

NAMES, FACES AND SIGNATURES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S "CAT'S EYE" AND "THE HANDMAID'S TALE"

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I'm afraid . . . I'll look into the bathroom mirror and see the face of another girl, someone who looks like me but has half her face darkened, the skin burned away. (CE 212)

THE HEROINE OF *Cat's Eye* thus describes herself reflected in a mirror, simultaneously doubled and divided, figured and disfigured. Elaborating the mirror Elaine Risley envisions, Atwood's work introduces a mirror structure in which autobiography and fiction, the referent and the figure emerge as figuring and disfiguring counterparts. In Atwood's work, names, faces and signatures, the very elements which suggest the referentiality of autobiography, become figures which undermine the referentiality they introduce. Thus, Atwood disrupts the autobiography/fiction, referentiality/self-reflexivity polarities with an incessant play between naming and misnaming, facing and defacing, figuration and disfiguration.¹

One of the most persistent arguments in Atwood criticism is that her works are structured by duality and binary opposition.² Such criticism tends to situate Atwood's work within a system of oppositions between literal and figurative, referentiality and self-reflexivity, autobiography and fiction. It has been suggested, for example, that Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is primarily autobiographical.³ As I shall argue, it is precisely the autobiography/fiction, referential/auto-referential dichotomies which Atwood strives to undermine in her novel. While almost all of Atwood's poetry and prose explores the name, face and unified I/eye central to autobiography, it is particularly in *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale* that Atwood disrupts the elements often used to define the boundary between autobiography

and fiction. Atwood produces an intertextual echo between the two novels as well as reverberations of prior literary texts. Yet such intertextual resonances are not simply literary; indeed they transgress the boundary between verbal and visual art, between the seen and the heard. Ultimately such intertextual echoes are themselves another mode of figuration.

In *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the figures Atwood uses to destabilize a whole system of oppositions are, paradoxically, in and of themselves structured by a framework of binary opposition. While the process of naming and misnaming turns on oppositions between proper and improper, the process of facing and defacing turns on oppositions between the half-face and the full-face, the speaking face and the silenced face. Often introduced as a metonymic substitution for the face, the eye image in Atwood's work initiates divisions between the seen and the heard, the "I" speaking and the "you" spoken to. The process of naming and misnaming, facing and defacing inaugurates a malignant, disfiguring replication of the very oppositions it disrupts. Atwood's work raises a question which is relevant to current feminist theory: How might woman inscribe herself in a process which turns on the name, face and unified I/eye of man, a process structured by binary opposition, doubling and division? In both her poetry and prose Atwood ruptures the dualities which have structured the name, the face and the unified "I/eye," for she introduces an I/eye which is "multiple and in fragments" (*CE* 316). While exploring the boundary between autobiography and fiction, Atwood's works not only give a face to a name but also give a voice to a face and perhaps even give an "ear to the other."⁴

In a review of *Cat's Eye*, Douglas Glover opens his discussion of the relationship between autobiography and fiction with a description of facing and defacing. Glover remarks that Atwood is "the face on the construction-site wall that everyone gets to deface." Just as Atwood's public image is prominent enough to invite defacement, Glover notes, so Elaine Risley's face is a public one which may be defaced. Glover refers to a passage in *Cat's Eye* in which Elaine Risley contemplates the defacing of her poster. After suggesting a correspondence between Margaret Atwood and Elaine Risley, however, Glover questions the correspondence he introduces, remarking, "But Risley is not Atwood — or is she?" Furthermore, Glover writes that Atwood loves to play hide-and-seek at the place where autobiography and fiction meet.

As Glover observes, the front matter of *Cat's Eye* raises the problem of whether Atwood's novel is fictional or autobiographical. Atwood's prefatory note explains, "This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one." The claim that only the form of Atwood's work is autobiographical undermines the very referentiality on which autobiography depends, for it is precisely its form which transparent autobiography would efface. The statement at the front of Atwood's work raises Paul de Man's question:

... since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round ... ?

(de Man 1984:69)

THE QUESTION OF THE relationship between autobiography and fiction prevails not only in *Cat's Eye* but also in the earlier work, *The Handmaid's Tale*. While *Cat's Eye* begins with a note describing its content as fictional and form as autobiographical, *The Handmaid's Tale* concludes with "Historical Notes" which parody the desire for historicity and authenticity uncontaminated by fictional elements. At the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the "Historical Notes" present a transcript entitled "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" (HT 312).

Throughout both *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, names as well as faces disrupt the fiction/autobiography dichotomy. Paul de Man asserts that what makes autobiography seem referential is "a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name" (de Man 1984: 68). What complicates the relationship between autobiography and fiction in Atwood's work is the instability of names, which continually shift, frustrating the reader's desire to locate a single, proper name. In his discussion of autobiography, Derrida argues that the structure of the proper name initiates a process of exchange, a winning and losing, a giving and taking away of names. By turning the proper name into a common name, Derrida argues, one simultaneously establishes and relinquishes the proper name. Derrida claims that "One takes the risk of losing one's name by winning it, and vice versa" (Derrida 1985: 77). *The Handmaid's Tale* opens with an exchange of names. Describing the handmaids who lie on their beds and lip-read rather than speak, Offred remarks, "In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (HT 14). The indirect form of communication suggests that while some names may be given, some may be lost; while some may be named, some may be misnamed.

