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# **From Retrospective to Reconstruction of the “Auto/biographical” Subject in *Cat’s Eye* by Margaret Atwood**

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The paper deals with the problem of the subject in the novel *Cat’s Eye* by Margaret Atwood. In her attempt to represent the female subject in the text Atwood tests and redefines the concept of subject and the practice of autobiography.

The middle-aged painter Elaine Risley tries to define herself through the narration of her life. It is a double narrative – a version based on her memories and a version based on her paintings. The paintings as well as the memories refer to the themes we would like to discuss in the paper: imitation, self-erasure, self-splitting, self-mutilation, doubling, self-recovery. *Cat’s Eye* dramatizes the limitations and unreliability of human memory and the effects of time upon the human subject.

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## **1 Introduction. Genre and “Auto/biographical” Narrative Technique**

*“Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as I’m only doing an imitation of a girl. But I soon get more used to it.” (Atwood 1990: 52)*

The paper deals with a double-narrative – a version based on her memories and a version based on her paintings. The paintings as well as the memories refer to the themes introduced in the sub-chapters of the paper: time and imitation, self-erasure, self-splitting, self-mutilation and self-recovery.

It is not easy to label Margaret Atwood’s text as an autobiography, she plays with allusions to autobiography, fictional autobiography and Künstlerroman as well. Atwood tests and redefines the concept of subject and the practice of autobiography.

According to Tzvetan Todorov (1990: 25), “autobiography is defined by two identifications: the author’s identification with the narrator, and the narrator’s identification

with the chief protagonist.” The second identification is clear, the first is more subtle as this text does not necessarily indicate the reality of the author, who has a civil status, despite the fact that the text is full of elements from the writer’s life.

In addition, *Cat’s Eye* can be read as a ‘retrospective’ of Atwood’s earlier works employing autobiographical features, e.g. *Surfacing* which takes a form of a first-person narration of a female artist with autobiographical references to Atwood’s childhood and especially to the same parent and brother figures as in *Cat’s Eye*; the very same ravine traumatic experience in Toronto appears in *Lady Oracle*. *Cat’s Eye* re-shapes the strategies of autobiographical ‘I’ into a more satisfying image of the female subject by disrupting the fixed distinctions using a ‘narrated’ version and a ‘visual’ version presented through the paintings.

*Cat’s Eye* is a self-portrait of the painter as a girl, teenager, young woman and middle-aged successful artist. Elaine Risley returns to Toronto where she grew up to attend the vernissage of her first retrospective exhibition of paintings. She recollects her past, visits places of her memories and painfully realizes what she has forgotten.

The narrator’s voice is confident and calm even when talking about the moments of terror and pain. But the recording subject remains elusive, her position is the position of a visitor of the gallery as none of her paintings represent her totalized ‘self’ but become riddles provoking different explanations: “Because I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have came out of me. I am what’s left over” (Atwood 1990: 409).

The structure of the text seems to move forward chronologically from the past up to the fictional present in Toronto, but the events are not organized in a strictly causal nor chronological order. Instead, the scenes are fragmented and bound by emotions and associations. The leit-motifs, i.e. a marble cat’s eye, the Lady of Perpetual Help – do not lead to explanations of her past or present and her future, because the past coexists in the present. The leit-motifs and associations only restore a conscious awareness of what has been forgotten.

The narrative principle of the novel is constructed on the Contents page – the chapter titles correspond to the names of paintings and thus they create another intertextual layer of the text. The cyclical, iterative and layered narrative reveals gaps that ask the reader to participate. Elaine remains a slippery subject: “I vary. I am transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty-five, others like a sprightly fifty. So much depends on the light, and the way you squint” (Atwood, 1990: 5). The double-narrative based on the paintings and memories depends on the interpretation as well.

## 2 Time and Imitation

“*Time has gone on without you.*” (Atwood 1990: 171)

As readers, we witness the effect time has upon the world of Elaine. She is located in the fictional present; however, her subject exists as an accumulation of past moments. Her future endlessly becomes present and in turn it becomes past. What Elaine has forgotten draws her ‘present self’ from the ‘past self’. There are examples in the text where she is not able to recognize herself and thus various images of her self are fractured and separate.

