up the side of my face. Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain. I'm all right. (12-13; emphasis added)

Nowhere in this passage or in its vicinity does the referent of "he" appear; the reader (unlike the narrator), however, need not go far to find "him." The daughter set out to look for her father without any road maps or charts because, in spite of her nine-year absence from home, she was confident the way would be the same (12). But the road has changed beyond recognition. The closer she comes to the places she used to inhabit, the less familiar the travelled area becomes. She now calls it paradoxically, bitterly, "my home ground, foreign territory" (11). The first stage of her quest may be glossed by the concluding verses of Atwood's "Journey to the Interior": "it is easier for me to lose my way / forever here, than in other landscapes" (*Circle Game* 71).⁸

Several features of her monologue nevertheless unsettle any straightforward equation of "he" with her father. She seems to consider him, for instance, responsible for road conditions: "why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it." Her father is a botanist by profession and not a road engineer. He cannot be held literally accountable for the incursion of a new route. The daughter, on the way to her childhood home, seems to be toppling back into a belief in parental omnipotence. Her all-powerful father could have prevented any changes but evidently failed to do so. That is why she cannot find her way. Soon he will be very sorry, however. She intends to turn back and never find him.

What this daughter clearly wants is to be relieved of responsibility. Blame is shifted onto the father for circumstances entirely beyond his ordinance. Furthermore, confronted by his riddling and uncharacteristic disappearance, she would defer knowledge of its most probable cause: his death. The two strategies of self-relief or defense adopted here are displacement and

denial. Her patterned reactions throughout the greater part of her journey constitute a warding off, a turning away from reality. Already fully in place at the outset, these defenses govern the narrator's relations toward the truths (about her father, about her self) she is called upon to seek.

Nonetheless, despite frequent evasions and distortions, some recognition of reality persists on her part. Shortly after the misdirected accusation of her father, the daughter thus punishes herself: "I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything . . . but the knife-hard pain up the side of my face." The phrase "knife-hard pain" is unusual not only for its sudden intimation of aggression directed against herself. Throughout most of her journey, she rarely has recourse to metaphors or non-literal images; even the comparisons she occasionally makes tend to be literal. Added to the infrequency of figurative language, other means of verbal coloring and variation are also greatly reduced in her narrative. Cluett's comparison with the syntactic profiles of five works of contemporary fiction shows that "in no other book than *Surfacing* has the range of resources been so drastically inhibited." In fact, *Surfacing* has "the lowest total of modifiers of *any* text of *any* genre . . . sampled from the last 300 years" (80). These findings suggest, in Cluett's view, that the novel's "surface structures" correspond to the narrator's retreat from civilization during her climactic schizophrenic episode: "The linguistic retrenchment that marks the book's syntax constitutes a similar retreat from ornate 'civilized' values" (87).

But the phenomenon of "linguistic retrenchment" characterizes the book from its opening pages. The narrator's signifying systems are thoroughly inhibited and her verbal resources curtailed long before her psychotic break leads her to cut off all contact with civilization. Like her home ground, language, too, has become foreign territory to her. The avoidance of figurative elaboration is part of a more general stylistic (and, as I shall argue, symptomatic) economy. Her reluctance or inability to communicate is rivaled only by her lover, the inarticulate Joe with whom she agreed to live as she would buy "a goldfish or a potted cactus plant": "he doesn't talk much, that's an advantage" (42). Whatever impedes her discourse is already present in the highly charged passage about the blocked road where male antecedents make their first non-appearance.

Within such an overall rhetorical austerity, the metaphoric turn of "knife-hard pain" might well seem extravagant. Syntactically and chronologically, however, the "knife-hard pain" points in different directions: in the one instance, the phrase is indeed figurative; in the other, all too literal.

When read in anaphoric reference to the sensation of biting into an ice-cold cone, a sensation mentioned in the preceding clause, “knife-hard” is a metaphor. But it is also closely allied to the next sentence: “Anaesthesia, that’s one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain.” In cataphoric reference to anaesthesia, “knife-hard” alters its figurative aspect and introduces the notion of a surgical intervention. It not only designates the protagonist’s immediate sensation of pain but also points forward to her recovery of an unwanted memory. So the present slip, as it were, from literal to figurative register corresponds to a bungled action that took place in the past. Analogously, the reference to “the side of my face” indicates an anatomical displacement. For what the speaker is also talking about, without apparently knowing it, is her abortion.

