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Dark Stories: Poet-Audience Relations and the Journey Underground in Margaret Atwood's *The Door* and Other Works

PAUL HUEBENER

The story is in the dark. — Atwood, *Negotiating* (176)

MARGARET ATWOOD HAS often expressed a self-conscious preoccupation with the tensions involved in the writing process — with the nature of authorial identity, with the writer's negotiations with truth, and with the enthralling yet treacherous relationship between the writer and the audience. In 1976, thinking through the purpose and difficulties of writing, she wrote that “no good writer wants to be merely a transmitter of someone else's ideology . . . ; the aim of writing is to create a plausible and moving imaginative world, and to create it from words. . . . Writing [unlike politics] tends to concentrate more on life, not as it ought to be, but as it is, as the writer feels it, experiences it” (*Second* 203). The curious paradox inherent in this description — that writing creates imaginative worlds but, at the same time, focuses “on life, not as it ought to be, but as it is” — means that just as the writer is trying to negotiate a working relationship with an audience invested in ideologies and political positions, she must also cope with complex authorial tensions of her own. This preoccupation is by no means unique to Atwood, though it surfaces again and again in her body of work, which spans several decades. Many of her fictional narrators and poetic speakers identify themselves as writers and poets, and struggle with the implications of the fact that writing is imaginative, yet tied to truth; distinct from politics, yet tied to the world of the writer's experience; solitary and relatively autonomous, yet tied to audience desires.

Beginning with a survey of her earlier works, and focusing on her latest book of poetry, *The Door* (2007), I investigate how Atwood delineates these treacherous relationships. Among the self-conscious reflections on authorial tensions that are scattered throughout her works of fiction and non-fiction alike, it is possible to identify several recurring tropes. She persistently describes the writing process in terms of situated

performance for a particular audience, mediation between the seen and the unseen, and the doubleness of authorial identity. While each of these concepts, on its own, opens productive avenues of interpretation, it is through exploring the interactions between them that Atwood's work becomes particularly intriguing.¹ I argue that *The Door* draws especially from Atwood's own commentary about the writing process in her non-fiction work *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), and that by casting the poetic project as a voyage into a dark underworld — a voyage all people take in one form or another — the poems in this volume develop a subtle yet important case for complicating normative understandings of the poet and the audience. Even while it ponders the split identity of the poet and the tensions involved in the poet-audience relationship, *The Door* problematizes the assumption that there can be a clear distinction between the writer and the audience, and builds on the assertion made in Atwood's earlier works — that the problems of managing authorial identity and public personae are not particular to writers or famous people at all. To understand how *The Door* takes up and builds upon these metaphors of performance, mediation, and doubleness, it is worth briefly tracing their recurrence in Atwood's earlier works.

In her poem "True Stories" (1981), Atwood engages questions of truth and audience desire, explaining to her silent listener that the desire for a true story is misplaced. She writes:

Don't ask for the true story;
why do you need it?

It's not what I set out with
or what I carry.

What I'm sailing with,
a knife, blue fire,
luck, a few good words
that still work, and the tide.

.....

The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you
need it? Don't ever

ask for the true story. (*True Stories* 9-11)

The poet here carries not “the true story,” but a collection of useful items for interacting with the world: a cutting tool, magic, luck, language, and provocative questions. But while these items suggest that the poet is more a shaper of reality than a vehicle of truth, she is also “sailing with . . . the tide,” following a path set out by worldly forces beyond her control. She possesses impressive creative powers, yet the direction of her voyage is determined by the waters in which she finds herself. Like the tide in which she drifts — a shifting, immense force that is both predictable and volatile — the “true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue / after all.” At the same time, she makes the best of her failure to possess the truth by explaining that no one in his right mind would want such a thing as truth in the first place. Reality is cruel, she says, and encountering it directly will do more harm than good; this is a subtle, manipulative piece of logic.

One of the more notable variations on this theme occurs in Atwood’s short story “Happy Endings,” which subjects the characters John and Mary to various plot lines to see where the story might end up. Sometimes their lives are problem-free, sometimes miserable, but each possible plot ends in their deaths. “You’ll have to face it,” Atwood writes, “the endings are the same however you slice it. Don’t be deluded by any other endings, they’re all fake . . . The only authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and Mary die*” (*Murder* 40). Here again the truth is unpalatable, but this time the writer knows exactly what the truth entails and calls for the reader to acknowledge it as well; anything else would be delusion.

Authorial negotiations with the audience become important, as well, in Atwood’s novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000) when Iris, listening to Alex’s story about a fantastical world, complains that his ending is too pessimistic. “I like my stories to be true to life,” he replies, “which means there have to be wolves in them. Wolves in one form or another. . . . All stories are about wolves. All worth repeating, that is. Anything else is sentimental drivel” (436). Still, Alex wavers back and forth between including wolves in the story (in the forms of murder, betrayal, and unhappiness) and trying to please Iris with romance and heroic escapes. One senses here Atwood’s longstanding frustration with genre writings such as romances, spy thrillers, and, as she put it in 1981, “all the other Escapelands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth” (*Second* 393). The complex truth does not mean non-fiction but fiction

that is, as Alex puts it, true to life. Being a writer means asking, "What kind of world shall you describe for your readers? The one you can see around you, or the better one you can imagine? If only the latter, you'll be unrealistic; if only the former, despairing" (333). Like Alex, Atwood leans toward the idea that writing is "a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling. It is a naming of the world. . . . The writer *bears witness*" (348).