In his essay on autobiography, Paul Hjartarson contends that Atwood's heroine, Offred, is nameless, since her name is a patronymic comprising the possessive preposition "of" and a man's name, "Fred" (Hjartarson 115). Indeed, the desire of the Gilead regime to remove names is as strong as the desire to remove faces. Just as the rulers of Gilead try to eliminate mirrors, reflections of faces, so they attempt to erase names. Offred explains, "the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone" (HT 35). Nevertheless, Gilead never manages to eliminate names completely and Offred never becomes entirely nameless. Instead, Offred enters into a process of giving and taking away names, of dismembering and remembering names. The shifting of names conveys the impossibility of tracing any originary, referential name.

At the end of Atwood's novel the "Historical Notes" indicate that Offred's name is taken away, replaced by a patronymic. What would have been the heroine's last name in the pre-Gilead period becomes her first name in the Gilead period. Thus, the common or improper name becomes replaced by the proper name, which is itself improper, since it is not "propre," her own.⁵ As the "Historical Notes" further explain, the names were taken by the handmaids when they entered a particular commander's household and were "relinquished by them upon leaving it (*HT* 318). The name "Ofglen" becomes a signifier whose signified continually shifts. When Offred meets a woman who calls herself "Ofglen," Offred remarks, "of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen . . . That is how you get lost, in a sea of names" (*HT* 295). Furthermore, the very process of naming displays an instability which frustrates the reader's attempt to locate any one system of naming. While the narrator becomes known by her patronymic, "Offred," her friend becomes known by "Moira," and the aunts are called by "names derived from commercial products" (*HT* 321).

The name "Offred" itself becomes a circulating signifier, which not only shifts from person to person but which in and of itself displays an incessant shifting. Although the narrator's name may be divided into the possessive preposition "of" and the name "Fred," "Offred" may be further dismembered into another preposition, "off," and the adjective, "red." Indeed, throughout Atwood's novel the adjective "red" becomes instrumental in the process of giving a face to a name. At the beginning of the novel Offred, relating that "everything except the wings around [her] face is red," adds, "I never looked good in red. It's not my colour" (*HT* 18).⁶ When she looks in the mirror, Offred sees herself as "some fairytale figure in a red cloak . . . [a] Sister, dipped in blood" (*HT* 19).

As *The Handmaid's Tale* progresses, Offred becomes fascinated with the adjective "red" as a signifier which disrupts the signifier/signified, sign/referent correspondences. Describing the red tulips in Serena Joy's garden and the red smile of the hanged man, Offred remarks, "the red is the same but there is no connection" (*HT* 45). It is precisely the connection between sign and referent which "red" disrupts. The connection between the red of the tulips, red smile of the corpse and the "red" in Offred's name thus creates a disjunction between the name, the signifier, and the bearer of the name, the signified. As Cynthia Chase notes, the proper name is like a code whose message is missing; the name has no meaning apart from the unique individual it signifies. Although the proper name seems to exist outside the network of common nouns in language, it may become contaminated through a pun or rhyme, such as the "Offred" / "off-red" connection, which links the name with a common noun. Rhymes which link the proper name to a common noun or adjective, Chase argues, "give a face to a name," "make a description from inscription" (Chase 108).

AS ATWOOD'S NOVEL PROGRESSES, the giving and taking away of names becomes inextricably linked with the giving and taking away of faces. While names replace faces, faces replace names in a series of metonymic substitutions. In his essay, "Autobiography As De-Facement," Paul de Man argues that it is the figure of prosopopoeia which characterizes autobiography. Beginning with the etymology of the term, *prosopon poien*, "to confer a mask or face," de Man describes the figure of prosopopoeia as investing a name with a face (de Man 1984: 76). Indeed, what de Man calls "the giving and taking away of faces" comprises most of Offred's narrative. The exchange of names which opens Atwood's novel operates through a reading of the face which substitutes the seen for the heard. By lip-reading, the handmaids replace the silenced voice with the movements of the mouth from which the voice emanates. Thus, the handmaids must read the figure, the face, in order to read the name. Just as the handmaids lip-read, so the reader of Atwood's work must read the lips as a figure which continually crosses the boundaries between the exterior figure conveying the message and the interior message conveyed. One of the most prevalent images in *The Handmaid's Tale* is that of the crimson tulips. Not only do "tulips" and "two lips" become linked by a phonological similarity, but they also become linked by a similar tropic structure. The figure of metaphor, de Man notes, depends upon the relation between inside and outside. Like the two lips, the tulips become what de Man calls a metaphor of a metaphor (de Man 1979: 37). Offred describes the tulips as "chalices" which are "empty" and will eventually turn themselves inside out, just as the interior message of metaphoric substitutions moves inside only to move outside again.

Offred's fascination with lip-reading begins early in the novel. Just before Serena Joy replaces a name with a face, Offred, unable to see Serena Joy's face, substitutes part of the body she can see for part of the face which in turn becomes substituted for the whole face. Relating that she "wasn't looking at Serena Joy's face, but at the part of her [she] could see," Offred asserts that Serena Joy's fingernail was "like an ironic smile . . . like something mocking her" (*HT* 24). The simile prefigures the red smile of the corpse, which later becomes linked with the tulips. Offred thus describes the blood which stains the white sack covering the head of a man who has been hanged on the wall:

the red smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal (*HT* 43).