In light of later revelations, I would now propose that the assumptive pronouns in *Surfacing* all require a double attribution. The missing antecedent is never simply the protagonist’s father. Whenever “he” appears alone, she is engaged in the telling of two stories: the present search for her father has become intertwined with her affair with a married man. The abortion she underwent at his insistence—or, as she (re)calls it following the return of her repressed ones, “my deflated lap” (144)—led her to leave her lover. The interpolation of a third tale further complicates this two-tiered narrative. Refusing or unable to recognize what actually was, the teller appoints a substitute story, spins out a variation on the reality of an unacceptable memory. The illicit relationship becomes a marriage; the end of the affair, a divorce; and the aborted fetus, a child who remained in her so-called husband’s custody. In effect, then, the term “repression” does not adequately denote the protagonist’s defensive reaction to her past. The traumatic chapter of her history has undergone extensive *renarrativization*.

To clarify this process of revision, it is helpful to recapitulate the distinction developed in Freud’s late essay, “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence,” between different types of reaction to trauma: namely, repression (*Verdrängung*) and disavowal (*Verleugnung*). The first defense involves repressing the demands of an instinct or *internal* reality, whereas the second is directed toward a denial of *external* reality. In repression, the traumatic experience or perception is dismissed entirely from conscious thought; in disavowal, it remains present to consciousness but in disguise. When the mechanism of disavowal goes into effect, the individual contends with acute psychical conflict by means of two responses: on the one hand, the unsatisfying reality is rejected; on the other, that same reality is recognized and

transformed. Disavowal may therefore be deemed a successful type of defense, a way of having it both ways. Such double dealing, however, is paid for in full. As Freud observes, “this success is achieved at the price of a rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on” (“Splitting of the Ego” 275-76). Disavowal represents the more dangerous of the psyche’s attempts to cancel out trauma and dislodge the past. In contrast to the repression that typifies neurosis, disavowal marks the beginning of the reality loss found in psychosis.

Returning now to the psychological rift in *Surfacing*: on the temporal level, disavowal takes the form of engendering a retrospective dimension to the narrative that has no empirical reality and exists solely in a pre- or almost psychotic mind; on the rhetorical level, disavowal manifests itself in word-splitting, in speech that issues from a kind of forked tongue. But even this description does not go far enough. For Atwood’s unreliable narratorial agent deceives not only the reader but also herself.⁹ She is lying and truth-telling simultaneously. The reality of her past experience may be glimpsed at times through the pseudo-past she invents to cover it up. One of the textual strategies enabling this *tour de force* is the pronoun without nominal precedent.

Thus the apparition of “he” in the ostensible protest about her father and the different road signals the presence of another paternal figure. Unappended to an explicit referent, the pronoun marks the place of a gap or opening through which spirits return. Enter ghost, as the stage directions might say.¹⁰ The subject of the daughter’s accusation is not just the man who fathered her but also, and probably more so, the lover who unchilded her. These figures have complexly merged in the variant stories she tells about (and to) herself. Finding her lost father in the lake leads her to break through the skein of false memories and arrive at the acknowledgment of that other father: “*He said I should do it, he made me do it, he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. . . he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me*” (144-45; emphasis added).¹¹ On rereading, then, both “it” and “he,” in her accusatory “*he shouldn’t have allowed it,*” bear a double signification. In addition to an actual road, “it” also stands in for the surgical procedure that terminated her pregnancy. Her bodily territory, albeit with her adult consent, was transgressed and scarred by the inroads of a knife. Like the split referentiality of “he,” the mention of “it” signposts the present moment while pointing to the past.

These defensive arrangements are entrenched in the narrator’s everyday

speech and thought. Accordingly, when she mentions “the way I did it, so suddenly, and then running off and leaving my husband and child” (29), her doing “it” patently refers to an invented past: I was married, as it were. And yet her vague phrasing also admits the memory of a real event: I had an abortion, as it happened. The “knife-hard pain” and “it” turn out to be, as does “he” alone, verbal traces of the trauma that precipitated her twinning. That is, like the legible skin of her open palms (“some of your lines are double” [8]), the marks of her division are embedded in her speech. Both skin and speech function as a symptomatic site of injury.

The Child. Further difficulties arise in assessing the daughter’s diatribe against the father who failed her. The missing antecedents of “I want to turn around and . . . never find out what happened to *him*” are not the same as those of “*he* shouldn’t have allowed them to do it.” Although the obvious referent is her father, another subject emerges on second reading. This “*him*” also alludes to her aborted fetus whose final resting place is—like her father’s—unknown. If I follow this chain of associative connections correctly, the narrator acknowledges here, once again without knowing what she does, the other who is lost to her. Child-haunted and grieving, she resembles the woman-survivor in Atwood’s poem “After the Flood, We,” who hears “the first stumbling / footsteps of the almost-born / coming (slowly) behind us” (*Circle Game* 19). But an undisguised account of the “almost-born” of *Surfacing* is assembled only late in the long journey home.