Alex's insistence on wolves contrasts with another of Atwood's fictional storytellers, *Lady Oracle's* Joan Foster, whose costume gothics pander to "the desire, the pure quintessential need of my readers for escape, a thing I myself understood only too well" (36). While acknowledging the shortcomings of her work, Joan defends herself by saying, "I dealt in hope, I offered a vision of a better world, however preposterous. Was that so terrible?" (38). For Atwood, stories that are worth listening to must acknowledge the anxieties of human existence, yet audiences (or writers) who would prefer to focus on objects of desire put the story in a tight spot. The question of how terrible it is for the writer to give up artistic ground to please her audience is one that Atwood has taken up many times, and her responses to the frustrations involved in the literary performance of truth or fantasy range from the anxious to the sardonic. The complexities of these internally conflicted responses become a central focus in *The Door*.

The second issue of concern — the authorial mediation between the seen and the unseen — Atwood explores most often through the metaphor of a journey to the underworld. *Negotiating with the Dead* gives a detailed explanation of this journey. The book's title refers to the mediation that the writer must perform with the below-the-ground, which, as the symbolic (and archeological) site of the past, is also the site of the dead. She argues that "*all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality — by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (156). Following Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Atwood finds "the underworld journey simply a precondition of being a poet, . . . the one who can bring the knowledge held by the Underworld back to the land of the living, and who can then give us, the readers, the benefit of this knowledge" (173-74). The underground for Atwood is the site not only of knowledge but also of riches, excitement, the loved, the lost, and various other imaginative treasures: "wealth of every kind flows from the invisible world to the vis-

ible one” (168). “Because the dead control the past,” she concludes, “they control the stories, and also certain kinds of truth. . . . So if you are going to indulge in narration, you’ll have to deal, sooner or later, with those from previous layers of time. Even if that time is only yesterday, it isn’t now. It isn’t the *now* in which you are writing” (178).

Atwood has used this metaphor extensively; her 1970 book of poems, *Procedures for Underground*, is an early example. In the eponymous poem she writes about visiting those who live in

the country beneath
 the earth . . .

 from them you can learn
 wisdom and great power,
 if you can descend and return safely.

 . . . those from the underland
 will be always with you, whispering their
 complaints, beckoning you
 back down . . . (25)

In “For Archeologists,” she describes early cave drawings as

. . . the link between
 the buried will and the upper
 world of sun . . .

 existing still in us
 as fossil skulls

 . . . waiting
 for the patient searcher to find them
 exist in caves of the earth. (72)

Frank Davey writes that *Procedures for Underground* uses “a dominant metaphor in Atwood of the hazardous journey to insight and self-knowledge — a descent to Hades” (113). Davey’s multiplicitous descriptions of Atwood’s underground spaces — as places of “repression, the personal unconscious, the classical underworld, as well as the fertile natural world”; as sites of particularly feminine knowledges; as the places of “all the various escapes that the ‘refugee’ can make from alienating rational-

ism” (109-11) — speak to Atwood’s wide-ranging use of this metaphor, even by the early 1980s when Davey was writing.

One of Atwood’s most notable poetic uses of this metaphor, prior to *The Door*, is the poem “Down,” from her 1995 collection *Morning in the Burned House*.

They were wrong about the sun
 It does not go down into
 the underworld at night.
 The sun leaves merely
 and the underworld emerges.
 It can happen at any moment.

It can happen in the morning,
 you in the kitchen going through
 your mild routines.

.....

Old thread, old line
 of ink . . .

.....

where are you leading me this time?

. . . past the cellar,
 past the believable,
 down into the darkness

.....

This is
 the kingdom of the unspoken,
 the kingdom of the unspeaking:

.....

They say:
Speak for us (to whom)

.....

Some say: *Witness*.

There is the staircase,
 there is the sun.

.....

What are you supposed to do
 with all this loss? (72-75)

In many ways, *The Door* can be seen as the sequel, or the continued investigation, of the concerns raised in this poem. At any time — perhaps while washing dishes in the kitchen — the underworld can call to the poet, drawing her down into the cellar of the mind where the silent calls of unseen voices are taken up, made conscious, and brought back to the light of day. As the final lines suggest, what this mediation with the underworld is meant to accomplish may not always be clear at the moment of its enactment, yet the poet is compelled to make the journey. Making loss visible, dredging up memories and fantasies, is inevitable and frequent, and despite the pain involved, the process is fulfilling in its broadening of our understanding.

The archetypal properties of the journey underground are illuminated by Northrop Frye, who traces its recurrence in western literature from the Bible through to the twentieth century. He frames images of vertical orientation in terms of

the central metaphor of the *axis mundi*, a vertical line running from the top to the bottom of the cosmos. . . . To the imagination, the universe has always presented the appearance of a middle world, with a second world above it and a third one below it. We may say, with many qualifications, that images of ascent are connected with the intensifying of consciousness, and images of descent with the reinforcing of it by other forms of awareness, such as fantasy or dream. The most common images of ascent are ladders, mountains, towers and trees; of descent, caves or dives into water. (151)

The power of the dive underwater to reinforce consciousness is a central motif in Atwood's early novel *Surfacing* (1972). However, in the poem "Down," as in *The Door*, Atwood is concerned with the cave and its various incarnations, most commonly the cellar, where other forms of awareness — the unbelievable or imaginative, the past and the unseen, the metaphorical voices of the dead — are experienced and associated cognitively with the "upper" realm of normal reality. Like Atwood, Frye points out that "the lower world is the world of the dead, but not of simple death: there is always some sense of a surviving and continuous form of existence, a *kingdom* of the dead, however vague or insubstantial" (231). Indeed, Atwood's commentary on the writing process echoes Frye's view about the underworld discovery of self-knowledge: "the creative energy involved," he writes, "has produced all literature" (251).