By describing the stain as a smile, Offred's words give a face to the lifeless corpse whose face has been blanked out, covered over with a white bag. Not only does Offred's description give life to the corpse but it also gives life to the tulips through the figure of personification. Thus, Atwood introduces a chiasmic figure which

Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of
 the tulips,
 And I have no face, I have wanted to efface
 myself. (161)

Plath's image of the eye which initiates a play between figuration and disfiguration is reflected in the eye image of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Just as Plath introduces the staring eye to personify the tulips and deface the subject of her poem, so Atwood uses the eye image to personify, give face and deface. When she describes her room, Atwood's heroine, Offred, remarks that a blank space in the center of her white ceiling has been "plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out" (*HT* 17). In Offred's description the image of the eye engenders simultaneously the emergence of a face and also a defacement. Atwood personifies the ceiling at the same time as she covers over the ceiling's face with white plaster like the white bags covering the faces of the hanged bodies.

DURING THE COURSE of Atwood's novel language both disfigures and is itself disfigured. The narrator describes the handmaids' conversations, the "clipped whispers" as "amputated speech" (*HT* 211). Addressing the reader, Offred apologizes for her "limping, mutilated story" which is "in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force" (*HT* 251). Yet Atwood disfigures the very figure of disfiguration by forcing the reader to read the disfiguration literally, or leterally, to the letter. When she plays a Scrabble game with the Commander, Offred arranges her letters to form the word "limp" (*HT* 149). Similarly, the bodies of victims from a Men's Salvaging hang from hooks which disfigure. The hooks, however, become signifiers which not only disfigure but which are themselves figured and disfigured. Offred observes that "the hooks look like appliances for the armless. Or steel question marks, upside-down and sideways" (*HT* 42). Through the figure of the simile the hooks become part of a disfigured body and then become part of a language, punctuation which is disfigured, turned "upside down."

The specular play between naming and misnaming, facing and defacing, figuration and disfiguration in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to prefigure the exploration of names, faces and figures in Atwood's later novel, *Cat's Eye*. In *Cat's Eye* a winning and losing of names becomes inextricably linked with the giving and taking away of faces. While women in *The Handmaid's Tale* slip in and out of names, women in *Cat's Eye* become involved in an exchange of names. The narrator, Elaine Risley, imagining that her friend, Cordelia, has changed her name, observes that "women are hard to keep track of, most of them. They slip into other names and sink without a trace" (*CE* 226). Further conveying a sense that names

in *Cat's Eye* shift like circulating signifiers is the narrator's assertion that her friends' names have become emptied of their meanings:

Their names are like names in a footnote, or names written in spidery brown ink in the fronts of Bibles. There is no emotion attached to these names. They're like the names of distant cousins . . . people I hardly know. (CE 201)

Atwood's dialectic of naming and misnaming becomes particularly interesting in a passage which describes an exchange of valentines. When Elaine Risley receives her valentines, she discovers a series of substitutions for the signature and the proper name. While some of Elaine's cards are not signed at all, some are signed with "Guess Who?", a question inviting Elaine to fill in the blank (CE 163). Other cards which Elaine receives "have only initials," fragments of names (CE 163). The cards which Elaine receives from girls, however, are "neatly signed with their full names, so there will be no mistake about who gave what" (CE 163).

ALTHOUGH THE NARRATOR, in one passage, describes the name "Cordelia" as having been emptied of its meaning, for most of Atwood's novel the name Cordelia becomes emptied of its meaning only to be filled with another. That the proper name is not a static signifier which corresponds only to the bearer of that name becomes apparent early in Atwood's novel. At the beginning of *Cat's Eye* Elaine, having mentioned Cordelia's name, remarks, "But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up . . . or the one before or the one after? There is never only one, of anyone (CE 6). As Cordelia explains to Elaine Risley, she and her two sisters Perdita and Miranda are named after characters from Shakespeare's plays. Later in *Cat's Eye* Elaine, meditating on the name "Cordelia," wonders, "why did they name her that? Hang that weight around her neck. Heart of the moon, jewel of the sea . . . The third sister, the only honest one" (CE 263).

As *Cat's Eye* progresses, the name "Cordelia" seems to become both proper and improper, an appropriate and inappropriate name for Elaine's friend. The Cordelia of *Cat's Eye* does indeed display many of the characteristics of the Cordelia from *King Lear* who, Elaine notes, is "The stubborn one, the rejected one, the one who was not heard" (CE 263). Nevertheless, in Atwood's novel Elaine Risley seems to appropriate the meanings of Cordelia's name. The tendency of Atwood's characters, Cordelia and Elaine, to slip in and out of their names frustrates the reader's desire to fix a one-to-one correspondence between the Cordelia of *King Lear* and the Cordelia of *Cat's Eye*. Discussing her anxiety about encountering Cordelia at an art exhibition, Elaine remarks, "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places" (CE 227).

The sense that Cordelia and Elaine are changing places emerges early in *Cat's Eye*. It is not Atwood's character, Cordelia, but rather the narrator, Elaine, who begins to resemble the Cordelia of *King Lear*. In response to King Lear's demand that Cordelia compare her love for him with that of Goneril and Regan, Cordelia simply utters the word "nothing." At the beginning of *Cat's Eye* it is Elaine who answers "nothing" to Cordelia's question, "what do you have to say for yourself?" (CE 41). The parallels between King Lear's daughter Cordelia and Elaine Risley's friend, Cordelia, again become disrupted when Elaine responds to Cordelia's "what do you think of me?" with "Nothing much" (CE 254).