The referential dualities initially mobilized in the exemplary passage about the blocked road, as well as in the wish not to know “what happened to *him*,” are reintroduced and expanded in later passages. During the daughter’s first days on the island where her father lived before his disappearance, she finds some unintelligible (to her) drawings among his papers. She quickly decides that he is insane and hiding somewhere nearby. The alacrity with which she attributes insanity to him suggests another displacement: “I am not crazy; he is,” as in: “I am not responsible; he is.” Fear of an uncontrollable and dangerous presence takes over:

[T]he island wasn’t safe, we were trapped on it. They didn’t realize it but I did, I was responsible for them. The sense of watching eyes, *his* presence lurking just behind the green leafscreen, ready to pounce or take flight, *he* wasn’t predictable, I was trying to think of ways to keep them out of danger. . . .

Similarly, a short while later:

I wanted to get them off the island, to protect them from *him*, to protect *him* from them, save all of them from knowledge. (77, 83; emphasis added)

Though elided here and in adjacent passages, the antecedent “my father” again seems to be self-evident. The protagonist feels responsible for protecting the people she brought to the island and, given her recent conjecture about his insanity, this concern seems reasonable. Oddly enough, however, she hopes for redemption from knowledge rather than ignorance. She would defend her companions from learning about her father’s madness, her father from their realization of his condition. The implausibility of her concern undermines its overt meaning. Furthermore, with the mention of “watching eyes” and someone “ready to pounce,” an irrational and anxious note signals the interpolation of her other story.

Here, too, pronominal surrogation veils the figures from her actual past. Lurking behind “him” is her aborted fetus, and behind “them,” the persecutors who took him away. Roles have undergone a strange reversal, however; the protagonist now perceives the endangered one as highly dangerous. She seems to have switched positions in what Atwood designates the “victor/victim games” (*Survival* 39).¹² This reversal immediately raises several questions: why indeed should “they” require *her* protection? why the need to “keep them out of danger”? or to “save all of them from knowledge”? Behind “them,” I suggest, is *she*. The protagonist conceals herself from herself among the collective pronouns. She later acknowledges her complicity in these very terms: “[I]t was hiding in me . . . and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn’t; that made me one of them too” (*Surfacing* 145). Another motive for her need to “save all of them” now becomes apparent. Knowledge threatens to perforate the fortification (disavowal) behind which she has installed herself. Hence she wants protection from the memory of “him” and “it.” Salvation through ignorance is precisely what she seeks for herself.

However, a recurrent sense of surveillance, of “watching eyes . . . behind the green leafscreen,” provides one indication that such defensive structures are uneasily maintained. In frequent correlation with her feeling of being looked at, frogs or frog-like creatures increasingly plague her sojourn on the island. There are the real ones constantly underfoot: “Frogs hop everywhere out of my way” (37). But there are also the imagined ones, some waiting and some never-to-be born.

To this second type belongs the protagonist’s striking explanation of how she could experience her brother’s accidental drowning before her own birth:

"I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (32). The "un-" of "unborn" denotes: not yet born (waiting-to-be), but also: deprived of being born (never-to-be). An emblem of nurturance and life (baby *with* a bottle) may signify the very opposite of life (baby *in* a bottle). Familial ambiguities hop out and surround the protagonist. The "unborn baby" bears a close resemblance to the father who is also "dead or alive." In other words, paralleling the mystery of her father's absence in the present is another equivocal existence that is the afterbirth of her duplicitous retrospection.

So even an apparently straightforward self-reference (*I* = baby) resonates with the disavowed memory of her abortion. The image of a walled-in baby, with its anomalous similitude to "a frog in a jar," disguises and yet also recognizes that other missing member of her (potential) family. In analogous circumstances, Atwood's Susanna Moodie, without equivocation, evokes the memory of her dead children: "unborn babies / fester like wounds in the body" (42). In *Surfacing*, fetal loss feels like a pain up the side of one's face, looks like a frog suspended in a state of stringent liquefaction. Death may thus be undone for a time. The loss, which is the actual object of comparison, has dropped out of direct view; and, in contrast to Moodie's bleakly accurate remembrance, the connective "like" seeks after substitutive objects.