While echoes of Frye often appear in Atwood's writing (she was once his student, and dedicated her famous study of Canadian literature, *Survival*, in part to him), followers of psychoanalysts such as Freud or Jung would remind us that Frye and Atwood are by no means alone in their preoccupation with levels of consciousness and with metaphors of vertical orientation. In *The Poetics of Space*, for instance, Gaston Bachelard usefully theorizes the phenomenology of space, seeking "to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped" (xxxix). Much of his analysis focuses on the verticality of the house and on the way that the height of the attic and the depth of the cellar can be mapped onto different levels of human experience and thought. The cellar, he writes, "is first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths" (18). His description of this dark entity highlights the unknown, mysterious, potentially dangerous aspects of the underground space; it is a space that is both independent, separated from us by its subterranean location, and inextricably connected to the depths of our experience, to the subconscious workings of our minds.

Other trips to the cellar are scattered throughout Atwood's writings. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan tries to conceal her previous identity by prying loose cement away from the foundation of the house she is hiding out in, scraping out a cavity in the dirt, and stuffing a bag of her old clothing inside, "wedging the piece of cement back on top of it" (19). But while the underground may hide things, it does not erase them. Later in the novel, a man from whom Joan thought she had kept her previous identity secret recovers the clothes and, to her horror, returns them to her, "neatly washed and pressed," along with some awkward questions (393). In *Bodily Harm* (1981), Rennie and Lora both spend time imprisoned in cellars as children, and their experiences resonate with them long afterwards. In *Cat's Eye* (1988), Elaine's cat's eye marble is hidden in the cellar, but it preys on her mind until she digs it out and finds her childhood memories flooding back. In *Alias Grace* (1996), it is two dead bodies that are hidden, and then discovered, in the cellar. The title character in Atwood's children's book *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes* (2004) makes various alliteration-infused trips to the root cellar. Atwood even slips the occasional sly reference to the underground as a site of subconscious inspiration into non-fiction pieces that

most readers would take literally. “I’d thought I might take some time off,” she writes about having finished *The Blind Assassin*, “write a few short pieces, clean out the cellar” (*Writing* 284). While the underworld metaphor proves useful to her in many contexts, “Down” in particular anticipates a central assertion of *The Door*, suggesting that it is the ordinary person in the kitchen, not (only) the poet, who can make the sudden journey underground. By switching from second to first person upon entering the underground and then back to second person upon ascent, Atwood suggests that the ordinary person *becomes* the poet during the descent.

The third issue of concern is the doubleness of authorial identity — a problem that Atwood has pondered in various ways over the years. In 1980, she described the issue thus:

The person who wrote the poem I seem to remember composing yesterday no longer exists, and it’s merely out of courtesy to librarians that we put everything with the word *Shakespeare* on the title page into the card file together. Or it would be merely out of courtesy, were it not for the fact that each piece of writing changes the writer. . . . Shakespeare, whoever he was, was also the only creature who went through the experience of writing those plays, one after another after another. (*Second* 344-45)

Much in line with twentieth-century thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, Atwood questions the extent to which a piece of writing can be analytically associated with the writer. The writer is a human being, with all of the fluidities and subjective processes that human life entails, while words printed on a page are static traces; they are separate from the person who once left them there. Even the actual moment of writing is difficult to pin precisely on the author: “writing itself is a process, an activity which moves in time and through time, and it is self-less. . . . In writing, your attention is focused not on the self but on the thing being made” (344). Though of course, like Foucault and Barthes, Atwood does include her name on her published works. She explores the doubleness involved in this process more explicitly in *Negotiating with the Dead*, where she claims that “the mere act of writing splits the self into two” (32), that “all writers are double, for the simple reason that you can never actually meet the author of the book you have just read” (37).

Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* embodies this idea to the point of carica-

ture. Publishing various books under different names in order to keep her increasingly elaborate alternate identities secret from various people, Joan eventually decides that the only way to escape her split selves is to fake her own death — or, at least, the death of the identity that is causing her the most trouble. This act serves as a metaphor for the “death” involved in any act of writing, during which a non-living imprint of the author’s thoughts is recorded in static form. But it functions as well as a type of ironic statement or cathartic release for Atwood herself who, at the time of *Lady Oracle*’s publication, was struggling to cope with her own escalating fame as she encountered unfamiliar versions of herself in magazine articles, reviews, and even interviews. As Atwood’s Joan tells it, “it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me. . . . She wanted to kill me and take my place, and by the time she did this no one would notice the difference. . . . Now that I was a public figure I was terrified that sooner or later someone would find out about me, trace down my former self, unearth me” (304). In one sense, Joan’s celebrity persona is just as true or real as her private persona — it really is her giving the interviews — but at the same time, the intense scrutiny and reproduction of her public persona in various forms of media make her see this aspect of herself as foreign to her and as a threat. In Lorraine York’s words, Joan’s “faked suicide becomes merely the metaphorical telling of her murder at the hands of celebrity” (119). Atwood’s suggestion in *Negotiating with the Dead* that the authorial double plays Mr. Hyde to the author’s Dr. Jekyll (39) is certainly relevant here, as Joan’s “public figure” becomes a dangerous, unstable creature that she both fears and inhabits.

