

TALES WITHIN TALES

Margaret Atwood's Folk Narratives

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ALL LIVE BY storytelling: it is the way we make sense of our lives.¹ In making up stories about ourselves and others, we give shape to these lives and meaning to the world about us. In personal acts of narrative imagination, people tell themselves and each other the truths, half-truths, lies, and fantasies by which we all live. Sometimes, such freely anecdotal storytelling accumulates local history and becomes public chronicle. Then there are the stories of art, the “high literature” we study, with its genres ranging from the *märchen* to the epic and the novel. Margaret Atwood has been an avid student of literary history, and in her poetry and fiction has included allusions and quotations from its many genres, and repeated some examples of them in condensed form. For like that of many modern writers, Atwood’s fiction is self-reflexive. Aware of its position as latecomer, Atwood’s writing reflects on the models that have influenced it, seeking through antithesis or completion to clear a place for itself within an ongoing literary tradition. Not surprisingly then, Frank Davey has used the title “Alternate Stories,”² to comment on Atwood’s radical suspicion of narrative art, her attempt to create a *tabula rasa* by overtly criticizing the distorting lies of fiction. “Alter-native” fiction would be a more appropriate title, I suggest, for describing Atwood’s meditations on the liar’s paradox in which her narratives are grounded. It also underlines more clearly the issue of origins, of the grounds for an aesthetic, which is one of her major fictional themes. More specifically, too, it highlights the question of a native literature, one of the participants in the battle of the books waged in her fiction, which features varying types of embedded tales within tales.

My essay has two starting points. One is my reading of Atwood’s *Bluebeard’s Egg*, which marks a shift in her narrative technique. David McFadden’s comment about the book sums up my reaction to it:

I’m, still under the spell of Margaret Atwood’s new book from McClelland and Stewart, *Bluebeard’s Egg*. . . . The book is a big breakthrough for Atwood both artistically and in terms of basic human understanding.³

The deepening of “human understanding” in the book, it seems to me, is directly related to the “breakthrough” in technique, indeed, is created by the artist’s powers of illusion. This is the result of a change in the relationship between embedded

and frame stories within the narratives. To approach this issue will take us to my second source, the folk narrative tradition of anglophone Canada.

My understanding of this tradition is shaped by Carole Carpenter who has underlined the issue of hegemony, the problematic relationship between ethnicity and folklore, in Canadian folklore studies.⁴ High literary culture is culture as imposition, culture as power, for the anglophone “majority” of Canada refuses to acknowledge the existence of its folklore. Folklore is the culture of the “other,” something which serves as a rallying point for those without economic power. It is associated with the preservation of an archaic past, a threatened regional existence or an ethnic language. Regionalism and ethnicity orient folklore scholarship, the more powerful and richer regions or cultural groups encouraging study on hierarchical lines downward. The folk culture of Quebec has been intensively studied, as has that of Newfoundland, which boasts Canada’s only English-language folklore department at Memorial University. Collection of folk narrative and poetry in Canada has focussed on “olden times,” on the establishment of a fixed written text, with senior citizens as informants and research focused on isolated or backward regions such as Cape Breton, the Ottawa Valley, or among immigrants such as the Norwegians in Alberta, or among the indigenous population of Indians and Inuit. As yet, few studies centre on folk literature as a way in which all people make sense of their human experiences. Nor do they start with the local, the here and now, especially not when they originate in the centre of anglophone Canada. The novelty of *Bluebeard’s Egg*, I would suggest, is to undertake this serious analysis, even as it promotes to high culture some of the forms of oral narrative — anecdotes, local legends, natural narratives — currently alive in Toronto. That this marks a shift in Atwood’s fictional technique and in the type of folk narrative embedded in her fictions, and ultimately in the relationship between embedded story and framing story. I shall demonstrate with reference to *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*, which incorporate, respectively, the narratives of the Indian and the Québécois and the written *märchen* of European tradition.

Before examining these in detail, I should like briefly to explore oral narrative forms in Canadian literature and to situate Atwood’s work within this activity through her comments on folklore in literature. Discussion of the oral tradition in Canada is linked to the evolution of a Canadian discourse. In *Empire and Communication*, Harold Innis sketched a theory about the relationships between social power and corresponding cultural forms. Writing codified vast spatial expanses, though it ultimately fossilized into a ponderous system. In contrast, the tradition of oral discussion engendered by a philosophical tradition of dialogue, was creatively dynamic in the intellectual sphere. A number of Canadian novelists have continued this discussion of imperialism by structuring their work around similar concerns: the implications of oral and written communication, social power, and ideological manipulation.

Attempts to create a national literature in Canada have developed on this interface of metropolis and hinterland, of written and oral literary models, a most frequent literary device being the "Battle of the Books" which pits high European cultural models against the oral narratives of North American experience, as in the work of Robert Kroetsch or of Antonine Maillet, where the *Odyssey* and *Don Quixote* are repeated in the vernacular. In their writing folklore breaches the walls and facilitates the entry of the speech or dialects of North American peoples into the high literary tradition, affirming the vitality of the primitive against convention, or experience against form, of process making sense against the repetition of ready-made code.⁵ Naming one's own experience is subversive if one writes from the periphery: the task becomes the exploration of the landscape that is language itself in order to free the imagination from imposed structures. Haunted by the rich anglophone tradition that is their heritage, Canadian writers have asserted the right to an existing language whose use has been restricted to speech and oral narrative tradition. In the nineteenth century discussion about the foundation of national literatures centred on the creation of languages that would incorporate features of existing native languages. "Founders of a 'distinctive literature,' [will not be produced] unless they write in Anglo-Ojibway, and educate a nation to look upon Nana-bo-John as a Launcelot or a Guy of Warwick."⁶ Political independence is not sufficient to bring about this national literature. As Crémazie writes:

we shall not be any the less simple literary colonists. . . . if we spoke Iroquois or Huron, our literature would live. I repeat, if we spoke Huron or Iroquois, the works of our writers would attract the attention of the Old World. That virile and vigorous language, born in the forests of America would have that crude poetry which delights the foreigner.⁷

A new wave of interest in the folk tradition as foundation for an indigenous literature flowered during the nationalist movement of the 1960's and 1970's. This renewed interest is also a consequence of new literary values which favour the introduction of popular culture into noble art forms. Moreover, as "post-modern" writers have turned away from the spatialized forms of modernism, they have sought engagement with historical change and with literature as performance, a prominent feature of oral literature. Through legend and oral history, folklore is its engagement with the past. Often called "fakelore" by folklore scholars,⁸ this new wave of literary folklore is still dependent on the traditions of the native people which it appropriates and colonizes in asserting its own difference from imperialist discourse. It adopts the discourse of the most visible "other," the "native," in order to establish its own distance from a homogenizing centre. By being aboriginal it aims to be original.

While some contemporary Canadian writers such as Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch, and Antonine Maillet have relied on the narrative models of their *own*

oral traditions — the Celtic hero tales, the tall tale or the liar's tale of Alberta, and the giants' tale of Acadia — many more writers have grounded their subversion in the narratives and practices of the native peoples. The figure we encounter most frequently, whether in the fiction of Sheila Watson, Robert Kroetsch, or Jack Hodgins, is that of Coyote, the trickster cultural hero, the shape-shifter, master of illusion. His presence highlights the problematic situation of the writer/illusionist whose ability to cast spells is dependent on the audience's participation in the enchantment. Where Coyote is at work, we are invited to participate in literature as performance. Here the stage as barrier between author/reader dissolves in a communicative event in which all are equally involved in the negotiation of meaning. Oral practices of narration make structural changes in written work, advancing a post-modernist aesthetic of process over a modernist one of stasis.