At the beginning of *Cat's Eye* Cordelia "insists on always being called by her full name: Cordelia" (CE 72). Her insistence creates reverberating echoes of *Anne of Green Gables*, a novel whose heroine is similarly fascinated with names.⁷ Like the characters Elaine and Cordelia, in Atwood's novel, Anne becomes involved in an exchange of names. When Anne arrives at the Cuthberts, she answers Marilla's question, "What's your name?" by asking, "Will you please call me Cordelia?" (26). Bewildered by Anne's response, Marilla exclaims, "Call you Cordelia! Is that your name?", to which Anne responds, "No-o-o, it's not exactly my name, but I would love to be called Cordelia" (26). When Marilla refuses to call Anne Cordelia, Anne insists that the name which is seen is as important as the name which is heard. Requesting that her name be spelled with an "e," Anne explains that it "looks so much nicer" (27). Similarly, Elaine meditates on her name, remembering that she had "wanted something more definite, a monosyllable. . . . Nothing you could make a mistake about" (CE 263).

The character of Elaine Risley further becomes linked with Anne, for Anne not only calls herself Cordelia but also takes on the name Elaine. Hence, while Elaine and Cordelia in *Cat's Eye* slip in and out of their names, the heroine of Montgomery's novel slips in and out of the names Cordelia and Elaine. After suggesting that she and her three friends dramatize Tennyson's poem, "Lancelot and Elaine," Anne decides to play the role of Elaine and lie on a barge which floats down the river under the bridge. While Anne's three friends stand on the bank and watch in horror, however, the barge on which Anne is floating begins to leak. Anne's friends run for help, leaving Anne clinging to a bridge pile until Gilbert Blythe rescues her. Similarly, Atwood's heroine, Elaine Risley, falls through a frozen pond beneath the bridge while her three friends stand on the bridge watching. Interestingly, Atwood begins *Cat's Eye*, as Montgomery begins *Anne of Green Gables*, with the image of the bridge. Anne tells Matthew, "I'm always afraid of going over bridges. I can't help imagining that perhaps, just as we get to the middle, they'll crumple up . . ." (22). At the beginning of *Cat's Eye* Elaine Risley also refers to her fear of reaching dangerous midpoints, comparing the middle of her life to "the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway

FORMING A BRIDGE between *Cat's Eye* and *Anne of Green Gables*, are not only the resounding names, Elaine and Cordelia, but also the echoes of "Lancelot and Elaine." We hear Atwood's echo of Montgomery's echoing of Tennyson's poem. Through a remarkable intertextual redoubling, the topos of winning and losing names in Tennyson's work reverberates in the texts of Atwood and Montgomery. "Lancelot and Elaine" opens with the story of a battle between two brothers who had met "And fought together; but their names were lost" (150). Paradoxically, the brothers' battle in which their names are lost gives a name to the jousts which engage Lancelot in a process of winning and losing his name. Upon discovering the skeletons of the two brothers, King Arthur finds a diamond crown on the nameless King's skull. King Arthur, after removing the diamonds, declares that one diamond shall be the prize of every joust and calls the tournament the "diamond Jousts" (151).

When Lancelot enters the joust, he becomes entangled in endless chiasmic reversals which cross between his game and his name. Guinevere tells Lancelot, "Your great name, this conquers: hide it therefore; go unknown" (154). Following Guinevere's advice, Lancelot decides to go unknown, to lose his name and thereby win it back again. Tennyson's poem closes with Lancelot's recognition that in losing his name to win it back, he has won a name which contains the endless chiasmic reversals of winning and losing. Lancelot thus meditates on his name:

Pleasure to have it, none; to lose it, pain;
Now grown a part of me: but what use in it?
To make men worse by making my sin known?
Or sin seems less, the sinner seeming great? (196)

In "Lancelot and Elaine" the winning and losing of names becomes intimately bound up with saving and losing face, with facing and defacing. At the beginning of Tennyson's poem, Lancelot decides to lose his name in order to save face. Having lied to the King about his wound, Lancelot asks Guinevere, "And with what face, after pretext made, / shall I appear, O Queen, at Camelot . . ." (153). Later in the poem Elaine, "she that knew not ev'n his name" (150), replaces Lancelot's name with his face, "And all night long his face before her [lives]" (160).

In *Cat's Eye* the exchange of names similarly becomes linked with the process of facing and defacing. When Elaine Risley sees a poster displaying her name and face, she comments that she has kept her name but lost her face. Observing the mustache added to her face, Elaine remarks "It was a defacing, it was taking away someone's face" (*CE* 20). Nevertheless, Elaine, reassuring herself that one must win a face in order to lose it, concludes, "I have achieved, finally . . . [a] public face, a face worth defacing" (*CE* 20). The process of giving and taking away

faces continues throughout *Cat's Eye*. When Elaine Risley applies her make-up, she remarks, "who knows what faces I'm making, what kind of modern art I'm drawing onto myself?" (CE 5). She again worries that her face is defaced when Cordelia holds up a mirror to Elaine's face and exclaims, "Look at yourself!" (158). As Elaine notes, Cordelia's tone implies that "[Elaine's] face, all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far" (CE 158).