The novel also insists, though, that the problems of fractured or conflicting identities are not peculiar to famous people. Joan’s revelation — “I soon discovered there were as many of Arthur as there were of me” (255) — leads to the later decision that “every man I’d ever been involved with . . . had had two selves” (357). Indeed, it seems that every character has more than one name, more than one identity, more than one role to fill in different times or places. Even the “Bite-A-Bit” restaurant where Joan used to work is refashioned into the trendy “Zerdo’s.” Thus, the problems that become heightened for Joan as she negotiates her authorial identities parallel the issues that everyone has to cope with in negotiating personal identity. Everyone encounters the problems of fame and authorship simply because everyone interacts with other

human beings over time. Joan's thought that someone will "unearth" her former self is terrifying precisely because even this mythical original self is mired in duplicities and fabrications.

Iris in *The Blind Assassin* is an equally cunning manipulator of authorial identity. After her sister Laura's death, Iris publishes a manuscript ostensibly found among Laura's possessions. The resulting novel, which recounts details of a secret love affair, becomes highly controversial and is banned from local stores and libraries. It is only late in *The Blind Assassin* that we learn the truth: Iris wrote the novel and published it under Laura's name to maintain the secrecy of the affair, which had really been hers, not Laura's. The voice of the dead Laura, then, turns out to be that of the ventriloquist; though as Iris claims in retrospect, "you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers" (644). The identity of authors and non-authors alike, Atwood warns, is always more complex than it would seem. Even those who never put pen to paper engender various authorial doubles.

* * *

In *The Door*, Atwood again takes up all of these elements of the writing process: the doubleness of authorial identity, the situated performance of truth for a particular audience, and the necessity of mediating between the seen and the unseen, the lived world and the underworld. And again, her work is most intriguing when it inquires into the interactions between these properties. The speakers in *The Door's* poems, who frequently identify themselves in the first person as poets or oracles, tend to be preoccupied with the disjunctures between what they see as necessary or true — what they find in the dirt and the cellar — and what their listeners want to hear. Their authorial performance anxiety has them questioning their own accounts, musing about the nature of the oracular project, and wondering if they might be better off lying, yielding to their listeners' wishes, or falling into silence. The flow of information from the underworld into the lived present forms the crux of the tension between the poet, with her unlocking of the cellar door, and the audience, who may prefer that the poet's dark knowledge stay hidden. The poet's stories are not just *from* the dark, they contain dark information — insights into decay, ruin, and death. In Frye's words, "the waking consciousness is considerably more docile than the

more repressed forms of awareness, and consequently most structures of authority tend to focus on it and try to make sure that repressed impulses remain repressed" (236). For the poet who is interested not in docility but in truth, the authority structure, often represented here by displeased audiences, poses serious problems.

The first poem in *The Door* to engage explicitly with the occupational hazards of poetry is "The poet has come back . . ." (*The Door* 23; original ellipsis). The poem begins, "The poet has come back to being a poet / after decades of being virtuous instead. / Can't you be both? / No. Not in public" (23). The claim that poetry and virtue are mutually exclusive speaks to the deception involved in the writing process; this is the same deception that Karen Stein notes is self-consciously at work in Atwood's fiction when she creates characters who are themselves writers. "To achieve her aims," Stein writes, "the novelist must often appear to be the innocent recorder at the same time that she is the skilled rhetorician" (163) — a duplicity that is certainly true for poets as well.

Particularly interesting here is the qualification that one cannot be both a poet and virtuous "in public." The limitation that the poet suffers exists only insofar as the poet is visible to the audience; the implication is that the writer, in her private life, could very well be virtuous. Atwood's comment in *Negotiating with the Dead* that all writers are double, that the act of writing splits the self into two, speaks to the same concern identified in the poem: words written on a page exist separately from the person who once wrote them, and the writer — the authorial persona perceived by the public — is no longer the same person "who walks the dog, eats bran for regularity, takes the car in to be washed, and so forth" (*Negotiating* 35). Thus, the act of writing a poem brings the poet into existence; this process is both identified and performed in the title "The poet has come back . . .". This is a dangerous piece of magic, as it separates the mysterious being called the poet from the subjective self as experienced from within. What Atwood calls the "authorial part" of oneself, "the only part that may survive death," the part which "is not flesh and blood, not a real human being" (*Negotiating* 45), is a ghostly by-product of the act of placing words on a page. The trickery involved in this process, even if unintentional or benign, is another sense in which being a poet requires a forfeit of virtue.

Thus, just as this poem brings the poet into existence, it also speaks to the impossibility of *being* a poet, the impossibility of inhabiting the

non-flesh-and-blood authorial self that comes into existence upon writing. By referring to her poet self in the third person and holding her impossible, ghostly split identity up for analysis, Atwood comments on the inability of any writer to meet her public as the author of the work in question. In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood offers Alice's trip through the looking glass as an analogy for the writing process and suggests that the actual moment of writing — the moment in which the self is split in two — is, paradoxically, also the only time when the self resolves itself: "At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time she is all of these at once" (57). This fleeting moment cannot be captured and distributed, yet it is also the moment in which the split self, the non-flesh-and-blood self, is produced, and becomes un-retractable fodder for public reactions, some of which are inevitably hostile. Describing the "deathly spectre" that fame becomes, Lorraine York argues that, for Atwood, negotiating with the dead involves not only the "archetypal descent" but also "negotiating with the living death that is fame" (121) — a task evidently on the poet's mind here as she contemplates the existence of her public double.