I HAVE BRIEFLY SKETCHED in this background so that Atwood's place in the evolving tradition will be clearer. That she is conscious of such a lineage is evident in her talk at Harvard University entitled "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction." A description of the use of folklore in literature, this essay explores a tradition of "magic people," especially the "Monster as Other." Here we read "the wendigo story in *Brown Waters* is short and simple as the folktale material from which it obviously derives," and later, "In the first third of [*Tay John*], which is written in the form of a folktale or legend." With her comments on Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, Atwood establishes links with the other contemporary writers I have mentioned, even as she distances herself from them by treating Coyote as metaphor for landscape, as aesthetic product, rather than as master illusionist, a stand-in for the author and the process of production:

The wendigo and Coyote are both landscape-and-nature creatures, nature in both cases being understood to include super-nature. Neither is human; both can act on human beings, but cannot be acted upon. They are both simply *there*, as supernatural forces in the environment and as embodiments of that environment which must be reckoned with. They are objects rather than subjects, the "Other" against which the human characters measure themselves.⁹

Here Atwood reveals the way the elements of the oral traditions of the native people function for her as the "Other," something which she experiences from outside, and appropriates. Her language betrays the hierarchical nature of her relationship with this alternate culture, as it establishes her at the centre looking down on the oral traditions of those who are more marginal or peripheral than she is. It is against these assumptions that we shall measure the changes which occur in Atwood's use of folk tales, keeping in mind that this model she has used

for establishing difference — self/other, presence/absence — is preeminently one that leads to identity and the obliteration of real difference.

Before turning to Atwood's tales within tales, we should briefly explore the options open to her within a broad stream of self-reflexive narrative. Such specular fiction, as Lucien Dällenbach terms it,¹⁰ involves a process of fiction doubling back on itself, mirroring itself, and offering a metaphor of its own origins. Through a "mise en abyme" or embedding, the fiction may mirror the statement, the complete fiction, or the code or genre which governs its construction, or the process of enunciation. The doubling may be simple or complex, ranging from the relating of one story model or the quotation or resumé of a single story, to the never-ending story where narrative is embedded within narrative in a recursive paradigm which, like the proverbial chinese-box conundrum, opens to infinity.¹¹ Within these variables, the writer may proceed by reduction through containment or by an elaboration of the paradigm of reference. This in turn may operate on the principles of either contrast or analogy, though the former will always involve some relationship of analogy in order to establish grounds for comparison in parallel, related, or coincidental likenesses which may contain other great differences. The resemblances between frame and embedded stories may occur in the setting, the characters, the narrators, or in the repetition of textual expressions. Again the text may be integrated into its new context in a single presentation, or in sections alternating with the frame story. What results from all these techniques of repetition is that the text enters into dialogue with itself and represents the apparatus of its own interpretation, the activities of both reading and writing being reproduced on the level of the story, the narrated and the quoted worlds. In her various works, Atwood uses a wide range of these specular techniques, ranging from the evocation of the generic code of the yellow press in *True Stories* to the quotation of the sacred lore of the goddess in the snake poems of *Interlunar*. Indeed, doubling has always been a feature of her work, from her first book, *Double Persephone*. However, the fiction I wish to examine in detail, fiction that embeds folk narratives, establishes a loose typology of self-reflective strategies, from *Surfacing* which doubles the statement, through *Lady Oracle* which multiplies and refracts the generic code, to *Bluebeard's Egg* where the mimesis is of the process of enunciation, of production.¹²

Surfacing is Atwood's most eloquent exploration of the problem of colonialism and of the necessity to escape from the distortions and constrictions of the ruling American way of life and of an inherited language in order to reach authenticity and psychic survival. Here she recognizes the contours of our entrapment and the double bind in making sense of daily life within them. This book develops along a basic Atwood theme of conflict between form and life, dramatized in terms of imitation. Lacking originality, false forms — linguistic alienation and fakelore — distort experience. What is being imitated is the artistic experience of another culture, one that is dominant economically. This basic story of expropriation and

obliteration is repeated on two levels: Anglo-Canadians imitate and are overwhelmed by the forms of American culture; the Québécois are corrupted by the Anglo-Canadians who expropriate this culture of the other in order to forge their own authenticity. As the biting irony of the gap between original and appropriated meanings, between embedded tale and frame tale reveals, such an activity rebounds on the expropriator, vitiating the search for authenticity.

Identity is implicit language. As the narrator of *Surfacing* observes: “a language is everything you do.”¹³ Yet the billboards she reads on the Quebec highway, with their confused signs, reveal the power of the advertising slogan of the Anglo-Canadians, themselves colonized by the Americans, to disrupt a language and a culture:

VOTEZ GODET, VOTEZ OBRIEN . . . THE SALADA, BLUE MOON COTTAGES ½ MILE,
QUEBEC LIBRE, FUCK YOU, BUVEZ COCA-COLA GLACE, JESUS SAVES.

In the random juxtapositions all around her, she sees the religion, tradition, and even language of Quebec violated by “American” values of material progress and ecological destruction. Popular culture is obliterated by culture for the masses imposed from without. In the village, the gas station is decorated with stuffed moose, one waving an American flag. The Quebec of her childhood, when her mother and Madame Paul could exchange only phatic signals — “Il fait beau,” “ow are you” — devoid of any message, an empty communicative exchange which left the two cultures and languages impervious to each other, has vanished. To the narrator’s great dismay, the main agents of occupation are not Americans but anglophone Canadians, who are roaring through the tranquil waters scaring away all the fish. The ultimate facade stripped away on this voyage to the mythic north is the illusion that Canadian culture has been more respectful of the other. Without the barriers of a different language, Canadians have been assimilated to the “American way of life” and are, in turn, colonizing Quebec. As the narrator says: “If you look like them and talk like them and think like them you are them. . . .”

At the heart of the narrator’s discovery of her complicity in the takeover of Quebec is her recognition that she really knows nothing about Quebec. And this is where the embedded folk tales are vital, for it is through her puzzling over the meaning of such tales, that the narrator raises the question of originality as a goal in art, all the while underlining Atwood’s own practice of explicit appropriation or parody, when it becomes clear to the reader that this embedded tale, interpreted by the narratee, forecasts the outcome of her own story she is narrating for us, of which it is the refracting mirror.¹⁴ For the narrator is involved in a project to translate Quebec culture for an anglophone audience who will make sense of their own nationalism by appropriating Quebec popular culture, perceived as a genuine literature of the soil, to replace the folklore lacking in Anglo-Canadian society. This appropriation has a venerable tradition, dating back to the end of the

nineteenth century when Quebec culture provided the model for a national culture, just as the Quebecers' name for themselves, "Canadiens," was adopted by the British North Americans to name themselves. In raising the old saw about translation as treason Atwood underlines the fundamental duplicity of all language, the gap between sign and object it designates, but more specifically, the twisting of language through its commodification in the marketplace. This is more than a "dialect problem," as the narrator identifies her poor translations. It is an ideological one first, and then a formal one. As the narrator points out, her main motivation for her work is money. She is a commercial artist who will illustrate anything she is given to do, from a Department of Manpower employment manual — the "young people" in her drawings "with lobotomized grins" — to the translation of *Quebec Folk Tales* she is currently working on. "It isn't my territory, but I need the money," she says.

Working on the illustrations is a disturbing process and raises more questions than solutions. Just as these embedded tales are interpretive puzzles for the narrator who is the narratee (fictional reader) on the first level of story, so too are they conundrums for us readers, tests in our knowledge of Quebec culture. The representation of the process of enunciation in the embedded story thus performs a meta-fictional function. For the stories are not at all what she has expected to read. They are "märchen," "like German fairy tales, except for the absence of red-hot iron slippers and nail-studded casks." Why is unclear, because so many hands have been involved in the preparation and transmission of the tales:

I wonder if this mercy descends from the original tellers, from the translators or from the publisher: probably it's Mr. Perceval the publisher, he's a cautious man, he shies away from anything he calls "disturbing." We had an argument about that: he said one of my drawings was too frightening and I said children liked being frightened. "It isn't the children who buy the books," he said, "it's their parents." So I compromised: now I compromise before I take the work in, it saves time . . .

The desire to sell triumphs over all integrity and leads to bowdlerization, an extreme violation in a literary world which places the question of originality above all. But distortion is inevitable whenever there is repetition of the story. While the narrator has decided that Mr. Perceval's mercantile interests are the most likely corrupting source in the line of transmission of the story, she has given us a long chain of doublings, any of which, from varying original versions to translations of them, might be responsible for the distortion. Any doubling, as reader becomes writer and frames the story from a new perspective, introduces divergences and undecidability.