Moreover, so elaborate have the narrator's defensive configurations become that the bottled frog also resonates with the false memory of her brother's drowning. The ground for this substitution is an inversion: death by water represents a reversal of birth. Under the aegis of disavowal, the brother functions in the manner of the vanished father, providing the narrator with another surrogate for the traumatic reality of her unborn baby. Her brother who, in fact, "almost drowned once" but was saved by their mother has replaced the one who, as it turns out, "drowned in air" because she, unlike her mother, was not a savior (131, 143). "The Canadian author's two favourite 'natural' methods for dispatching his victims are drowning and freezing," Atwood remarks in her (partly ironically entitled) *Survival*, "drowning being preferred by poets—probably because it can be used as a metaphor for a descent into the unconscious" (55).¹³ Wry authorial observations notwithstanding, the climactic moment of revelation in *Surfacing* constitutes a complex literalization of the metaphor of watery descent and retrieval of what has been submerged: the daughter finds the drowned body of her

father; the amnesiac narrator surfaces from the lakewaters of her past; and, quite suddenly, the associations confounding the living and the dead cease.

As if a composite picture had re-separated into two photoplates, previously superimposed images of brother-baby move apart and acquire a discrete existence. "It formed again"—the narrator now closely tracks what she visualizes—"in my head: at first I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face . . . but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all." The fatality concealed behind the fetal-frog imagery comes into her full epiphanic view: "[I]t was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands . . . it had drowned in air" (143). She is seen but also unambiguously sees, and the real tenor of her surrealist simile ("a cat pickled") is finally understood.

The Lover. Shortly before finding her father's body in the lake, the daughter goes out in search of prehistoric rock paintings whose location she adduces from the same drawings read at first as proof of his madness. The paintings do not turn up at the place seemingly indicated by his mapped instructions:

Either I hadn't remembered the map properly or what he'd written on the map was wrong. I'd reasoned it out, unravelled the clues in his puzzle the way he taught us and they'd led nowhere. I felt as though he'd lied to me. . . . He hadn't followed the rules, he'd cheated, I wanted to confront him, demand an explanation. (127)

As in the episode of the different road, she cannot find her way and holds someone else accountable. The referent of this complaint appears unambiguous. The way to the rock paintings eludes her, as if he—again, her father—had deliberately misguided her steps. Here too, however, "he" means in more ways than one. The unnameable liar ("he'd cheated") also refers to her married lover. Disorientation and betrayal, the sense of being "led nowhere," activates that other scene. Earlier she describes how her "husband" had manipulated her through deceptive language, just as her father presumably falsified the signs she tries now to follow: "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (47).

Distrust of words—"love conquers all, conquerors love all, mirages raised by words" (164)—links expressly to the failures of the father. The representative of the symbolic order, of language and law, which (as constructed by the dominant social system) is a patriarchal agency, has shown her its dark and annihilating aspect. The narrator retaliates by repudiating the rhetorical-cultural conventions over which he presides: "[W]ord games, the win-

ning and losing games are finished" (191). Even while going forward in search of her actual father, she turns away from the symbolic paternal order. At the cost of censuring herself, a radical constriction of her verbal range ensues. Long before her psychotic episode, the remarkable pronominality and stylistic austerity of her narration coincide with a state of disconnection reaching back to the paternal function.¹⁴

Refusing patronymic markers of identity, she remains unnamed throughout her journey. "I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending," she explains in the extraordinary lucidity of her madness (168). There is no proper designate, no "surname" she would call her own. Non-naming belongs, then, to a rhetorical constellation that signals her rupture with the Name-of-the-Father (*nom/non-du-père*).¹⁵ She repudiates the rules and interdictions previously accepted and, however hesitatingly, obeyed: Thou shalt not be a mother to this child; and also: Thou shalt not be an artist. "I do posters, covers, a little advertising and magazine work." The protagonist who is a commercial illustrator recalls the vocational recommendation received from her former lover: "[H]e said I should study something I'd be able to use because there have never been any important woman artists" (52).

However, what happens when a speaking subject expels or rejects the symbolic father is, according to Lacanian theory, largely destructive: "It is the lack of the Name-of-the-Father in that place which, by the hole that it opens up in the signified, sets off the cascade of reshapings of the signifier from which the increasing disaster of the imaginary proceeds" (Lacan, "On a Question" 217). For Lacan, the foreclosure (repudiation) of the Name-of-the-Father is commensurate with psychosis. Julia Kristeva describes some clinical symptoms of such foreclosure in the section of *Powers of Horror* entitled "Why Does Language Appear to Be 'Alien'?": "A consequence of that disconnection, involving the very function of language in its psychic economy, is that verbalization, as he [the patient] says, is alien to him." Among the special effects accompanying this alienation is a severe restriction or loss of figurative language. Kristeva elaborates:

Only seldom is metaphor included in his speech; when it is, more than with anyone else, it is a literal one. . . . "I displace, therefore you must associate and condense for me," says such an analysand He is asking to be saved like Moses, to be born like Christ. He is asking for a rebirth that . . . will result from a speech that is recovered, rediscovered as belonging to him. Lacan had perceived this: the metaphor retraces within the unconscious the path of paternal myth. (50)

These comments clarify not only an aspect of the narrator-reader relationship in *Surfacing* (“I displace . . . you associate and condense for me”) but also a correlation between the protagonist’s point of departure *qua* return (“I can’t believe I’m on this road again”) and her rejection of the metaphoric field. As previously noted, the language she uses is almost invariably lean and literal. The textures of her narration and its patterns of linguistic avoidance suggest a kind of verbal anorexia. Recovery is predicated on a rebirth into language, a resurfacing into the world of words.