Atwood complicates the matter of being a virtuous poet in the middle section of "The poet has come back . . .":

You could [be both], once,
back when God was still thundering vengeance
.....
Then you could . . . hymn the crushed skulls of your enemies
to a pious chorus.

No deferential smiling, no baking of cookies,
no *I'm a nice person really.*" (23)

The matter of being virtuous, then, may have to do mainly with the performed adherence to a set of cultural standards. The Old Testament poet, gaining authority by celebrating enemies' defeats, does not, it would seem, enact higher moral standards than the contemporary poet — who is busy apologizing and handing out cookies — but rather takes on the persona of the virtuous. The inability of today's poet to be virtuous has to do not only with the trickery of split selves but also with the cultural and artistic climate in which she finds herself deprived of

a God-fearing audience that can be awed by displays of authority. This does not excuse the poet from performance but from the performance of piety. The smiles, pleas, and cookies are a performance of their own and tell us as much about the kind of audience that would require such niceties from the poet. Atwood says more about the appeasement of this audience later.

The final lines of the poem work further subtleties into the matters of doubleness and virtue:

Welcome back, my dear.
 Time to resume our vigil,
 time to unlock the cellar door,
 time to remind ourselves
 that the god of poets has two hands:
 the dextrous, the sinister. (23)

While still talking *to* her poet self as though it leads a separate existence from her, Atwood welcomes the poet's return, despite the loss of virtue this return entails. Upon this welcoming, and for the first time in the poem, she partially internalizes the identity of the poet and introduces a first-person perspective with the word "my," which switches immediately to the plural possessive "our" and the reflexive "ourselves"; the writing self is experienced from within, yet retains the doubleness of the plural form.

One of the more interesting aspects of this poem (for the purpose of understanding the writer's relationship to her audience) is that by enacting a sort of one-sided conversation with herself — a monologue that the subjective self speaks to the poet self brought into existence through the act of writing — Atwood implies that the writer is her own audience. Before there are readers, dedications, publications, or critics, there is the human being pressing keys on a keyboard, observing the ghostly imprint of her own doubled self in real time as it splits away from her lived self. The act of writing not only brings the poet into existence; it also brings the audience into existence. (One wonders, then, to what extent the performance of virtue or deference is done for the sake of the writer herself as the first audience to her own words.) While Atwood says in *Negotiating with the Dead* that the writer "is alone while composing," that "writer and audience are invisible to each other" (48, 50), her poem implies that this is not the case. True, "publication changes everything"

by multiplying readers and texts (134), but insofar as the writer is her own audience, to write is always to write “in public.”

The single yet doubled self, symbolized finally in the two-handed “god of poets,” recalls Atwood’s suggestion in *Negotiating with the Dead* that the doubleness of writers can be understood as a relationship that is both parasitic and symbiotic, that “the double may be shadowy, but it is also indispensable” (37). Anticipating her own poem, she writes here that the discussion of doubleness requires “talking about hands — two of them. Dexter and sinister” (37). The words “dextrous,” meaning agile (etymologically, “on the right”) and “sinister,” meaning malicious (etymologically, “left”), map the doubleness metaphor onto the body itself. Just as a human being is a discrete whole whose physically bilateral symmetry and propensity for both good and evil make her a mirror — a reverse image of her own other half — writing is a coherent act that involves two “hands”: the subjective self (admirable for its talents), and the mysterious, duplicitous authorial double. While *Negotiating with the Dead* is less interested in the implications of double-handedness for non-writers, Atwood’s poetry pushes the assertion that doubleness, split identity, and performance are issues not only for writers but for all human beings. Everyone has two hands.

Again, Atwood echoes Frye’s articulation of archetypal images. Tracing the double or doppelgänger motif through western literature, Frye writes that

One aspect of the double of particular interest is the relation between the self as dreamer and the self as — well — dreamee, the main character in the dream. This follows the pattern of an observer and an actor within the same psyche of which other forms are the myths of the conscience, of the guardian angel Any duality deriving from a feeling of conflict within oneself can take a Doppelgänger form: the soul-body one, the good-evil one, the conscious-unconscious one, the subjective and objective side of the personality being a few examples. (266-67)

For Atwood in “The poet has come back . . .,” the poet-identity, which is split away from the subject yet simultaneously experienced from within, is a marked example of the presence of the observer and the actor within the same psyche. The doubleness that the poet’s return engenders is, in Frye’s framework, of the same type as that which can be caused by any sense of inner conflict, and is another indication that while the

authorial doubleness Atwood describes is real, it is not unique to writers. In stories about doubles, Frye writes, “each aspect of the double is necessary to the other one, and . . . to destroy the double is to destroy oneself” (268). As the doubleness of Atwood’s god of poets suggests, the two-handedness of poets and other people may be duplicitous, but it is also essential.