This is especially true of the narrator's art work for the book which diverges radically from the reading of *Quebec Folk Tales*, the meta- or second story, she offers through her questions. The drawings are anything but original, as she makes

clear, for she repeats the stylized drawings, hence clichés — “a princess, emaciated fashion-model torso and infantile face” — she has used as illustrations for *Favourite Fairy Tales*. These, in turn, are modelled on advertising images of fashionable women, mass-produced images created explicitly for adults. No Quebec local colour here. Indeed, just the opposite, for it is the reader’s perception on the level of the first story that colours this interpretation. As she is doing the drawing, the narrator remembers the imitation that defined nationalist symbols in public school. Bliss Carman’s famous line, “God planted a Scarlet Maple Tree,” was “printed thirty-five times, strung out along the top of the blackboard, each page with a preserved maple leaf glued to it, ironed between sheets of waxed paper.” Nationalism is a commodity for a culture-starved Anglo-Canadian audience. Clearly the narrator learned her art of imitation early before she began imitating for the international market. Cultural imperialism, through the international marketplace, encourages the production of “fakelore,” Atwood suggests through this representation of reading/writing, in the metaphor viewing/drawing.

BUT IN REWORKING this material, Atwood’s own writing becomes an art of parody, displaced into drawings rather than narrative forms, working ironically within a Canadian tradition of exalting French-Canadian peasant popular culture with its “joie-de-vivre.”¹⁵ The narrator explicitly alludes to this long tradition of anglophone versions of Quebec folklore in the title of the tale she is attempting to illustrate, “The Tale of the Golden Phoenix,” which is that of a collection by Marius Barbeau, translated into English by Michael Hornyansky.¹⁶ Through the image drawn to illustrate the story, Atwood reinforces the point about the ways in which commercial considerations have led to the exploitation of mythic material. Through her own explicit appropriation of it, she defamiliarizes our response to it, and exposes the unconscious motivations of her narrator. The princess is looking up at a bird rising from the flames, “wings outspread like a heraldic emblem or a fire insurance trade-mark.” The economic considerations of publishing force the artist to choose yellow instead of red for the bird, further compromising the artistic vision or the symbolic meaning. The artist reacts to this limitation of her creative freedom on a subconscious level. Her hand betrays her: the princess “looks stupefied” rather than filled with wonder. A second attempt depicts her “cross-eyed,” and with “one breast bigger than the other.” Life revolts against the plastic perfection of the advertising image.

These initial struggles with the image lead to questions about the ideological construction of the Quebec tales, in what proves to be the narrator’s first step on a quest to get in touch with her own emotions, to free herself from the forms of “Americanization,” or commodification:

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

The superreader might detect in these last lines allusions to Jacques Ferron's "Le chien gris," and "Mélie et le boeuf," in his *Contes*. But the narratee is not as well read nor is she knowledgeable about her world; she is forced to admit: "the truth is that I don't know what the villagers thought or talked about."

Nonetheless, there is some truth to her previous assertion. Though all collections of Quebec folk narrative contain examples of the "märchen" which the narrator rejects as inauthentic, these seem to be stories brought from Europe, imposed culture, rather than popular culture, making sense of daily life. Tales that were naturalized in Quebec, localized as legends, incorporated into the distinctions between the sacred and the profane made in that province, and revoked in innumerable novels since, are tales of bewitchment, especially those concerned with diabolic pacts. Quite rightly, the narrator speculates: "There should be a *loup-garou*." Perhaps Mr. Perceval did take it out, because it was too strong a story. Certainly, it did not fit into his value system, based on marketing comfort. The narrator is determined to put it in. The third rejected picture of the princess, shown here with "moons and fish and a wolf with bristling hackles and a snarl" as the narrator doodles, "adding fangs and a moustache" to the princess, points clearly to the narrator's ultimate metamorphosis when she turns into a furry creature running wild in the woods, the fish-foetus in her belly, conceived with the moon over her left shoulder. The embedded story thus projects forward in the frame narrative, outlining its plot evolution for the attentive reader. The narrator refers specifically to the traditional Quebec version of the story, where the metamorphosis into werewolf occurs in punishment for missing seven Easter communions. Maybe that's why, she speculates, the locals have stopped looking for her father. He never went to mass at all and is one of "*les maudits anglais*, the damned English." This is a term of opprobrium hurled at the politically and economically dominant English-Canadians by the Québécois, and thus relates to an ideological struggle. In Atwood's novel it is taken literally; the English have no sense of the sacred. After this forecast provided by the embedded narrative, it comes as no surprise to the reader when, in the concluding moments of the text, the narrator sees her father in the woods in the form of a wolf: "it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent as the eyes of animals seen at night in the car headlights. Reflectors." A double metamorphosis has occurred: both have become *loup-garous*.

This moment of vision is followed by a meditation on shape-shifting which is explicitly linked to the shamanic visions of the native people, concretely imaged in the petroglyphs, sought by father then daughter. These visual signs introduce a new thread of embedded narratives, through allusion this time. For the signs are not reproduced for us in *Surfacing*, and they are only briefly described. Here too is elaborated a world view of process, in which art consists of the living being changed into idea, then image, finally spirit, and so back to life again:

From the lake a fish jumps
an idea of a fish jumps

A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no antlered fish thing drawn on cliffstone, protecting spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to the water. How many shapes can he take.

Spirit is the animating force that metamorphoses life into art and vice-versa. Coyote the culture hero is at work again, tricking us with his ambiguous views. Atwood's use of native shamanic stories and rituals has been well documented recently,¹⁷ so I shall not go into more detail here. In this context it should be noted that she makes the same use of them as of the traditional material from Quebec — both the Quebec folk tales, and the mythic journey to the north country, founding myth of Quebec nationalism which she has also appropriated for *Surfacing*'s canoe quest into the wilderness."¹⁸ In both cases, the narrator is an outsider with incomplete knowledge of the traditions and no understanding of or belief in their spiritual values. She summarizes them or refers cryptically to them. The frame narrative mimetically develops them in updated form. Divorced from sacred ritual, the tales are meaningless in their new context, *vendus* to the damned English.

It is this divorce between original and reproduction that opens up the meta-fictional paradox in *Surfacing*, which becomes an example of the liar's paradox. Although effected by a simple process of doubling, embedded story becoming a displaced version in the frame narrative, the result is anything but simple, as the commentary interpreting the embedded tale, with its enumeration of differences and gaps, makes clear. For even while the narrator of the frame story reveals her lack of understanding of the sacred, and so ironically distances herself from these embedded tales, which we come to understand she has appropriated and distorted, and so has lied to us, the frame narrative is constructed on the plots of these traditions of the "Other" and draws on the spiritual transformation implied in them to achieve narrative closure. The transformational potential of this narrative quest remains a moot point. Atwood's attack on the practices of cultural appropriation which she herself has engaged in, dramatized in the bowdlerization of the *Quebec Folk Tales* by the enterprising Mr. Perceval (is he the hero of the grail quest, and thus mentor of the questing narrator?) in the narrative *mise en abyme*, effectively

undercuts the grounds of the frame narrative. As readers, we are both given this experience of the other, and soundly berated for such appropriation in our quest for vicarious understanding.

IN *Lady Oracle* WE FIND similar self-reflecting mirrors. Here, too, the emphasis is on their distorting and refracting characteristics. The process of embedding is not a simple question of doubling, however, in which the statement or product is repeated. The embedded tales are scattered throughout the text rather than being presented in a single block. Moreover, their contents are summarized and told rather than being mimetically reproduced, as was the case in *Surfacing*. So too, the emphasis again is on the difference between Joan's story and the conventional tale. In the infinite spiral of narrative within narrative, a veritable never-ending story, the generic code of fairy tale and popular romance itself is doubled. Through this process of explicit appropriation, the romance form is defamiliarized for us, its instructions to the reader made clear to us, so that we can free ourselves from its call to identify ourselves with it. A more extended analysis of *Lady Oracle* would be more detailed. I shall be brief, however, to allow for more commentary on the less familiar *Bluebeard's Egg*.