I find my photo album with the black pages [...] Stuck into it with the black triangles there are pictures I can’t recall taking. For instance, there are several pictures of what

look like large boulders, beside a lake. Underneath is printed, in white pencil: *Daisy. Elsie*. It's my writing, but I don't remember printing this. (Atwood 1990: 203)

Time passing means that her life has become layered and her subject has become multiple. As a subject to time, then, Elaine is a composition, a construction of an external form that varies and takes the form of semblance and imitation. On the other hand, various characters who play a role in the narrative have a strong influence over her and she learns to use disguises and imitate socially acceptable behaviour. These disguises and masks act similarly to the effects of time upon the dislocation of her subject and help the dynamics of multiplication and social construction of her female subject.

### **3 The Aspect of Gazing. Self-splitting and Self-mutilation**

*"I have said, Look. I have said, I see."* (Atwood 1990: 404)

Elaine is controlled by her friends if she fits the stereotypical representations of women. "Stand up straight! People are looking!" Carol is in my classroom, and it's her job to report to Cordelia what I do and say all day." (Atwood 1990: 120) The watching guarantees that the girl occupies her fixed place in the imagined hierarchy. But it has also broader implications. The watching is done by the institutions of mass culture such as women's magazines. The magazines Carol, Grace and Cordelia are obsessed with, show pictures of women doing something they are supposed to do and should not do. There is an icon turned toward the female readers: "This is a Watchbird watching you" (Atwood 1990: 138). These images of women fix the traditional stereotypes.

A stereotype involves the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits [...] Through the operation of power a stereotype marks the boundaries between the 'normal' and the 'abjected,' 'us' and 'them'. (Barker, 2000: 248)

And Elaine wants to be normal, she dreams about a "normal" house and "normal" parents.

"Look" always means someone who gazes and judges and someone who is being gazed at and judged. On the other hand, the person that is being looked at is somehow responsible for the consequences. There is always a danger of "making a spectacle of yourself". In this relation the case of a little girl molested and murdered in a ravine can be mentioned. "It's as if this girl has done something shameful, herself, by being murdered" (Atwood 1990: 241). As if it was female responsibility to control the look. The responsibility to control the look is relevant to Cordelia's case. The girl is somehow a wrong person in the eyes of her father; she does not fit and she fails his expectations. In this relation we can refer to Luce Irigaray:

The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) "subject" to reflect himself, to copy himself. Moreover, the role of "femininity" is prescribed by this masculine specula(riza)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to woman's desire [...] (Warhol and Herndl 1997: 367)

Similarly to Cordelia, who tries to meet her father's expectations, Elaine wants to improve and please her friends.

“Look at yourself! Just look!” Her [Cordelia's] voice is disgusted, fed up, as if my face, all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far” (Atwood 1990: 158). The goal of this gaze is to control and to call for improvement. Elaine wants to please her oppressors, she is trying hard to fit the stereotypical forms and later she does everything to meet the expectations of men. She remains the subject to being ‘improved’. “‘You should wear purple dresses,’ says Josef. ‘It would be an improvement.’” (Atwood, 1990: 304). Elaine employs lipsticks, beige wool suits, silk scarves to construct her femininity. Particularly relevant, in this respect, is the concept of feminine masquerade according to Luce Irigaray (quoted in Butler's *Gender Trouble*): “In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything” (Butler 1999: 60). It is not only the masquerade what helps Elaine to remain “on the market”, but she also adopts a role of a caring wife when she is with her future husband.

The text is full of obsessive references to mirrors and reflected images of the self. However, the mirror is the instrument of aggressive power struggle. There is only one way to resist the gaze and it is the gaze back, or outstaring, a version of an eye for an eye. She learns how to reverse the direction of the gaze. The tactic is involved to control and dominate. But to have a control means to erase the other subject: “So, Cordelia. Got you back. Never pray for justice, because you might get some. [...] You're dead, Cordelia. No I'm not. Yes you are. You're dead. Lie down” (Atwood 1990: 414). This power struggle involves a need for domination, the weaker subject is in danger of being erased, and being turned to a powerless object with no value. The tormentor controls the gaze; the victim is being gazed at.

She felt the same negation of herself when Cordelia was telling her to “tell something for herself”. Cordelia had an ability to make Elaine think as if she did not exist. “Cordelia, I think. You made me believe I was nothing” (Atwood 1990: 199). These extreme feelings of self-erasure are manifested by Elaine's self-punishing and self-mutilating tendencies; she peels the skin off her feet, gnaws the cuticles off from around her fingernails to punish herself for the lack of backbone and social awkwardness. Later these self-splitting tendencies intensify and Elaine learns to faint discovering she can watch her own body. Self-splitting separation of her subject and her body is later substituted by repression of her memories. It helps her to save the fake sense of coherence and completeness.