The crucial question is: *whose* language and speech will it be? For from the first stages of her journey, the narrating subject of *Surfacing* refuses the prevailing symbolic codes—just as during her self-recuperative madness she rejects the canned and processed foods—put into her mouth. “My throat constricts, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing” (11).¹⁶ The struggle for sovereignty over the sign evidently began, and reached an uneasy resolution, sometime before the present return to her past. Her father’s disappearance now compels her to reencounter that signifying relationship, to reengage what Kristeva calls, after Lacan, the path of paternal myth (50).

Consequently, some metaphors slip through the narrator’s garrison or seemingly impervious wall of literality. Her floating pronouns sustain the figurative function that she would (but cannot) exclude entirely from her experiential registers. The double-valanced images projected upon “he” are traces of metaphor, that is to say, of condensation in her narrative.

Metaphor and Metonymy. The coordinated terms “metaphor” and “condensation” designate the same type of mental functioning. Freud’s comparison of condensation in the dream-work to the production of composite photographs implies an homologous relationship between thought images and figural representations. Just as condensation may be likened to the making of multiple images into one, so metaphor also resembles the photographer’s methods of reconfiguration. In all of these processes, separate entities overlap and form a new unity. “*Verdichtung*, or ‘condensation,’” Lacan succinctly writes, “is the structure of the superimposition of the signifiers, which metaphor takes as its field” (“Agency of the Letter” 160).¹⁷

To describe in more specific terms the aberrations of memory in *Surfacing*, another psychological operation needs to be taken into account. According to Freud, the precondition for condensation is the presence of “associative

paths” that link disparate elements in the psyche (*Interpretation of Dreams* 4: 284). The contiguous features existing among these elements pave the way for and activate “the double triggered mechanism of metaphor.” Contiguity, of course, also describes the structure of metonymy: the “word-to-word connexion” as distinct from the “[o]ne word for another” formula of metaphor (Lacan, “Agency of the Letter” 166, 156-57). Metonymy and metaphor, or the mechanisms of displacement and condensation, or what Lacan calls the “two ‘sides’ of the effect of the signifier” necessarily operate in conjunction. Formulated in terms of a visual vehicle, the language of the unconscious is structured like a necklace. Every ring in the signifying chain has one or more verbal pendants suspended from it; the syntagmatic axis of language continually intersects with the paradigmatic; or, in Lacan’s words: “There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended ‘vertically’. . . from that point” (160, 154).

In *Surfacing*, multiple associations (metonymies) facilitate the protagonist’s condensed pairings (metaphors) of father-lover and father-child. Her father stands in for her lover because formerly her lover stood in for her father. Even before disavowal set in, this daughter was not adept at separating the functions of father and lover. When she finally acknowledges her abortion, the memory of her illicit attachment also emerges: “For him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that’s where I learned. I worshipped him, non-child-bride, idolater, I kept the scraps of his handwriting like saints’ relics.” She apparently met and learned to “worship” him, an older man with a family, at the art school where he was her drawing teacher; and, as she recounts the fragments of her childhood, her father taught her as well: “Geometry, the first thing I learned was how to draw flowers with compasses” (148, 104). Thus the one she calls “first” was, in fact, her second teacher, and what appeared to be “unique,” a repetition. The daughter was once again too late: the would-be-bride of one wedded to an (m)other. After surfacing, she recalls a different signatory relic: “[H]e showed me snapshots of his wife and children, his reasons . . . he said I should be mature” (149). Unmarriageability may well have enhanced her lover’s appeal. It provided an assurance that she would remain, after all, her real daddy’s girl.

Whereas transgressive desire or eros constitutes the associative linkage of father-lover, disappearance and death are the ties that bind father-child.