Bluebeard is at the heart of the narrative labyrinth of *Lady Oracle*, playing Pluto to Joan's Persephone. As in *Surfacing*, the embedded tales are "märchen," in this case the classical European fairy tales which have come to us in this time and country in the form of a fixed and static literary text, rather than as living oral performance. In this, they resemble the Quebec literary tales and Indian pictographs of *Surfacing*. They too are foreign to the experience of Anglo-Canadians, as the narrator of *Surfacing* remarks when she considers the alternatives to her fake princesses. Parents could buy British stories of "humanoid bears and talking pigs" (read A. A. Milne), or American "Protestant choo-choo trains who make the grade and become successful" (read *The Little Engine that Could* and *Tootle*). We could certainly read Joan Delacourt's costume gothics in light of such a thesis of cultural imperialism. Atwood's parody of Harlequin romances is thinly veiled. Moreover, it is Joan's Polish count, her "goose who laid the golden egg," as the allusions to fairy tales in the novel make clear, who starts Joan writing — in England. In this miraculous development of her career, Joan becomes Cinderella, metamorphizing from ugly mothball to beautiful butterfly. However, a reading of *Lady Oracle* in light of *The Cinderella Complex*¹⁹ opens up another ideological struggle in the drama of explicit appropriation, in feminists' call for freedom from the restricting plots of these fairy tales, in order to reshape the scripts of women's lives.

Atwood's subversive strategy is one of refraction. She plays with notions of

distorting mirrors, convex and concave, “funhouse-mirror reflection,”²⁰ foregrounding here the central issue of the novel, that all reflections are distortions, all mimetic representations lies. But the refractions and travesties of mirrors and art furnish the material for the novel which contains them. For the narrative itself is *mise en abyme* in this specular novel whose protagonist is a writer of gothic fictions and oracular poetry: it is an eternal braid of narrative within narrative. In fact, there is no “life” outside the web of narrative. This tension between form and content, between the desire to escape lies and the knowledge that there is no singular truth, is not the least of the multiplicities offered to us in Atwood’s book, a model of paradox, which plays with our desire for binary structures, but, ultimately, asserts the absence of boundaries that would create dualities. The book opens up as the boundaries between different codes of writing — following different generic strands, nurse books, costume gothics, fairy tale allusions, poetry, female gothic-twist and blur. So, too, do those between frame narrative of Joan’s many metamorphoses and embedded tales. Joan’s life is increasingly taken over by those of her fictional creations when she, as Felicia, moves into the labyrinth. Ultimately, there are no boundaries, only perpetual metamorphoses, for Atwood is intrigued by the point at which one thing becomes another.

Lady Oracle’s frame plot is clearly based on those metamorphoses characteristic of the embedded fairy tales whose plots this narrative calls into question. While Joan has spent her life “hoping for magic transformations,” she undergoes a reverse metamorphosis from butterfly back to the poison that will kill it. This pattern of inversion makes *Lady Oracle* a travesty of fairy tales. The direction of Atwood’s critique of the plots of fairy tales is one taken by many feminists recently. They argue that the familiar stories, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White*, assign conventionally passive roles to women. Overt commercials for marriage, they inform a woman that all that matters is her appearance, an image in the mirror. In all other aspects it is preferable she be dead, for the prince chooses a girl in a coffin, and it is only by accident that the apple jolts out. Death and marriage go hand in hand, as *Lady Oracle* makes clear to us. The only way out of such closure, which male texts, the classic texts of childhood, offer women, is to resist the final transformation, to refuse an ending.

Atwood’s parodic quotation of the fairy tale material in this novel, like her imitation of the Quebec folk tales in *Surfacing*, is marked by a disdainful, rather than a reverential impulse. Whether tale or anti-tale, however, the ending is death.

Joan as narratee attempts to project herself into the plots of the stories she reads. Romantic fantasies of metamorphosis nourish her imagination. Dreaming always of growing wings and taking flight into a better existence, as Psyche was carried off by Cupid, Joan continually casts herself in the roles of fairy tales, experiencing repeatedly that initial inversion to moth-ball, moving always towards death, not

happiness. *Snow White* with its double face in the mirror, maiden and hag, thin girl and Fat Lady, functions as an intertext of *Lady Oracle*. So too does *Cinderella*: for Joan casts herself disparagingly as “Cinderella’s ugly sister,” for whom the metamorphosis can never occur. In Bluebeard’s castle, she would be “one of the two stupid sisters who open the forbidden door and are shocked by the murdered wives, not the third, clever one who keeps to the essentials,” tells lies, and saves herself. With reference to Andersen’s Little Mermaid, Joan is “doing fairly well by comparison to Andersen’s Little Mermaid: “Neither of them had been able to please the handsome prince: both of them had died,” though ironically she undergoes a *fake* death. As narrator of the story we are reading, however, Joan criticizes these plots implicitly by following another line. Joan is conscious of the fact that completion of the fairy tale plots would find her in the grave. Equating marriage to death, Joan, like Scheherazade, tells stories to save her life. As soon as the men of her fairy tale world propose marriage, Joan undergoes another Houdini escape, reappearing in a new identity.

In *Lady Oracle* there is thus a distinction between Joan’s activities in the quoted world and the narrated world, between the activities of reading and those of writing, the former seen as a form of enslavement to death while the latter brings life through renewed power. Storytelling literally does support her life. She spins out Costume Gothics based on fairy tale plots to fill other women’s empty lives, by giving them something to dream about. For in her role as author, Joan is cast in a different role in the fairy tale plot, as “fairy godmother” with “the power to turn them from pumpkins to pure gold.” Her pen is a magic wand. Though as reader, Joan strives to resist the authority of plots, as writer she is only too happy to repeat the same form over and over again, for the power it gives her. She exploits the naïveté and desire for projection of her readers in another series of embedded stories, those she writes developed more fully as *mimesis* than the narrated accounts of her reading. Even here she continues to resist the happy endings of tales, the consolations of art, for she fights against the temptation to closure they offer. She changes identities in a continuous effort to avoid the grave, in a process that extends story within story *ad infinitum*, like the face seen in the triple mirror. One of the secrets the mirror contains is that the tale’s apparent closure is a paradox. *Lady Oracle* is a ghost story told by a revenant from the other world. Life and death, mobility and closure, coexist within it.

WHILE ATWOOD’S *Surfacing* fits into the pattern of Canadian monster stories as a Wendigo story, it is text and not performance, and thus stands outside the post-modern storytelling of contemporary Coyote’s. With *Lady Oracle*, the emphasis on perceptual process, new versions and revisions, based on context, not fixed text, Atwood moves closer to this second mode of storytelling.

The clues to her eventual shift from the texts of art and the written word to the texts of life and of speech, are suggested in another intertextual design within *Lady Oracle*, the story of Demeter and Kore. Phyllis Chesler has suggested that the rigid dualities of beautiful maiden and wicked stepmother of the fairy tales are debased forms of this ancient women's story celebrating fertility and creativity.²¹ Atwood emphasizes the labyrinth in *Lady Oracle*, which was the sacred entry into the sanctum of the divine Earth Mother. This hidden story offering the possibility of alternative readings of the tales based on a female culture is what effectively subverts the male-dominant plot of fairy tales.

In both *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing*, the reader confronts self-cancelling structures which make no sense except as a "circle game." For both posit a tension between authoritatively imposed form (imperialist or patriarchal discourse) and life experience, uncoded, wild. In *Surfacing*, the frame narrative follows the plots of the folk tales which are contested by the narrative because they have been appropriated by an outsider and divorced from context. Creating other art forms does nothing to change this; in fact it compounds the situation even more by creating distortions in transmission between versions. A way out of the circle and a real metamorphosis is effected through the re-enactment of ritual and a movement from story to action. The narrator becomes the goddess, mates with the horned god, and gives birth to a new type of creature. Similarly, in *Lady Oracle*, the appropriation of a patriarchal tradition which has rewritten the scripts of women's stories, then oppressed women's lives by forcing them to conform to the new plots, is subverted and countered by the re-emergence of the lost stories and the re-enactment of their sacred rituals. Indeed, the whole novel celebrates giving birth to the creative self, as the tradition of the female gothic is extended, though with anxiety still at the monstrous birth likely to occur. The narratives eventually kick free from imposed conventions when the old stories of the goddess are unearthed. The connection with *Bluebeard's Egg* is made both through this focus on digging through the archive — the title of the final story in the collection is "Unearthing Suite" — and through the emphasis on process. For in *Bluebeard's Egg*, Atwood mirrors the process of production, the instance of enunciation, as she works on embedded oral narratives and local legends, whose meaning is vested in the sacred lares and penates, the gods of family and hearth.²² The transition is evident in the intervening works, as Linda Hutcheon makes clear:

Like the later novel *Bodily Harm*, *Life Before Man* is, on the surface, a move away from this overt mode of self-reflectiveness. The creative power of the imagination is still a theme, but the context is that of life, not art. The distance between the aesthetic and the moral dimensions *decreases*. Lesje's learned but child-like fantasy world both compensates for and offers an escape from life, but it is a world that is left behind at the end of the novel, as life and real creativity — in the form of her as yet unborn child — assert themselves.²³

TRANSFORMATION IS also evident in the collection in the title which alludes directly to the bluebeard motif in *Lady Oracle*, with a difference that makes all the sense — egg. Placed in the centre of the collection, “Bluebeard’s Egg” radiates its concerns throughout the collection. It is a story about reading and writing, about the hermeneutic puzzle that is narrative, constructed like *Lady Oracle* as a recursive paradigm, a Chinese-box narrative. The narrator of the frame story, Sally, is editor of the newsmagazine of a company. Currently she is taking a night course to keep herself occupied while her heart-surgeon husband, Ed, is busy in the evening. It is a course that emphasizes learning through doing, and so Sally is both reading “Forms of Narrative,” and writing them. After having worked its way through epic and ballad forms, the class has come to folk tales and the “Oral Tradition.” Atwood’s title story mimetically represents the narrative processes of this collection of stories. In the fictional world, Sally as reader is decoding various versions of the Bluebeard story from the quoted world, to recode them in the modern day version which is to be her class exercise. While this latter has not yet been written on paper, one draft of it has been narrated orally, as Sally composes fictions of life, stories about her enigmatic husband attempting to construct his life in a meaningful way, for her friend Marylyn, the narratee. In Sally’s narrated world she is evaluating her relationship with Ed, the heart surgeon, who has had two previous wives about whom she knows little.

Atwood’s text plays two embedded versions of the Bluebeard story against each other. There is the Grimm version which is summarized in total in the story as it is being read aloud and listened to. Lines are quoted directly from Grimm’s text.²⁴ However, there is also the version of Perrault hovering in the text. For Sally may well be the less enterprising wife victim to the vampires, her boss and Ed. Sally reconstructs the first story, which again splits into two versions, depending on whose point of view is foregrounded. In the version Sally is constructing, Ed is the egg. In the frame narrative, however, on the mimetic level, it is the other version that dominates, with Ed as the murderous husband whose secret is behind the keyhole. Life against death. As reader, interpreting the embedded fairy tale, Sally puzzles over the ambiguity of the egg as symbol, relating to virginity in its unbloodied state, or dirty and provocation for murder. Such contraries are held within the egg as fertility symbol, or “something the earth hatched out of.” This primordial egg of the beginning, alchemistic vessel of renewal and ancient symbol of the goddess, centres this title narrative, and indeed all the stories enfolded within the book, within the shadow of its implications of division, as growth and process. It is an egg of transformations, as Sally suggests in the frame narrative, where she is wondering about “the puzzle . . . Ed,” and how to interpret him, how to represent him — the central puzzle of narrative. “In her inner world is Ed, like a doll within a Russian wooden doll, and in Ed is Ed’s inner world, which she

can't get at" except through fiction. Her story covers that gap, the absence which is Ed's story, present though in the frame narrative. That it too might be told, is the ultimate element of the narrative. For it introduces the possibility of another story, that of the phoenix, when Sally views the bloodied egg not as a symbol of death, but as one of rebirth, red glowing from within as the egg prepares to hatch new life and adds a never-ending story. As in *Lady Oracle*, one story leads to another, but the process is now seen as a movement of completion and extension, rather than the perpetuation of solipsism. For Sally is able to move from the fictions of life to the texts of art only when she is capable of perceiving the story of the other, of the egg.

Images of growth and process dominate the texts in this book, especially, "Unearthing Suite," that introduces this fundamental metaphor, through which Atwood presents the organic life, valued above the fixity of art. As the final story, it avoids closure, for this is a story, like the egg, which celebrates the triumph of beginnings over ends. The narrator of the story, who in Atwood's habitual self-reflective fashion is also narratee and author of embedded stories, begins all her childhood stories with *The End*, as she tells us. She begins this one about her parents in the same way, beginning with a description of their telling her about their plans for their death, when they want to be cremated and given back to the earth. Around this threatened ending, she orchestrates various disconnected memories and anecdotes of family history that reveal the parents' enormous vitality. Her father, were he to contemplate the end of the world, would "continue to cultivate his garden . . . the proper activity [of mankind] is digging." Her mother, at seventy-three, nimbly climbs onto the roof for its annual, ritual sweeping, and comes back down with the dropping of a fisher, rare in that part of the country, and greeted as a miracle. The story woven by the daughter from the family narrative provides the next episode, the "suite," in this ongoing process, implying a form of eternal life.

This is a book about origins, about the origins of storytelling and the storytelling of origins, both family and narrative genealogy. Atwood is aware here that the creation of narrative is an ongoing process in life, as in art. Indeed, there are few barriers between them. "[Her] own house is divided in two: a room full of paper, constantly in flux, where process, organicism, and fermentation rule and dustballs breed; and another room, formal in design, rigid in content. . . ." While in the other books we have examined, this formal design imposed by books has dominated, and stories have come to us as written narrative, distant from and distortion of life, in *Bluebeard's Egg* life and art are interchangeable parts of a whole. For there are narratives of life, just as there are narratives of art. Life itself can be organized into formal patterns, as the narrative makes clear. The parents arrange themselves to tell the daughter the story of the purchase of the funeral urns, framing their words so as to give them more than ordinary meaning: "They

both have an air of suppressed excitement, like children waiting for a grown-up friend to open a present they have wrapped, which will contain a joke." The wrapping metaphor, with its implications of recursive paradigms, further contributes to this framing of an occasion. This family interchange is similar to the concluding one, when the parents are again seated with the daughter, their shared knowledge about their discovery again being something the narrator as reader/listener of the embedded tale must puzzle out: "They both regard me, heads a little on one side, eyes shining with the glee of playing this ancient game, the game of riddles, scarcely able to contain the right answer." These oral storytelling contexts, which provide the material for the written narrative we are reading, are presented mimetically, rather than summarily told. The matter of high art comes from these family exchanges.

Just as art flows from life, so too life may imitate art. The young children walking through the woods reenact a folklore motif, "potentially lost." Their reading has shaped their lives. They are also retracing the steps of Indians, discovering trees that have been blazes. ". . . like most history," as the narrator comments, "this may or may not be true." Whereas the embedded narratives in the earlier books served to underline the moral implications of distortion through fictionalizing, those in "Unearthing Suite" point up the fact that history and story are processes. "Nothing goes on forever," comments the narrator. Just as the parents may one day be resurrected from their ashes scattered on the soil, so too there is only story, continually revised from a new perspective. An embedded narrative, anecdote recounted by a neighbour which the narrator retells to her mother, is a case in point:

One of their neighbours recently took me to task about her.

"Your poor mother," she said. "Married to your father."

"What?" I said.

"I see her dragging her groceries back from the supermarket," she said. (True enough, my mother does this. She has a little cart with which she whizzes along the sidewalk, hair whispering out from her head, scarf streaming, exhausting anyone foolhardy enough to make the trip with her, by that I mean myself.) "Your father won't even drive her."

When I told her this story, my mother laughed.

My father said the unfortunate woman obviously didn't know that there was more to him than met the eye.

The potential for many versions of the same story to coexist is introduced by representing the listener's reactions as well as the story.

IN THE FIRST STORY of the collection, "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother," the narrative chain is initiated by the stories the

mother tells and the narrator rewrites. These are stories about the active woman who had her vitality repressed as a girl and escaped into her unconventional marriage, “rescued from a fate worse than death.” The mother is characterized by adjectives, “quick,” “a blur,” involved in activities like skiing and flying. As a girl, however, her life is more precisely delineated by the imposed order of art, as “a Japanese Haiku: a limited form, rigid in its perimeters, within which an astonishing freedom was possible.” It is with this paradox of freedom in constraint that the narrator is working. The rigid boundaries between art and life, between form and process are blurred here. So too are the limits between creative process and created artifact. For we are always arranging and interpreting experience to come to terms with it. As the narrator comes to realize, there are narrative forms in life which coexist with or precede those of art:

I used to think that my mother, in her earlier days, led a life of sustained hilarity and hair-raising adventure. (That was before I realized that she never put in the long stretches of time that must have made up much of her life: the stories were just the punctuation.)