According to Lacan, we begin to construct a sense of self by looking in the mirror (real or imagined). The ‘mirror phase’ is the moment when we first recognize ourselves in a mirror. On the basis of this (mis)recognition (not the self, but an image of the self) the person begins to see her/himself as a separate individual. It means, as both subject (self that looks) and object (self that is looked at). “We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image [...]” (Rice and Waugh 2002: 191). The ‘mirror phase’ heralds the moment of entry into an order of subjectivity Lacan calls the imaginary: it is the realm of images in which we make false identifications. And by the misidentifications we support a fictive sense of the unitary and coherent subject. As for Elaine, she misidentifies herself with the stereotypes and her amnesiac image of herself and thus she constructs a fictive version of herself that protects her.

#### 4 Memory, Doubling and Self-recovery

“[...] she looks up and there's the burned one looking back at her.” (Atwood 1990: 211)

Another strategy to self-protection is avoiding girls and discovering that 'boys are her allies'; Elaine does not want to belong to the category of women because women "[...] pass hard judgments, unlike the purblind guesses of men [...]" (Atwood 1990: 378-379). She prefers to exist in the gap as 'an unfinished woman', in the gap between her forgotten bad times and conscious painful memories. Creating a discontinuity with the past, she is "happy as a clam: hard-shelled, firmly closed" (Atwood 1990: 201); moreover, when she finds out that her marriage is a failure, she flees from Toronto to Vancouver. And it is Toronto which "still has a power; like a mirror that shows only the ruined half of your face" (Atwood 1990: 410) when she returns back as an "eminent painter".

In the city of her childhood, Elaine searches for Cordelia. "But which Cordelia? [...] the one before, or the one after? There is never only one, of anyone" (Atwood 1990: 6). Cordelia invents and reinvents herself and is constructed not only through her own actions but by Elaine as well. Cordelia is perceived as pastiche, as an imitation. "She's mimicking something, something in her head, some role or image that only she can see" (Atwood 1990: 244). As Elaine's brother used to say: Cordelia has a tendency to exist. This implies that she is a pure simulacrum, an identical copy without an original; she "has no relation to any reality whatsoever [...]" (Baudrillard 1994: 6). Cordelia copies and imitates her sisters, the women in the magazines, the famous heroines from her favourite plays. She acts and reproduces what she thinks she is supposed to say or do. Elaine's double is a mere simulacrum.

The text is full of allusions to literary Doppelgänger characters, e.g. the story about two sisters, a pretty one and one who has a burn face. Only the mirror shows the "true face". There is also another reference to old fables about the twins: "each of whom has been given half a key" (Atwood 1990: 411). The two halves of the face and the two halves of a key Elaine needs to recover herself. She needs to be given her reflection back:

She will have her own version. I am not the centre of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give her back. (Atwood 1990: 411)

Her desire for a complete, unified and coherent subject represents the humanist need for one true 'I'.

## **6 Conclusion. Self-recovery**

*"I look into it and see my life entire."* (Atwood 1990: 398)

Elaine recovers and reconstructs her subject only when she accepts the otherness, her multiplicity and incompleteness. "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia" (Atwood 1990: 227). By the disruption of the category dominant/submissive, tormentor/victim Atwood challenges the established cultural and sexual norms. If the girl wants to achieve her independence of the demanding 'tormentors' (friends, Mrs Smeath, men) she must assimilate will-to-power.

Her amnesia involves the recollection of something she has lost, but Toronto unexpectedly means a move beyond the rigidified, 'hard-shelled' perspective. Elaine has dared to look back and suddenly she is able to see Cordelia not as her tormentor but as a lost child and we read: "I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*" (Atwood 1990: 419). By seeing Cordelia as a victim, she is able to accept her own multiplicity.

The desire for the control of 'the gaze' is compromised to the egalitarian coexistence of gazing and being gazed at. The reconstruction of the subject means acceptance of both. As Hutcheon states: "Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion" (Hutcheon, 2000: 61). Elaine can recover and reconstruct her subject only when she is able to take control of the gaze as well as being gazed at.

From the retrospective of Elaine's paintings and memories we have come to the reconstruction and self-recovery of her "auto/biographical" subject. In the course of the paper we have discussed various aspects of the problem of the subject related to the book *Cat's Eye*: imitation, memory, self-splitting, self-erasure, doubling.

We have also analyzed how Atwood's novel challenges the mode of autobiography. By the multiple modes of representation, Atwood has paradoxically exposed the limits of autobiography and unreliability of human memory. And this process and construction, as well as the effects of time upon human subject, help the main protagonist to reconstruct her multiple subject.

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