As Atwood's heroine becomes increasingly tormented by defaced faces, visions of figuration and disfiguration not only fill her conscious mind but also enter her dreams. In one dream Elaine envisions "a head wrapped up in a white tea towel" and sees "outlines of the nose, the chin, the lips" (CE 250). Elaine fears that if she unwraps the cloth to identify the head it "will come alive" (CE 250). This dream recalls a figure from her waking life which turns on chiasmic reversals between figuration and disfiguration, life and death. When Elaine sees a performance of *Macbeth*, the play closes with Macduff throwing Macbeth's head on stage. It is a "cabbage wrapped up in a white tea-towel" which comprises the simulation of Macbeth's head (CE 245). Thus, a lifeless cabbage is personified in order to simulate the disfigured head which suggests Macbeth's death. The very figure which brings the cabbage to life simultaneously disfigures, deprives Macbeth of life. Yet the process of figuration and disfiguration revolves around a cabbage which must itself be disfigured before it figures and disfigures. The cabbage must literally be lifeless, one which "is going bad . . . getting soft and squishy and smells like sauerkraut" (CE 245).

As soon as Cordelia replaces the dead cabbage with a fresh, "brand-new" one (CE 245), she reverses the whole process of figuration and disfiguration. At the end of *Macbeth* the fresh cabbage does not hit the stage with "an impressive flesh-and-bone thud" (CE 245) but rather "bounces, bumpity-bump, right across the stage like a rubber ball, and falls off the edge" (CE 245). It becomes apparent that Macbeth has not died and that the fresh cabbage, which is not sufficiently disfigured and lifeless, has become deprived of the figure which gives it life, personification.

ONE OF THE MOST pervasive images of disfiguration in *Cat's Eye* is that of the half-face. Elaine imagines herself jumping off the bridge and becoming disfigured, "smashing down there like a pumpkin, half of an eye, half of a grin" (CE 155). Moreover, a chapter entitled "Half A Face" closes with an uncanny play between doubles and halves, figuration and disfiguration. At the end of the chapter Cordelia reads Elaine a comic book story about two sisters: one is beautiful and the other disfigured by "a burn covering half her face." The disfigured sister hangs herself, but lives on when her spirit goes into the mirror. Look-

ing for her image in the mirror, the beautiful sister sees instead a mirror image of the disfigured other. Yet the horror story disfigures the figurative by making the mirror substitution literal. Escaping from the figurative realm of the mirror, the disfigured sister inhabits the pretty sister's body. The pretty sister's boyfriend, however, breaks the mirror, an action which ends the whole process of figuration and disfiguration.

The comic book story suggests that it is not the burn but the uncanny doublings and dividings, the pairs and halves which constitute a disfiguration. Similarly, Elaine Risley's painting of Cordelia entitled *Half A Face* does not replicate the disfigured, burnt face from the comic book story but replicates instead the process of doubling and division, of figuration and disfiguration. As Elaine observes, her painting presents Cordelia's face as both a whole face and a half-face, a divided face and a doubled face. Elaine comments that her title is odd, since "Cordelia's entire face is visible" and behind her, hanging on the wall, is "another face, covered with a white cloth" (CE 227). Like the white tea towel covering the cabbage, the white cloth in the painting becomes a kind of "theatrical mask" personified by the face behind it (CE 227). Through the figure of prosopopoeia the white cloth is given a face at the same time as it covers over, defaces the very face which gives its life.

Elaine Risley's two paintings, "Cat's Eye" and "Unified Field Theory" similarly exhibit a play between the half-face and the full-face. In "Unified Field Theory" a woman's face is "partly in shadow," defaced by the light of the moon (CE 408). Yet the moon which defaces is itself defaced by the painting's frame, which cuts into the moon and leaves visible only the moon's "lower half" (CE 408). The process of defacing, of cutting the face in half, links the moon and the woman's face. Hence, what disfigures and defaces the moon paradoxically creates the figure, prosopopoeia, which invests the moon with a face. In Elaine's painting, "Cat's Eye," the subject's face is similarly defaced by a frame which leaves visible only half a face, "from the middle of the nose up: just the upper half of the nose, the eyes looking outward" (CE 407). A mirror behind the half-face, however, reflects three full figures. While the half-face of the foreground remains in light, the full figures of the background become disfigured by shadow. The three figures in Elaine's painting walk forward, "their faces shadowed, against a field of snow" (CE 408).

Significantly, Elaine's paintings "Unified Field Theory" and "Cat's Eye," like the two sisters in Cordelia's story, become figuring and disfiguring counterparts of each other. The light/shadow, half-face/full-face dualities which divide Elaine's "Cat's Eye" in half find their counterparts in Elaine's other painting, "Unified Field Theory." While the foreground of "Cat's Eye" depicts a woman's completely illuminated half-face, the foreground of "Unified Field Theory" exhibits a woman's half shadowed full-face. Similarly, the background of "Unified Field Theory"

displays a moon's illuminated half-face, while the background of *Cat's Eye* portrays the shadowed full-faces of three full figures. Just as each painting in and of itself displays a ceaseless play between figuration and disfiguration, so the relationship between the two paintings initiates chiasmic reversals between the light and shadow, the full-face and the half-face.