Here Atwood’s use of parentheses makes us aware of the perceptual process of revision. More fully than in her earlier narratives, Atwood runs frame into embedded narrative, narrative distance decreasing so that the text becomes an alternation of the narrator’s words and the character’s. These two roles are interchangeable, as embedded and frame stories intersect. What is mirrored is the instance of production. The focus is no longer on imitating, but on the past reading activity of listening followed by creative rewriting. By focusing more clearly on the performative contexts and the act of telling/listening, Atwood has moved her narratives in new directions.

Moreover, the stories have the sound of oral narrative, relying heavily on dialogue. Teller and listener interact in the performative context, negotiating meaning conjointly through shared material, as in the traditional oral event. As the narrator says in “Unearthing Suite,” “not all of these things are in the same place at the same time. This is a collective memory.” Collective is the keyword to describe the merging of stories, of teller and listener/writer’s stories, which is most evident in “Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother,” a life story of a mother rewritten by her daughter. The two voices merge in this communal narration. Sometimes one voice interrupts another’s sentence: “When they were young — this can cover almost anything these days, but I put it as seven or eight — my mother and her sister had a tree house . . .” The listener evaluates and amplifies the mother’s narration, interpolating her own remarks. Here the two voices remain separate, because the pronouns separate mother and daughter, teller and writer. At other times the pronoun “I” refers alternately to both in a shared experience. This occurs in the haircutting anecdote, when the mother, in direct discourse explaining how she had her hair bobbed in defiance of her father, says: “So I

went out straight away and had it all chopped off.” The story is developed mimetically, the mother, “who is a good mimic” imitating the sounds of the dentist’s drill “Rrrrr! Rrrrr! Rrrrr! Phtt . . .” while her daughter comments on the effectiveness of the storytelling technique. In indirect discourse then, this daughter writes an interpolated story of how her own long hair was cut off, because her father could not manage to comb it. He too was upset about the hair loss, says the mother in conclusion, “with an air of collusion.” Through the shared experience and the common reactions of men to women’s hair, the two intertwined stories create a complicity between teller and audience. This is how family unity is constructed, through the ritual repetition of such moments that bind members into a common pattern. The effect of such storytelling is radically different from the isolation and misperception effected by the reading of imported tales in both *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*. Stories no longer are a source of alienation, but a means to identity and community.

As the title suggests, “Significant Moments . . .” is a disjointed collection of anecdotes about the mother’s life, offering an encyclopedia of storytelling forms. We are given an inventory of storytelling contexts in which the mother performs, and the impact of her performance is continually evaluated by the listening daughter, who reports to us on the reception of the story as well as on its delivery. One series of performances occurs in the boarding house she lived in when at Normal School, where they had to make their own fun and made “family theatre.” This leads to a story about an unfortunate adventure to kidnap the family cat for one of the performances. It peed on the mother’s skirt, created an embarrassing incident. Most of the stories are comedies, like the theatre, entertainment for a small privileged audience, who are brought closer together through this shared event. As the narrator informs us, her mother is quiet, listening when part of a large group, but this is how she gathers material for new stories. She selects her stories for specific audiences:

There are some stories which my mother does not tell when there are men present: never at dinner, never at parties. She tells them to women only, usually in the kitchen, when they or we are helping with the dishes or shelling peas, or taking the tops and tails off the string beans, or husking corn. She tells them in a lowered voice, without moving her hands around in the air, and they contain no sound effects. These are the stories of romantic betrayals, unwanted pregnancies, illnesses of various horrible kinds, marital infidelities, mental breakdowns, tragic suicides, unpleasant lingering deaths. They are not rich in detail or embroidered with incident: they are stark and factual. The women, their own hands moving among the dirty dishes or the husks of vegetables, nod solemnly.

Opposed to these are stories for general consumption:

When she tells them, my mother’s face turns to rubber. She takes all the parts, adds the sound effects, waves her hands around in the air. Her eyes gleam, sometimes a

little wickedly, for although my mother is sweet and old and a lady, she avoids being a sweet old lady. When people are in danger of mistaking her for one, she flings in something from left field; she refuses to be taken for granted.

Pointedly, the narrator makes clear that there are many facets to her mother's storytelling. It is impossible to pin her down, to fix her in a single representation, a single role, when she is in constant flux. The collage effect of Atwood's text recreates this for the readers. Here the title of Michael Ondaatje's family narrative which blurs the boundaries between fiction and autobiography becomes an appropriate epigraph: "Running in the family."

"Life is like art," the daughter quotes her mother. One story especially illustrates this interpenetration of stories from both realms, an anecdote related by the mother that also involves the daughter, present at the event, but unaware of what was happening. Her only knowledge of this episode of her life is the story her mother tells her.

"We were going down a steep hill," my mother continues, "when a hay wagon pulled out right across the road, at the bottom. Your father put on the brakes, but nothing happened. The brakes were gone! I thought our last moment had come. Luckily the hay wagon continued across the road, and we shot past it, missing it by at least a foot. My heart was in my mouth," says my mother.

I didn't know until afterwards what had really happened. I was in the back seat, making bagpipe music, oblivious. The scenery was the same as it always was on car trips: My parents' heads, seen from behind, sticking up above the front seat. My father had his hat on, the one he wore to keep things from falling off the trees into his hair. My mother's hand was placed lightly on the back of his neck.

Clearly, it is the fiction that makes us real. Large parts of the narrator's life are constructed for her in her mother's fictions, just as all she knows about her mother is conveyed through these stories. What is significant here is the complicity of audience in the telling. As the framing narrative makes clear, these stories about the family's survival are told in order to maintain family feeling and to create a common history. They must be told to create, to perpetuate the family, "otherwise the entire family, individually or collectively, would be dead as doornails." Collectively, teller and listeners share the emotions of the experience, remembered, represented in the teller's words, sufficient "to produce adrenalin, serve to reinforce our sense of gratitude." Through such family narratives, we construct our sense of community.

RATHER THAN ATTACK the false representations which are constructed through tales, as she has done in her earlier works through the ironic contrast between embedded and frame narratives, in *Bluebeard's Egg* Atwood minimizes the distance between the levels in order to focus on the processes of

construction, the constant fictionalizing we engage in as human beings. Experiences happen to us, but we underline them, question them or solidify them into sign by repeating them in anecdotes and stories. They help us make sense of the chaos of our lives, give them pattern and create community. As the daughter remembers the story of her mother's life, ordering the mother's anecdotes she plays in her mother's mythology. As she writes:

We both knew whose idea this was. For my mother, the proper construction to be put on this event is that my brother was a hell-raiser and I was his shadow, "easily influenced," as my mother puts it. "You were just putty in his hands."

"Of course, I had to punish you both equally," she says. Of course. I smile a forgiving smile. The real truth is that I was sneakier than my brother, and got caught less often.

"Proper construction to be put on this event," indeed! As this passage points out, we are continually interpreting, and these interpretations change as our perspective in place and time varies. From the mother's perspective there is one interpretation, from the daughter's another. This story plays on the divergence of perspective, even as it enfolds them both by including such acts of interpretation and revision on the mimetic level, as well as on that of the enunciation. Initial unity is created with the daughter through the mother's communication of her interpretation of the action. But this is later disrupted by the emergence of alternate perspectives. Increasingly the mother's anecdotes of optimism and energy give way to the memories of her morbid daughter. Talking gives way to writing, but there is a matrilineal bond between them. For the daughter's narrative grows naturally out of the mother's. The gap between them is covered by the daughter's written narrative that lovingly retraces the storytelling events, as graph, deferred always from that event, but generated by it.

For the daughter too has begun as a storyteller, her propensity emerging early in life, according to her mother's version of the story of these early years. The relevant anecdote involves an episode at a government tea party in Ottawa, where the daughter took a cookie, sat in the corner and told the doughy rabbit a story. In a juxtaposed segment, when she is older — showing how autobiographical time is superseded by narrative time as we move from story to text levels — the daughter in turn becomes aware that in her stories, the mother is always cast in the role of mother. In fact, as an anecdote near the end of the story reveals, the mother has a private inner life, unknown to the daughter, in which she dreams of being an archaeologist. Writing emphasizes the distant future, from which the narrator will return as "time-traveller from distant space," speaking a language the mother has never heard before. This is the evolutionary process of family narrative. But on the frame level of the story, where the mother's process of fictionalizing, her "mythology," and the daughter's involvement as listener, interpreter, is the represented material, it is the closeness of mother and daughter which is con-

veyed, both participating in these stories my mother told me, the *mise en abyme* of the text we are reading.