“My father has simply disappeared then, vanished into nothing,” she says. Likewise, in evoking her aborted fetus, “it was traveling through the sewers by the time I woke . . . I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished” (24, 143). To vanish derives from the Latin *evanescere*, to dissipate like vapor: both father and child suddenly slipped out of sight, without due rituals of mourning to mark their final passage. The association of watery death, unmarked grave, and inadequate mourning prepares for their metaphoric convergence. Symptomatically, in response to Anna’s puzzled “What was he *doing* up here?” the narrator initially fails to understand and, only belatedly, realizes that the subject of this question is the ostensible object of her quest—her missing father: “All at once I’m furious with him for vanishing like this, unresolved, leaving me with no answers If he was going to die he should have done it visibly . . . so they could mark him with a stone” (58). Yet it is unlikely (as she cannot help but know) that “he” chose to vanish. Anger is a subterfuge for fear. Her father’s disappearance evokes the spectre of an earlier unresolved relationship. Another ghost not laid to rest might return to demand restitution from the living.

The notion of death conjoins with water, vanishing, and varied forms of separation on other tell-tale occasions. For instance, during a wilderness excursion intended to entertain her city friends, she goes into the woods to dig a toilet hole. The hole suddenly revives a recollection of what used to bother her most about living in cities: “white zero-mouthed toilets.” The narrator proceeds to compile a list of associated urban monsters: “Flush toilets and vacuum cleaners, they roared and made things vanish, at that time I was afraid there was a machine that could make people vanish like that too, go nowhere, like a camera that could steal not only your soul but your body also” (117-18).¹⁸ That flush toilets appear first on her list of bad machines may be read as a result of too many severed relationships, of an incapacity to hold onto people or emotional incontinence. Toilets blend expulsion and disappearance with water. However, whether she is recollecting a childhood fear from the period when her family alternated between living in town and country, or whether the fear of machines that “made things vanish” is a development associated with her adult dislocations, remains unclear. Her vague reference to “that time” is a corollary of the splitting that obscures her remembrance of the past.

Strangement from the past may be further correlated with a mortification of feeling or, as the narrator describes it, “something essential missing . . .

atrophy of the heart" (137). She finds herself reduced—"I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb"—because her heart has somehow vanished. Calling attention to this severed state are other startling self-descriptions: "I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate . . . smiling, a trick done with mirrors . . . ; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart" (108). To be safe from "knife-hard" knowledge, from the affect accompanying her experiences of separation and loss, she seems to have bottled herself up: "At some point my neck must have closed over . . . shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase Bottles distort for the observer too." Yet how long can a woman within a bell jar last? Can a woman without a heart live? Hence the anxiety about her own possible fate: "It was no longer his death [whose?] but my own that concerned me" (105-106, 107). The antecedent of "his" is symptomatically elided.

Ideas of amputation or scenes of bodily fragmentation do not only feature in the protagonist's inner world. They also mark her anchoring points outside herself. Of the one-handed woman known simply as "Madame"—"none of the women had names then"—during her childhood, she recalls: "I wanted to know how the hand had come off (perhaps she had taken it off herself) and where it was now, and especially whether my own hand could ever come off like that" (27). In the parenthetical speculation, which amplifies a seemingly fantastic operation, she implicates the woman in the loss of her own hand. Madame-of-the-missing-hand may be read as an analogue for the mutilation and deprivation to which the protagonist conceded by failing to resist the lover-teacher who both arranged for her abortion and negated her artistic vocation. Of the end of her relationship with this imaginary husband, she says: "A divorce is like an amputation, you survive but there's less of you" (42). Amputation also describes her relationship to the son she supposedly bore and gave up to his father's custody. Of this imaginary son, she says: "[I]t was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me . . . my own flesh cancelled" (48). Resorting to passive verbal constructions, she typically defers guilt and absolves herself of collaboration. The frequency of syntactic passivation in the text corresponds to her denial of agency and choice.

"*Who is responsible?*" Issues of moral responsibility, according to Atwood, are a particularly pervasive theme in the Canadian literary tradition (*Survival*

222). Whether this theme characterizes the whole of Canadian literature or not, the protagonist's inability to find the right road at the outset of *Surfacing* does coincide with a state of errant being. Her life has turned into a series of indirections, daily lies, acts of evasion, and distorted memories. Moreover, throughout the greater part of her journey, she conspicuously wishes to be relieved of responsibility. In sum, she instantiates what her author identifies as "the great Canadian victim complex":

If you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault—it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. . . . And that is not only the Canadian stance towards the world, but the usual female one. Look what a mess I am and it's all their fault. (Gibson 22)

The validity of Atwood's attribution here—that is, the claim that such a stance describes the Canadian and (or) female sensibility in particular—may be called into question. However, the shift in *Surfacing's* pronominal paradigms of defense indeed occurs only when the protagonist changes her testimony from "he made me do it" to "I could have said no but I didn't" (145). The transition from victim to agent is concurrent with her acknowledgment of the substitutions through which she revised the trauma of her elective but unwanted abortion. "I couldn't accept it . . . I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts" (143-44). *Après coup*: she reconstructed the past in ways intended to contain it that, on the contrary, only served to increase its devastating effect on her relations to the present and the future.