The disfigured half-faces in Atwood's *Cat's Eye* echo the disfigured half-face of the oarsman in Tennyson's "Lancelot and Elaine." As Elaine, lying on her barge, floats down stream, her figure is covered, "all but her face," "that clear-featured face" (187). Whereas Elaine's beautiful full-face is visible, only half of the oarsman's disfigured face is seen from the bank. Tennyson thus describes the oarsman's disfigured face:

but that oarsman's haggard face,
As hard and still as is the face that men
Shape to their fancy's eye from broken rocks
On somecliffe-side . . . (190)

As the poem progresses, however, the guide's half-face becomes a full-face when he turns to see King Arthur and his Knights. Yet Tennyson further defaces the oarsman's face with a metonymic substitution of the eye for the full-face. Looking at the King, the "tongueless man" turns from the "half-face to the full-face to the full eye" (190).

JUST AS THE OARSMAN in Tennyson's poem turns from "the half-face to the full eye," so Elaine Risley in Atwood's novel turns the half-face into the full eye. In Elaine's "Cat's Eye" painting a convex mirror enclosed by an ornate frame reflects the back of Elaine's half-head as well as three other figures. Convex surfaces are instrumental in producing reflections of both light and sound. Repeating, yet distorting an audible or visible source, convex surfaces, Hollander notes, "converge echoes so as to make them louder and more noticeable than rebounds from planar surfaces" (Hollander 1). The convex mirror in Elaine's painting is indeed rich with converging resonances. In her painting we see the reflection of that famous and intriguing portrait of convex mirroring, "The Arnolfini Marriage." As the title of Elaine's painting suggests, the convex mirror of the painting's background becomes part of a face, an eye. The eye of Elaine's painting echoes an earlier reference in *Cat's Eye* to the mirror of Van Eyck's painting, a convex pier glass "like an eye, a single eye that sees more than anyone else looking" (*CE* 327). Like the mirror in Elaine's painting, the mirror in van Eyck's work is personified through an image of the seeing eye. Elaine's painting is perhaps an ekphrasis of all the intertextual reflecting echoes in Atwood's work.

The eye image which personifies the mirrors in *Cat's Eye* similarly personifies the mirrors in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As Offred goes upstairs in the commander's house, she notices that her face appears "distant and white and distorted" in the convex mirror which "bulges outward like an eye under pressure" (*HT* 59). While Offred gives face to the mirror through the figure of personification, the mirror defaces, disfigures Offred.

The relationship between facing and defacing, figuration and disfiguration, is integrally related to the relationship between referentiality and mirroring self-reflexivity. As Paul de Man argues, the process of figuration and disfiguration disrupts the referential/auto-referential opposition which has been mapped onto the autobiography/fiction dichotomy (de Man 1984: 68-9). The distorting mirrors in Atwood's work provide an example initiating chiasmic reversals between figuration and disfiguration. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine's painting of the convex eye-mirror introduces the problem of the referential-auto-referential duality. Elaine describes her "Cat's Eye" painting as a "self-portrait, of sorts" (*CS* 407). Yet while certain elements of the painting do reflect Elaine's past, it becomes a portrait which undermines its own mode of self-portraiture.

Far from being a transparent reflection of Elaine's life, the painting, "Cat's Eye," constitutes a reflection and reworking of "The Arnolfini Marriage." Similarly, Elaine's work displays a convex mirror in an ornate frame. Just as van Eyck's mirror reflects figures who are not in the main picture, so Elaine's mirror reflects three figures beyond the frame of her painting. "The Arnolfini Marriage" is, in one sense, a self-portrait since the artist is reflected in the mirror behind the two main figures. Hence, Elaine's "self-portrait of sorts," by reflecting another self-portrait, paradoxically departs from the seemingly referential mode of self-portraiture. Elaine's painting is, moreover, an interesting reworking of "The Arnolfini Marriage." While van Eyck places himself as artist in the background of his painting, Elaine Risley places herself in the foreground of her painting, "Cat's Eye," and thus reverses the foreground/background, portrait/self-portrait division in van Eyck's work.

Elaine reverses a dualistic relationship of a painting which in and of itself destabilizes the opposition between portrait and self-portrait, between the referential and auto-referential. As Linda Seidel points out, van Eyck's work undermines the very authenticity on which it is based (Seidel 69). As do the "Historical Notes" in *The Handmaid's Tale*, van Eyck's painting functions as a record of actual events. In fact, the Arnolfini portrait performs much the same role as the household diaries used as evidence of the monetary exchange involved in marriage ceremonies. "The Arnolfini Marriage" records not only the marriage ceremony of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami but also such details as Giovanna's trousseau, which suggest a financial transaction. Because van Eyck's position as landowner gave him the power to witness and document legal transactions, Seidel notes, the bride's

father may well have commissioned the portrait as evidence of the marriage ceremony and the transference of dowry (Seidel 62-8).

Despite van Eyck's attempt to create a sense of authenticity, realism and legitimacy, his ambivalent position as both artist and recorder of evidence yields some intriguing contradictions. As she examines the Arnolfini portrait, Elaine Risley notices the words "Johannes de Eyck fuit hic. 1434" (CE 327). By placing his signature and the date above the mirror, van Eyck underlines the resemblance of the mirror to a seal of legitimacy. As Seidel argues, however, the "seal-like object" and signature draw attention to the unusual nature of van Eyck's form of documentation, since such records were normally produced by scribes. The signature has the effect of foregrounding textuality, for it depends upon our knowledge of a previous mode of reading and recording of events. It combines two seemingly opposite types of reading, a biographical, historical one and a more literary, narrative one (Bal 513).