At the heart of the difference in the two levels of narrative which intermingle with each other is "a difference between symbolism and anecdote," as the narrator phrases it. "Listening to my mother, I sometimes remember this." The family narratives of this first story rely heavily on anecdote. As such they are the most common form of oral narrative in our society. Indeed, among these embedded anecdotes, is a type of natural narrative which has been much studied by speech act theorists such as William Labov and Mary Louise Pratt. This is "the time I almost died narrative." The mother uses almost the same words "I remember the time we almost died," to introduce the anecdote about the close accident with the hay wagon. Like fictive discourse, natural narratives operate through a network of assumptions, of appropriate conditions. In drawing on those conditions, indeed in explicitly cataloguing the assumptions of natural narrative in the stories of *Bluebeard's Egg*, Atwood is inviting us as readers to use our knowledge of everyday fictions in order to make sense of the book. We are much less conscious of these conditions which we learned in early childhood than we are of the literary conventions acquired in school. Consequently, our engagement with the stories occurs on a more instinctive level, creating that illusion of greater human understanding constructed by this book.

This is the illusion of orality Atwood creates. The format of the literary stories is that of a collection of minimal narratives in each of which past experience is recapitulated by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the verbal sequence of events that have occurred. The narrative sequence evolves through abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, to coda.²⁵ In the mother's narrative of near death, this form is reproduced with several significant twists. The emphasis on the recollected nature of the experience is reinforced through a summary given by the narrator of the many near death experiences, of which this typical one is being retold. Even though the retelling itself emphasizes the actual dramatization of the event, this form of generalization moves us from anecdote towards symbol. The event comes to "represent" the mother's character, not to enact it dramatically. Also, the coda is summarized by the daughter in the frame story instead of mimetically enacted by the mother in embedded story. Both these changes illustrate the constant interpenetration of the two narrative levels in this story, even as they show how written narratives are elaborations of oral narratives.

"Hurricane Hazel," the second story in this collection, demonstrates this intersection in another way by showing how anecdote becomes symbol. A symbolic reading of the story is prepared by the final words of the first story where it was feared that the girl would return from a distant land, "bearing news of a great disaster." In Toronto folklore, Hurricane Hazel was a once-in-a-lifetime disaster, told over and over again. A form of local legend, it is as common a type of oral

narrative as the family historical anecdotes we have just been discussing, as shown in a recent class assignment in collecting oral narratives. Asked to collect oral history, most student researchers found people keen to talk about the Depression or the Second World War. A significant number of respondents, however, dealt with the relationship to nature, especially to nature out of control. Four or five students collected narratives about Hurricane Hazel which emphasized the surprise element in the event. They focus on details such as pictures of dead animals and destroyed cars and describe the co-operation to help those in difficulty. Atwood's version of this event is very similar to one of the accounts collected by students. Both focus on the perspective of the observer or observers, safe in their houses and unaware of the full extent of the disaster at its height. Both live close to major rivers in Toronto, the Don flowing under Pottery Road which is described in Atwood's version, and the Humber near Long Branch in the other version. The following day they are able to walk out and witness the damaged house and to hear stories of lives lost in the raging flood. Both contrast the wisdom and security of those who have been forewarned, with the improvidence and threat of danger to others.²⁶ In fact, this is the major point in Atwood's anecdote, the one she uses to make Hurricane Hazel into a symbol. As the narrator informs us, this is the first of a series of "atmospherically super-charged break ups" with men she has, and so becomes a typical incident used as a generalization revealing character. It is also the narrator's prudence in staying in that stops her from experiencing the fate of Maggie Tulliver in the *Mill on the Floss*, a book she has been reading at school that year along with *Wuthering Heights*. It is her resistance as reader to plots that has allowed her to grow up to become an author, instead of succumbing to an early death in the throws of nature's violence.

In writing her story, Atwood has exploited the popular nature of such oral anecdotes, by placing Hurricane Hazel in a tradition of oral anecdotes of survival against the forbidding forces of nature. Near the beginning of her narrative, when the family takes up residence in their primitive summer cabin, the narrator summarizes the tales about besting the elements that her father tells them on his return from the north:

All the time we were going around mealtimes and what we would eat at them, he was flying in bush planes into valleys with sides so steep the pilot had to cut the engine to get down into them, or trudging over portages past great rocky outcrops, or almost upsetting in rapids. For two weeks he was trapped by a forest fire which encircled him on all sides, and was saved only by torrential rains, during which he sat in his tent and toasted his extra socks at the fire, like weiners, to get them dry. These were the kinds of stories we heard after he came back.

The father is the hero in these embedded tales of encounters with nature, as he proves once more against Hurricane Hazel. But these stories of the father save the daughter too. Insisting that "anybody who goes out on a night like this must be

crazy," she quotes her father's words to her boyfriend Buddy, in reply to his demand that she prove her love for him, by going out as promised the night of the storm. This marks the end of the relationship, and begins the behavioural pattern the hurricane comes to symbolize. Through the repetition of her father's words and the imitation of his heroic stories, the daughter casts herself as hero in the frame text. A new story emerges now, one which plays on the equation of strong women and natural disaster, for the girl wreaks havoc in Buddy's life. The sexist implications of this narrative are underlined by both the naming power of the father in the story and the names given such natural disasters in our society. A frequent feminist attack these days makes us aware that the hurricane might well be named Henry.

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N TERMS OF ITS technique, through its use of embedded anecdotes and legends, this text relates oral narratives that have the power to create or undo community. Thus it is linked to the framing first and last texts in this collection. On its mimetic level, however, it is linked to the title story. As in "Bluebeard's Egg," we read about the relationship of a seemingly super-intelligent woman ("I even knew what a Zygote was," she says) and her plodding boyfriend, Buddy. She is learning Greek from her brother, while Buddy speaks in monosyllables and writes love letters in clichés like "that's the way the cookie crumbles." The text we read is her reminiscence, an episode in her life history, that enfolds oral anecdotes. On this level it is about the differing linguistic capacities of men and women, about the ways in which they construct fictions to explain each other, fictions in which they place themselves as heroes of the action. This becomes clear in the final paragraphs when we hear that Trish, in switching allegiances from the narrator to Buddy, has begun telling stories "about how I'd lived in a cowshed all summer." The story differs according to the narrator's role in the events it relates. "Hurricane Hazel" shows how repetition creates a pattern which becomes personal mythology and then symbol. Over the years, after a series of emotional ruptures coincident with upheavals in nature, the narrator comes to see herself as a hurricane. Presented in terms of natural imagery, the process is thus *constructed* to seem both inevitable and natural.

That her representation of the process of construction of these symbols, rather than of the final product, has led Atwood to see them as less rigid and threatening than they appeared in her early fictions is borne out by the final story, one which in its attempt to delineate the differences between father, mother, and child, bears marked resemblances to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Father is characterized by his love of projects, mother by their completion and the unremitting activity to ensure this. Unlike Woolf's, Atwood's text leaves us without a seamless

web of prose. The embedding of anecdotes reveals how these personalities construct each other and are being constructed by the narrator. Her construction of them is evident in her use of the dock, as central focus for a series of perspectives conveyed during her contemplation of darkness. She finds the dock "fit subject for meditation." Her father sees the dock as something he built that needs repairs, while her mother sees the dock as a place from which to launch canoes. The dock does not emerge as a symbol dominating the flow of anecdotes, but rather as the brief pause in the flow of remembered incidents, when it is no longer process but product that is being represented. It is a moment when the relative perspectives coalesce. In this, the dock is similar to the sunrise of the title of the penultimate story in the collection, which is described as "an effect of light caused by the positions of two astronomical bodies in relation to each other." From the vaster fictions of scientific relativity, the dock is but a small "accident of language," in the flux of experience. In *Bluebeard's Egg*, Atwood has reached this broader fiction which enfolds several layers of embedded narratives within it. From this cosmic perspective all stories are relative, none having any special claims to status as truth, all being equally valid and good, as long as they build community.