Here as well, in the poem’s last few lines, Atwood invokes the familiar concept of the cellar to indicate what it is that the poet is after. The “vigil,” which involves unlocking the cellar door, implies a wakeful watching over of what is below the ground (though, ominously, the word also recalls the Old Testament poet and hints that the new poet’s job may not be so different after all from “hymn[ing] the crushed skulls of your enemies”). Throughout *The Door*, Atwood repeatedly invokes the cellar and related figures — partially dug gardens (27), “damp grey earth” (36), wells (56), tombs (74), caves and trenches (83), “disturbed earth” (109), and finally, a sparsely described dark underground space (116-17) — all of which serve as sources of the poet’s knowledge or as destinations of a search. Within the context of Atwood’s long-standing usage of the underground motif, the unlocking of the cellar door makes sense as the initial act of the poetic project. It is evident, as well, why she does not specify whether the poet is entering or leaving the cellar; clearly, she must do both (a parallel to the assertion that the poet must have two hands). Earl Ingersoll has pointed out that Atwood often works figuratively with the ambivalence of doorways, which, because they swing in both directions, can indicate opportunity, exile, or both (n. pag.). The dangerous aspects of the poet’s journey make this ambivalence central here, as the door must swing both ways; it must be unlocked for poetry to exist. Without the risky trip to the underworld, the poet would not have the knowledge necessary to be a poet, and without returning she would not be able to commit the live, present-tense act of writing or speaking. As Frye says, “the intensifying of consciousness represented by images of ascent is unintelligible without its dark and invisible counterpart, which diversifies and broadens consciousness with other psychic activities” (232).

For Atwood, to unlock the cellar door is to open the flow of movement and communication between the seen and the unseen; it is to make poetry possible. The dark and invisible counterpart, the authorial double, is able to leave the upper realm of normal consciousness precisely

because it is non-living; in more literal terms, a person is able, through imaginative and creative activity, to access insights that do not form part of her usual and continuous experience. One potential shortcoming of Atwood's underground metaphor now becomes apparent, in that it implies a clear distinction — a doorway — between normal consciousness and imaginative exploration, when these two states may, in fact, be experienced as inextricably intertwined aspects of consciousness itself. Atwood seems aware of this at times — as with Joan Foster's realization that even her so-called former self is a site of contention, that she will never be “a very tidy person” (*Lady* 419); but at other times, she opts for the poetical latitude afforded by the doorway metaphor at the cost of intimating a questionable distinction.

The underground journey is framed somewhat differently in “Sor Juana works in the garden.” Though the poem does not repeat her name outside the title, it re-imagines the seventeenth-century Latin American poet who defended women's rights and was censured by the Catholic church. Like the poet in “The poet has come back . . .,” Sor Juana finds her source material underground. Here, though, the unlocking of the cellar door, in the form of a hole dug in the garden, allows the voices of the underworld to come to the surface whether the poet wants them to or not. Describing the dangers of digging into the earth with a “portentous trowel,” Atwood warns, “You ought to have worn rubber / gloves” (*Door* 27), the line-break after “rubber” calling to mind the slang term for condoms. But the poet has no such protective barrier, and, orgasmically, the words erupt:

. . . Your arms hum, the hair
stands up on them; just one touch and you're struck.
It's too late now, the earth splits open,
the dead rise, purblind and stumbling
.....
 your exploding
syllables litter the lawn. (27-28)

Just as the body momentarily escapes a person's control during orgasm, the authorial mediation with the underworld creates a moment in time during which the poet seems to split away from the subjective self. And yet, despite the initial distinction between the above-ground and the underground, the creative impulse characterized by the rising dead and exploding syllables does not remain separated by a doorway or the

ground but joins the present world of unfolding events. The poet's act of digging into the earth serves metaphorically as a reaching into herself, an act which is conscious yet releases unconscious revelations. The problematic distinction between normal and creative consciousness is tempered by bringing one realm into the other.

Ultimately, of course, there is no protection against the final journey to the underworld, which is the journey from literal life to literal death: a distinction less mired, it would seem, in conceptual trickery and intertwining. In "Owl and Pussycat, some years later," Atwood (the pussycat) speaks to the owl (unnamed, but identifiable as fellow Canadian poet Dennis Lee, Atwood's long-time friend and wearer of owlish large-framed glasses). Lamenting their mutual aging processes and wondering if their years of "caterwauling" have accomplished anything, Atwood writes,

What's the use anyway
 of calling the dead back, moving stones,
 or making animals cry?

 we were born with mortality's
 hook in us, and year by year it drags us
 where we're going: down. . . . (31-32)

The move to the underworld will happen eventually, whether the poems are written or not. And eerily, even as the poets approach death, their own non-living counterparts, their public personae, will continue to exist: "In ten years, you'll be on a stamp, / where anyone at all can lick you" (34). Any person can mediate with the underworld and form a split authorial self separate from one's continuous consciousness, but only those who become famous for doing so can look forward to the dubious honour of the postage stamp. Ironically, it is the non-flesh-and-blood self created through writing that continues to exist once the actual person disappears underground forever.

In the poem that follows in the collection, "The poets hang on," Atwood again sees poets as haunting figures that cannot help but straddle the divide between metaphorical life and metaphorical death:

The poets hang on.
 It's hard to get rid of them,

Are they dead, or what?

.....

They put those costumes on
some time ago,
those black sweaters, those tatters;
now they can't get them off.

.....

They're having trouble with their wings, as well.
We're not getting much from them
in the flight department these days.

.....