Van Eyck's choice of the convex mirror for a legitimizing seal-like object introduces still more contradictions. The mirror reflects not only the marriage ceremony but also van Eyck witnessing and recording events. Any sense of the mirror as an objective reflection of events, Seidel observes, is complicated by van Eyck's dual role as an object in the mirror and the subject creating the mirror. Hence, van Eyck's signature and self-portrait, which emphasize his role both inside and outside the mirror, destabilize the interior/exterior, subject/object dualities suggested by the mirror's ornate frame. Far from being a closed mirror, the convex pier glass, Seidel argues, is an open one reflecting the viewer's gaze and the viewer's role in the production of the painting (Seidel 79).

In *Cat's Eye* Elaine Risley's description of van Eyck's mirror makes apparent distortions which further disrupt any authentication implied by the signature and the mirror's seal-like appearance. What interests Elaine Risley is the way the convex surface of van Eyck's mirror distorts:

These figures reflected in the mirror are slightly askew, as if in a different law of gravity, a different arrangement of space, exists inside . . . (CE 327)

In Elaine's reworking of van Eyck's painting the distortion of symmetrical reflections and divisions becomes important. As Elaine Risley observes, van Eyck's mirror creates a doubling of the couple being married, for the mirror reflects not only the backs of the Arnolfinis but "two other people who aren't in the main picture at all" (CE 327).

The Arnolfini Marriage does indeed exhibit a dualistic structure of doubling and division. In his analysis of the Arnolfini portrait, Derrida argues that the pair of shoes in van Eyck's painting form a kind of sinister *doppelgänger*, as each shoe is "strangely the double of the other" (Derrida 1987a: 374). Yet the pair of shoes off to the left of the painting is itself doubled by the other pair of shoes under the

mirror. Moreover, the double pair of shoes replicates the pair in the foreground of the painting, the couple being married. The two spouses, however, are themselves doubled by the other pair reflected in the mirror. Like the two pairs of shoes separated by the foreground and background, the two spouses in the foreground are set in opposition to the two figures in the background.

Elaine Risley's painting, "Cat's Eye," distorts the symmetrical division of van Eyck's work, for her mirror reflects an asymmetrical relationship between the one face in the foreground and the three sinister figures in the background. Elaine's painting, with its cat's eye mirror, both reflects and distorts "The Arnolfini Marriage," a painting which itself displays a distorting mirror. Thus, Elaine's "Cat's Eye" simultaneously reflects a distortion and distorts a reflection. It becomes apparent that Elaine's work not only disrupts the opposition between portrait and self-portrait, between the referential and auto-referential, but it disrupts the structure of binary opposition itself.

SIGNIFICANTLY, ATWOOD frames her novel with shifting structures of address which destabilize the sense of a fixed autobiographical subject. The first and last paragraphs which frame *Cat's Eye* display an ellipsis, an absence of the first person pronoun "I." While the last paragraph of *Cat's Eye* contains the pronouns "we" and "they," the first paragraph presents an insistent repetition of the pronoun "you":

If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time. . . . (CE 3)

As the reader progresses through the first paragraph of *Cat's Eye*, she might interpret the pronoun "you" as an address to the reader. Such an interpretation would be reasonable, given the prevalent notion that autobiography is a specular genre in which the writer and reader, the "I" and "you," mutually define each other. Atwood, however, frustrates the reader's expectation for any dualistic, specular relationship between the "I" and the "you." What undermines an interpretation of "you" as the reader is the sentence which opens Atwood's second paragraph, "It was my brother Stephen who told me that" (CE 3). By opening *Cat's Eye* not with the narrator's words but with her brother's words, Atwood defers the voice of the autobiographical subject.

A shifting between the "I" and "you" pronouns characterizes not only *Cat's Eye* but also *The Handmaid's Tale*. As Paul Hjartarson notes in his essay on autobiography, the "you" pronoun in *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a kind of "mirror in which the 'I' finds herself" (117). Indeed, the narrator, Offred, continually introduces the "you" pronoun in passages which make the reader aware

of her complicity in the production of Offred's story. Addressing the reader as "you," Offred asserts:

By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you. I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story. I will you into existence. I tell, therefore you are. (HT 279)

Atwood thus reworks Descartes' "Cogito, ergo sum," shifting the center from the "I" to "you," decentering the Cartesian subject.

While Hjartarson's description of the "you" as a mirror articulates the important role of the reader, his metaphor becomes problematic when he asserts that the "'I' finds herself" in a mirror reflection. Atwood's distorting mirrors suggest a kind of Lacanian process of misrecognition which frustrates the subject's attempt to "find" herself in either the "you" or a flat, two-dimensional mirror. What further disrupts any sense of an imaginary stage in which the ideal I finds its unity in the Other, the mirror reflection, is Offred's remark:

A story is like a letter. 'Dear you,' I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one. (HT 50).

By affirming the plurality which ruptures the closure of the flat mirror, the direct correspondence between "you" and "I," sign and referent, Atwood's exploration of a text marked by openness and plurality provides an interesting point of intersection between her fiction and Luce Irigaray's feminist theory. In Irigaray's work a disruption of closed structures of address functions in tandem with a critique of the closed, flat mirror which reproduces man as subject and reduces woman to the other. Like the open, plural "you" in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the shifting pronouns in Irigaray's work display an openness and plurality. In a chapter entitled "When Our Lips Speak Together" Irigaray writes a kind of love letter which invites the reader to participate in a playful exchange between singular and plural pronouns. Criticizing the dualistic "I"-"you" structure of address which shapes the conventional love letter, Irigaray asserts, "You/I: we are always several at once." What Irigaray celebrates is a text in which there are "several voices, several ways of speaking [which] resound endlessly back and forth" (Irigaray 209).