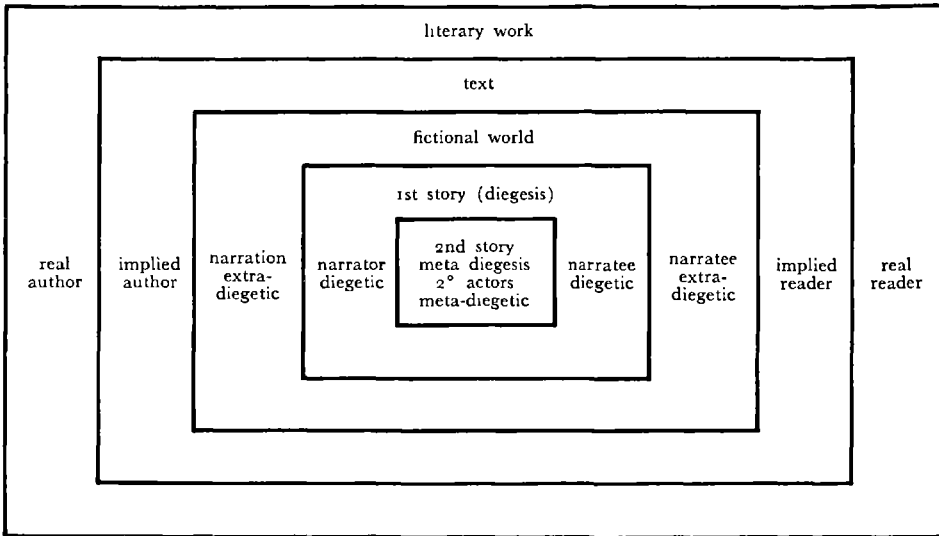
Inevitably, I too have constructed a pattern on this experience of reading Atwood's book, for there are many texts in this collection I have not mentioned. I have taken an approach that is "framed" by the implied author in her positioning of the texts and in the title of the book, her means of directing our reading. Moreover, the focus on the act of enunciation, the attention given to the processes of reading/listening and creative transposition of the material into writing within the texts, has instructed me to rewrite the story from my own perspective. The oral anecdote is important within these frame stories in representing such processes of active making sense of our world. But it is also the inclusion of the anecdotes on the narrated level that reproduces for readers the experience of the narrator when we all become listeners of the same stories.

The pleasure I have in reading Atwood's book stems from the stimulation of my memory of listening to the stories of my childhood, told now from a slightly different perspective. In my family too, there is a story about "the time I almost died," when the brakes of the car failed on the way down a hill. This is told in conjunction with the events of my birth. My mother relates a story of losing her unmentionables, picking them up from the pavement and putting them into the pocket of her best suit. Until reading *Bluebeard's Egg*, I had thought these stories which had shaped my sense of self to be unique to my family treasury of narrative. Now I learn that they are part of the experience of a broader human community, and that our family is not so different as we might have thought. My complicity with the narrator is confirmed through the perspectives we share when we retell the events of 15 October 1954, the night of Hurricane Hazel. In encouraging such complicity between the implied author and reader, Atwood has moved away

from her earlier narratives in which she used the folk narratives of other cultures to invite our critical distance from the unfolding narrative. In privileging oral anecdotes of local experience over written narratives from other cultures, Atwood favours the richness and variety of experience over the exercise of controlling limits and boundaries.

NOTES

- ¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association Toronto, 1 April 1984.
- ² Frank Davey's paper was read at Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures, Guelph, 5 June 1984.
- ³ David McFadden, "Writer's Block: The Life of a Writer in Residence in a Nuclear Age," *Quill & Quire*, January 1984, p. 24.
- ⁴ Carole Carpenter, *Many Voices: A Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and Their Role in Canadian Culture*. Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies. Paper No. 26. Mercury Series (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1979) and lectures given at York University. See also my article "Oral Literature in English," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1985), pp. 1331-32.
- ⁵ For detailed analyses of these works see "The Oral Tradition and Contemporary Fiction," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, nos. 7/8 (Summer 1978), pp. 46-62, and "The Tale of a Narrative: Antonine Maillet's *Don l'Original*," *Atlantis* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1979), pp. 51-69.
- ⁶ Barry Dane (John Logan), "National Literature," *The Week* 1884, quoted in Carl Ballstadt, ed., *The Search for English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 117.
- ⁷ Octave Crémazie, from a letter of 29 January 1867 in his *Oeuvres complètes* (Montreal, 1882), p. 40. My translation.
- ⁸ This is a term of Richard Dobson. It has been applied to Laurence's *The Diviners* by Laurel Doucette in a paper read at the meetings of the Canadian Folklore Society, Halifax, May 1981.
- ⁹ Margaret Atwood, "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction," in *The Canadian Imagination*, David Staines, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 102-04.
- ¹⁰ Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).
- ¹¹ My analysis of embedded narratives follows Jaap Lintvelt, "Modèle discursive du récit encadré: rhétorique et idéologie and les *Illustres Français* de Robert Challe," *Poétique* 41 (1980), pp. 352-65. My translation.



- ¹² Here I am following the lead of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in *Narrative Fictions Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983) p. 3, in her translation of Gérard Genette's "histoire," "récit" and "narrative": "Story designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text . . . , together with the participants in these events. Whereas 'story' is a succession of events, 'text' is a spoken or written discourse that undertakes their telling. . . . The act or process of production is the third aspect — narration." Story has the same meaning as *diegesis* which is defined by a maximum of the information in contrast to *mimesis* which has the opposite relationship. Gérard Genette. *Narrative Discourse*. Jane E. Lewin, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 166.
- ¹³ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: Paperjacks, 1973), p. 129. All further references to this novel from this edition.
- ¹⁴ This is an example of *prolepsis* as outlined by Genette, p. 40.
- ¹⁵ Marius Barbeau, and Michael Hornyansky, *The Golden Phoenix and Other Canadian Fairy Tales* (Toronto: Oxford, 1958).
- ¹⁶ For development of this tradition, see Carole Gerson's article, "Margaret Atwood and Quebec: A Footnote on *Surfacing*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1 no. 1 (Winter 1976), pp. 115-19.
- ¹⁷ Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Surfacing: Amerindian Themes and Shamanism," in *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System*. Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir, eds. (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1983), pp. 91-111.
- ¹⁸ I have studied the canoe quest motif in *Surfacing* in more detail elsewhere, "Paddling Our Own Canoe: Women and Words." For the most complete development of this myth in Quebec literature, see Jack Warwick's *The Long Journey* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970). At the time when she was writing *Surfacing*, Atwood was teaching a course on Canadian/Quebec literature with Jack Warwick at York University.
- ¹⁹ Colette Dowling, *The Cinderella Complex* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982). This book describes women's learned anticipation of magical metamorphoses to solve

life problems. For more detail, see my essay "My (M)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 26 (1983), p. 13-44.

- ²⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1977), p. 251. All further references are to this edition.
- ²¹ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 265.
- ²² Margaret Atwood, *Bluebeard's Egg* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983). All further references are to this edition.
- ²³ Linda Hutcheon, "From Poetic to Narrative Structures: The Novels of Margaret Atwood" in *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System*, p. 21.
- ²⁴ "Fitcher's Bird," in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, New York: Pantheon, 1944, pp. 216-20. Lines Atwood quotes directly from this tale include: "'Preserve this egg for me, and carry it about with you everywhere; for a great misfortune [will] follow from its loss'" (p. 157). "'Since you have gone into the room against my will,' he said, 'you shall go back into it against your own'" (p. 157). "'You have [passed] the test', he said (to the third sister.) 'You shall be my bride.' [...] The wizard no longer had any power over her, and had to do whatever she (asked)" (p. 158).
- ²⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p. 45.
- ²⁶ Carol Davies, "Hurricane Hazel in Retrospect," Paper submitted to Douglas Freake, Humanities 1200, York University, 4 November 1983.

POETRY READING IN A (DIVIDED) CONFERENCE ROOM

Anne Swannell

You want to open
and reveal the pearl you've cloistered
in your papery shell,
its edges curved and rippled
from the washing of this water,
from your own being in these words,
the salty flesh that is you
in this laminated world you've made:
the irritation
the revolving of the particle