If they fly, it's downwards,
into the damp grey earth. . . . (35-36)

Interestingly, Atwood's speaker here observes the poets' behaviour from the outside even as she, inevitably, speaks a poem herself. Her complaint about the poets' downward trajectories brings to mind the contrasting approach of classical poets such as Milton, who famously started *Paradise Lost* by calling for his "advent'rous song" to "soar / Above th' Aonian mount" (1.13, 14-15). Frye points out that as traditional forms of authority have eroded over the last few centuries, a gradual reversal has taken place in the usual vertical orientation of poetic insight. Locating William Blake as the central figure in this shift, Frye explains that hidden truths now tend to be found, metaphorically, in an underworld — the repressed mind, for instance — rather than in a godly upper realm (see 243). While Atwood's response to her flightless poets is one of disgust — "Go away, we say — / and take your boring sadness./ You're not wanted here. / You've forgotten how to tell us / how sublime we are" (36) — the acid tone of the poet-hating poet acts, of course, ironically to anticipate audiences who would actually make such complaints. To be true to life, the poet must dig downwards, whether the audience likes the resulting discoveries or not; this sentiment is recognized in "Poetry reading," where Atwood continues the perspective of the observing outsider. Here again, the speaker is audience to the poet performing the reading; as the poet tells the ugly truth, Atwood writes, "you don't know whether to be scornful or grateful: / he's doing our confessions for us" (38). In the end, though, "you join the applause" (40).

One aspect of the underground journey, however, remains troubling. In "Sor Juana works in the garden," Atwood writes,

Time for gardening again; for poetry; for arms
 up to the elbows in leftover
 deluge, hands in the dirt, groping around
 among the rootlets, bulbs . . .
 . . . your own future
 bones, whatever's down there . . . (27)

Having described in detail the connection between the underground and the past, Atwood complicates matters here by also locating knowledge of the future down in the dirt. Frye would seem to agree with this metaphorical alignment; citing various examples in classical literature, he writes that “knowledge of the future normally comes from a ‘lower’ world associated with the darkness that usually surrounds the dream” (235). To understand the reasoning behind this connection, though, it is useful to turn to ecological philosopher David Abram’s conceptualization of the relation between the above-ground and the underground in terms of the temporal relation between the present and the past.

Abram usefully compares underground space to that which is beyond the horizon, “for these would seem to be the two primary dimensions from whence things enter the open presence of the landscape, and into which they depart” (213-14). The difference is that “*The beyond-the-horizon, by withholding its presence, holds open the perceived landscape, while the under-the-ground, by refusing its presence, supports the perceived landscape.* The reciprocity and asymmetry between these two realms bear an uncanny resemblance to the reciprocity and contrast between the *future* (or ‘what is to come’) and the *past* (or ‘what has been’)” (214). If the spaces available to our immediate perceptions correlate to the present — to what is *presently* experienced — then to travel beyond the horizon is to move into the future, while to dig into the ground is to excavate the past: a premise as relevant to poets as it is to archaeologists. The similarity, though, that Abram locates between the beyond-the-horizon and the under-the-ground means that the voyage into the underworld is a voyage not only under the ground but also beyond the horizon, beyond what is normally visible. The ground on which we stand is a form of horizon and can be travelled into; digging thus moves us into the future even while it moves us into the past.

“Another visit to the Oracle,” one of the poems in *The Door* that is heavily preoccupied with the purpose and nature of storytelling, is an iconic instance of Atwood’s concern with the oracular mediation

between the dark, unseen world and the lived, visible world. The poem ends, “That’s what I do: / I tell dark stories / before and after they come true” (98). The odd conflation of the past with the future — the idea that oracular stories have been true and simultaneously will be true — makes sense within the context of Abram’s account. Poetic insight comes from consideration of that which is outside one’s immediate perceptual awareness (which can also mean paying more careful attention than usual to what is perceived); as unseen realms, the past and the future, memory and imagination, all serve as sources of poetic material. By drawing insight and meaning from the dark and bringing it into the light of telling, the poet tells stories from the realm beyond immediate awareness, a realm in which the distinction between past and future can at times be immaterial.

“Another visit to the Oracle” speaks as well to the problem of audience relations. “Want to know your future?” the oracle asks. “But you’d rather have a happy story any / day. Or so you say” (91). The oracle’s remark, “What I do: I see / in darkness. I see / darkness. I see you” (96), reflects the murkiness and the moral uneasiness about both the self, and self-knowledge. While the oracle takes pride in her talent for truth telling, she worries that her skills are dangerous and misunderstood. These lines echo the “Circe/Mud Poems” from Atwood’s 1974 volume, *You Are Happy*, in which she writes,

you want me to tell you
the future. That’s my job,
one of them, but I advise you
don’t push your luck.

To know the future
there must be a death
Hand me the axe. (66)

Frye points out that “the motto of Delphi was ‘Know thyself,’ which suggests that the self intended was a conscience far below the ego with its anxieties of self-interest, far below all social and cultural conditioning, in short the spiritual self” (251). The benefits of negotiating with the unseen are substantial, yet Atwood’s oracles spend much of their time warning that such negotiation is not without its risks. As usual, the oracular dilemma involves a choice between speaking the truth and telling the audience what it wants to hear. “Deception is the air we

breathe,” says the oracle, “we couldn’t live without it” (94); yet she tells her dark stories after all, and her circular justification for her actions — “That’s what I do” — suggests that such telling is natural, a human imperative.

The friction between truth telling and negotiation with other people — also framed as a human imperative, and quite accurately so — refuses to ease. In “Enough of these discouragements,” Atwood’s first-person poet lectures an unspecified “you” about the short-sightedness of complaining about unsatisfying stories. The poet’s previous stories about flowers, dancing, and “gentle miracles” met with complaints: “You were bored by them. / / You wanted the hard news, / the blows of hammers, / bodies slammed through the air” (*Door* 79). So the poet obliged, only to hear more complaints: “Why all these red wet tickets / to the pain theatricals? / Why these boxfuls of ruin? . . . Why can’t you tell about flowers?” (79) Now frustrated, the poet says, “I’m only a shadow, / the shadow of your desires” (80), suggesting that she has no choice but to follow the listener’s shifting preferences. The tension is only, ostensibly, relieved by an exasperated poet who throws up her arms, renouncing what agency she may once have had; a shadow, after all, does not argue.