SIGNIFICANTLY, NEITHER *Cat's Eye* nor *The Handmaid's Tale* closes with the centered I/eye. Instead, both works close with the figure of Echo, the voices which are silenced by oculocentric works. At the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* Professor Pieixoto affirms that the past is "filled with echoes" (HT 324). While "voices may reach us," Pieixoto asserts, the meanings conveyed by those voices are lost, for they are "imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come"

(*HT* 324). As Pieixoto concludes, such voices may not be captured by the eye, not even “in the clearer light of our day” (*HT* 324). *Cat’s Eye* similarly closes with the image of echoes which the eye cannot see. Meditating on the stars, the narrator remarks:

If they were sounds, they would be echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago: a word made of numbers. Echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing. (*CE* 421)

By closing *Cat’s Eye* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* with reverberating echoes, Atwood decenters the central image of both works, the eye. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* perhaps the most predominant image is that of the single winged eye. Not only does the eye constitute the central image of *Cat’s Eye*, but it becomes closely associated with the center. In Elaine Risley’s painting “Unified Field Theory,” a woman holds between her hands a cat’s eye marble “with a blue center” (*CE* 430). Earlier in Atwood’s novel Elaine describes the cat’s eye marbles as clear glass with “a bloom of colored petals in the center” (*CE* 66). The image of a flower in the center of the eye recalls the central figure of Ovid’s myth of Narcissus and Echo. Indeed, Narcissus is emblematic of the centre, for he not only becomes an ideal I, unified with his mirror image, but he later becomes transformed into a flower with “white petals clustered round a cup of gold” (Ovid III. 530). The association between the stars and the eyes in *Cat’s Eye* further recalls Narcissus, for Ovid describes the eyes of Narcissus as a “twin constellation” (III. 420).

The figure of Echo occupies an eccentric position in Ovid’s story. In contrast to Narcissus’ unified subjectivity, Echo exemplifies split subjectivity, for her body becomes dismembered, scattered and fragmented, leaving only her voice behind. After she loses the power of speech, Echo may no longer inscribe herself as a subject in language:

All she can do is double each last word,
And echo back again the voice she’s heard. (Ovid III. 373-4)

The figure of Echo suggests the impossibility of reaching a centre, an origin, a referent. While the words of Narcissus convey meaning, Echo’s words form an opaque language whose meanings are endlessly deferred. Like the voice of Echo, the deferred echoes of light at the end of *Cat’s Eye* rupture a correspondence between sign and referent.

Cat’s Eye and *The Handmaid’s Tale* both remain open-ended. Not only do the echoing voices at the end of each novel suggest a process of infinite regression, but the voices engage what Derrida calls “the ear of the other.” In his discussion of autobiography, Derrida argues that a text which acknowledges the reader’s role in both hearing and producing the writing, introduces itself as a text which “awaits its own form” (Derrida 1985: 51). Indeed, in Atwood’s work the play between “I” and “you” pronouns, between singular and plural, between voices and silences,

continually involves the reader's participation in both hearing and producing the text.

To focus only on Narcissus, on the seen, is to silence the "other" of Ovid's myth, the resounding voice of Echo. Similarly, to see only the centered I/eye in Atwood's work is to see only half a face. The reader of Atwood's work who constructs only a face and not a voice *de-faces*. During the course of Atwood's poetry and prose the gaps, silences and fragments of faces engage the reader in a process of constructing a face and a voice just as Elaine in Tennyson's poem constructs the absent face and voice of Lancelot:

so the face before her lived,
Dark-splendid, speaking in the silence (160)

What emerges in Atwood's work is a sense of silenced voices, like that of the mute oarsman in "Lancelot and Elaine," voices which clamour to be heard.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul de Man articulates the chiasmic reversals of facing and defacing, figuration and disfiguration in his essay, "Autobiography As De-Facement" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984).
- ² Sherrill Grace argues that Atwood affirms "the need to accept and work within [dualistic oppositions]." Moreover, Grace writes that in Atwood's work "violent duality is a function of the creative act." *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule, 1980): 134.
- ³ In her review of *Cat's Eye*, Judith Thurman assumes that Atwood's novel belongs to the genre of transparent autobiography. Thurman refers to Atwood's heroine, Elaine Risley, as a figure "whose resemblance to Atwood, like peekaboo lace, is too coy to be elegant." Judith Thurman, "When You Wish Upon A Star," *The New Yorker*, (29 May 1989): 108-10.
- ⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Autobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).
- ⁵ See Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's discussion of proper and improper names in their essay, "Ceremonies of the Alphabet: Female Grandmatologies and The Female Autograph," *The Female Autograph*, ed. Domna Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- ⁶ Elizabeth van Berkel articulates the punning on Offred's name and the adjective "off-red" in her essay "Language As A Room of One's Own" (unpublished).
- ⁷ I am grateful to Joan Givner for reminding me of the names Cordelia and Elaine in *Anne of Green Gables*.

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