After all protective layerings have been scraped away, the narrator (and the reader) arrives at this furthest verge of her voyage: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim . . . I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone" (191). These opening words of the last chapter invite a recasting of the novel's very first masculine pronoun without referent. "*He* shouldn't have allowed it" may now also be read as saying "*I* shouldn't have allowed it." She who once stood in illusory safety behind the overtly accused "he" and the other accused "he" comes forward. The narrating *I* is no longer self-obscured by the leafscreens of false memories, or by the belief—and wishful thought—that complicity may be endlessly deferred along the lines of patriarchal responsibility. "It wasn't a child" is her achieved and precise recognition: "I didn't allow it" (143). The reluctant return ends with her poised at that

point where her real journey might begin.

NOTES

1 The complexity of *Surfacing* is suggested by the variety of critical attempts to define its genre. For example: Berryman finds the “chief intervening literary forms” to be those of comedy as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and romance literature as in *The Tempest* (52); Christ classifies the novel as a “spiritual quest” in which the “self’s journey is in relation to cosmic power or powers” (317); Brydon suggests that *Surfacing* is a subversive rewriting of “classical fictions of cultural encounter” (388); Garebian focuses on the ghost story aspect and compares the novel (mainly unfavorably) with Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1-9); Pratt emphasizes the novel’s archetypal patterns of rebirth and transformation (157-61); and Rigney argues that *Surfacing* is primarily a psychological novel, tracing a development from mental breakdown to breakthrough: “If the protagonist is ‘dead’ at the beginning of the novel, she must somehow be reborn, not in the religious sense, but psychologically” (*Margaret Atwood* 52).

For an overview of scholarship on *Surfacing* until 1984, see Carrington 30-38. See also McCombs and Palmer for a comprehensive, well-indexed bibliography on Atwood’s writings and criticism until 1991. For more recent scholarship, see the spring/summer issues of the *Newsletter of the Margaret Atwood Society*, published biannually, which includes an annotated bibliography of the preceding year’s publications.

2 In response to an interviewer’s comment on “the pull of the North” in Canadian literature, Atwood provides a cultural-historical context that is also relevant for the northward progress in *Surfacing*: “[T]he North is to Canada as the Outback is to Australia, and as the sea was to Melville, and as . . . Africa is, shall we say, to *Heart of Darkness*. It’s the place where you go to find something out. It’s the place of the unconscious. It’s the place of the journey or the quest. In nineteenth-century poetry such as Tennyson’s, it’s the ocean voyage, or the quest for the Holy Grail . . . [It’s] the thing you go into to have the spiritual experience, or the contact with a deeper reality in Nature. And it’s a place of ordeal, and vision” (Atwood, “Where Were You” 98).

3 Intradiegetic narrators are not omniscient, superior, or “above” the story; unlike extradiegetic narrators, they belong to or inhabit the fictional world. The narrator of *Surfacing* also participates as a character in the story, and therefore is homodiegetic rather than heterodiegetic. For helpful discussions of these distinctions, see Genette 255-56 and Rimmon-Kenan 94-96.

4 Missing female antecedents receive close consideration from a mythic perspective in Grace’s “In Search of Demeter.” For a discussion of negated maternal agency and its relation to the castration motif in *Surfacing* from different psychoanalytic perspectives, see my “Atwood’s Female Quest-Romance.”

5 Rubenstein presents a Jungian interpretation of the implications of Anna’s question for the narrator: “The journey towards wholeness involves a Jungian rejoining of the radically severed halves of the narrator’s self” (389). As Carrington (58) and Rubenstein (399) observe, Atwood describes paranoid schizophrenia or the split-personality phenomenon as the “national mental illness” of Canada (see Atwood, Afterword 62).

6 Photography and cameras are pertinent in several ways to *Surfacing*. In terms of reader-response, Atwood’s “This Is a Photograph of Me” from her second collection of poems, *The Circle Game*, concludes with what may be read as parenthetical instructions on how to read her novel: “(The photograph was taken / the day after I drowned. / I am in the lake, in the centre / of the picture, just under the surface. / It is difficult to say where /

- precisely, . . . / but if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me.)” More broadly applying these verses, VanSpanckeren contends that “the poem’s subject is poetry’s complex mediations between reader, text, and ‘reality’” (78). See also note 18.
- 7 On the open American frontier and its closed Canadian counterpart, Sullivan suggestively writes: “The operative myth of American literature is the frontier and its correlative, the open road, but in Canadian literature the frontier is all around us—we are encircled” (107).
 - 8 In a systematic survey of Atwood’s themes, Brown cites the tourist-protagonist as “outsider, the traveller into foreign lands” among the more prominent motifs in her writings (6).
 - 9 Even after the protagonist acknowledges the actual events, some readers adhere to the pseudo-past and even reorganize the plot in order to maintain the existence of a marriage and child. For example: “She has an affair with an older art teacher which ends in the disaster of an abortion which he arranged for her. She then marries a man whom she regards as perfect. He represents the norm; loves her, wants marriage and wants children. She does not want a child and, when she has one, denies that it is hers and walks out on the marriage” (Sweetapple 52). Before discussing the novel in an undergraduate seminar, I therefore asked the students to submit written answers to the question: how many children did the protagonist have? Of the 17 answers received, only 5 gave an accurate account. It seems to me that hasty reading alone cannot explain the inability of these different readers to readjust their interpretation. The difficulty in accepting the protagonist’s belated but explicit elucidation of her past may indicate the strength of the mechanism of disavowal activated in the novel. Readers who are caught up in a process that reduplicates this disavowal cannot easily stop the transference repetition.
 - 10 Atwood herself describes *Surfacing* as a “ghost story”: “[F]or me, the interesting thing in that book is the ghost in it” (see Gibson 20, 29). Campbell notes an analogy with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “*Surfacing* has several ghosts . . . both father and mother of the narrator-protagonist. *Hamlet*, by comparison, may have had it easy, with only his father/ghost to worry about” (18). My analysis would augment Campbell’s account by adding the protagonist’s lover and unrealized child to the ghost lists of *Surfacing*.
 - 11 To avoid misunderstanding the authorial position, it is important to bear in mind Atwood’s statement that she would be “most upset if [her] book were to be construed as an anti-abortion tract” (quoted in Christ 328). See also Christ on the abortion issue in *Surfacing*: “From what is specifically said in the novel, we can only say that it condemns an abortion not willed by the mother . . . The novel may be construed to allow for abortion when the woman feels it is necessary to protect her sense of her life;” and, therefore, the ethical position adopted “does not necessarily conflict with the feminist position on a woman’s right to choose abortion” (328-29).
 - 12 Mandel is among the first critics to observe that the views expressed in *Survival* often read “like a gloss on *Surfacing*” (59). Woodcock specifies the diverse types of victims found in both *Survival* and *Surfacing*, including “animals, Indians, sham pioneers, children, artists, women, and French Canadians, and Canada itself as the victim of colonialism” (101).
 - 13 On Atwood’s recourse to drowning as a central metaphor in numerous poems, see Rubenstein (esp. 392-93). See also Brown’s description of the patterns of descent in Atwood’s fiction as “a submerging, whether symbolic or actual, in search of vision that may permit a . . . restored or renewed individual” (18).
 - 14 Hulley similarly argues that the daughter’s quest “annihilates the symbolic father and the

boundaries his presence reconstructs." Nevertheless, Hulley finds *Surfacing* seriously flawed by the "linguistic conventionality" of its author who fails to transform the language she is compelled to use: "[T]here is no way out of the dilemma of speaking the oppressor's tongue" (74-75, 77). Yet the "way out," I suggest, may also be from within. Even while Atwood remains inside the symbolic order (or enclosure), her stylistic choices in *Surfacing* often subvert its regime.

- 15 Hunter provides a persuasive analysis of the aphasia of Bertha Pappenheim ("Anna O.") based on an analogous rupture with the symbolic: "Pappenheim's linguistic discord and conversion symptoms . . . can be seen as a regression from the cultural order represented by her father as an orthodox patriarch . . . She regressed from the symbolic order of articulate German to the semiotic level of the body and the unintelligibility of foreign tongues" (100).
- 16 Lecker links the outbreak of anorexia in Atwood's *The Edible Woman* with the protagonist's repudiation of "a culture which tends to exploit women and treat them as edible objects" (180). On the correlations of eating disorders, body phobias, and verbal expression in Atwood's fiction, see Rainwater.
- 17 In Lacan's reinterpretation of the Freudian insight, the workings of condensation in the unconscious constitute a linguistic phenomenon: "The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain" ("Agency of the Letter" 157).
- 18 A camera delays the discovery of the drowned father: "[H]e had a camera around his neck . . . the weight kept him down or he would've been found sooner" (*Surfacing* 157). For a detailed study of the significance of cameras, photographs, and pictures in Atwood's writing, see Wilson, "Camera Images"; see also Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics* 54-55.

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