At the same time, these lines raise the intriguing possibility that just as the poet creates the audience, the audience may be said to create the poet. Just as the writer typing out a story becomes her own first audience as she reads her own words, the audience becomes its own storyteller when it requests a particular kind of story. Indeed, the intertwined nature of the writer and the audience makes it difficult to discern a clear distinction between the two. The audience and its writer-shadow may be two parts of the same human subject, split into separate existences through the act of writing, just as easily as they may be two entirely different people. The tension between poet and listener, then, can be read as the internal tension of the person who wants to experience escapist thrills, only to discover (to her repeated disappointment) that narratives of risk-free voyeurism or benign beauty, if followed through, inevitably involve dealing with mortality; narratives that refuse to take the negative into account cannot adequately reflect the lived experience of human life. Indeed, it is productive to read the conflict between poet and listener in many of *The Door*’s poems as a struggle that is simultaneously external and internal; it is the struggle to justify one’s preoccupations to

oneself as well as to others and to persuade oneself to look unblinkingly at truths that would more easily be left buried.

Concluding “Enough of these discouragements” with the bitter remark, “I’m only a granter of wishes. / Now you have yours” (80), Atwood leaves her reader pondering the double-edged sword of the final word, “yours,” in which the audience’s ill-advised wishes are joined with their ominous consequences. The poet is no mere shadow after all; or rather, the position of shadow, of wish-granter, is more powerful than one would expect. The power to grant wishes is the power to dispense consequences. Escape-land fantasies, the poet maintains, are ultimately incapable of capturing human experience, and readers ought to realize this; if they don’t, they will be taught the hard way. Still, insofar as the shadow-storyteller here is both writer and reader — two partitions of one subject — we can see her worrying that she is just as implicated as anyone in the persisting prevalence of popular fiction. In its ominous framing of the poet’s shadowing of the audience, this poem again echoes the “Circe/Mud Poems,” in which Atwood writes,

I am the place where
all desires are fulfilled,
I mean: all desires.

Is it too cold for you?
This is what you requested,
this ice, this crystal

wall, this puzzle. You solve it. (*Happy* 67)

In both cases, the poet feigns a lack of agency, bitterly foisting responsibility back onto the audience and thus concealing the fact that the fulfilling of misguided requests itself involves considerable power. Ultimately, when stories go wrong, both parties are culpable, and the division of blame can be as difficult and misguided as the attempt to locate a clear division between poet and audience.

While “Enough of these discouragements” grapples with the frustrations of being a writer, “The nature of Gothic” explains the benefits, and indeed the necessity, of the authorial voyage underground. In this poem, Atwood urges a vulnerable girl to

. . . *Go back, my dear.*

Back is into the cellar
 where the worst is,
 where the others are,
 where you can see
 what you would look like dead
 and who wants it.

Then you will be free
 to choose. To make
 your way. (*Door* 86)

Facing the horrors in this cellar underworld, “where you can see / what you would look like dead / and who wants it,” is both a terrifying proposition — who would want it? — and a necessary one if the girl is to gain insight and learn about her vulnerabilities — if she is to see who wants her dead. The appeal to creative freedom in the last stanza suggests that only through the poetic trip to the dark underworld can human agency be realized. The origin of the English word “poet” in the Greek *ποιητής* (“maker,” “poet”) lends to these lines the notion that by facing the dangers in her world, the girl will be free “to make,” to be a poet, to invent and choose the direction of her life. Atwood is urging this girl to become a poet, or at least to engage in the same unlocking of the cellar door that makes poetry possible.

At the same time, the line “*Go back, my dear*” echoes the “Welcome back, my dear” that Atwood speaks to her own poet self in “The poet has come back . . .” (23).² In “The nature of Gothic,” then, the speaker’s exhortation to return to the cellar is directed as much at herself as it is at the vulnerable girl — or the vulnerable girl is a vulnerable part of the speaker. Once again blurring the distinction between poet and audience, Atwood indicates that mediation with the dark parts of the world is not only a key part of the poetic process but also a necessary part of life itself. The cellar is where the poet goes, but it is also “where the others are” (86), where everyone goes at one time or another.

It is in *The Door*’s final, eponymous poem that the underworld journey becomes most emphatically an inevitable component of being a poet and indeed of being human. The poem traces the life of a “you.” Though she goes physically undescribed, we learn that this “you” acquires a husband, children, a dog, and a garden. Each stanza describes a different stage in the subject’s life; in the first stanza “you feel scared”; later, “you

buy a purse, / the dance is nice”; then, “you wash the dishes, / you love your children”; later still, “Your children telephone sometimes. / The roof needs fixing”; and near the end, “Where is your husband? . . . At night there are blankets; / nonetheless you are wakeful.” At each stage of life, we are told, “The door swings open,” and then, “The door swings closed” (116-17). The poem’s tension is a function of the literal aging process but also of the subject’s interactions over time with this door — a metaphor for the mysterious dark passage that we all must take as we move from life into death. After an initial, frightening apprehension of the existence of mortality, the young person is soon uninterested in the door. As she ages, she becomes increasingly preoccupied with the question of what may be found on the other side, wondering, “why does this keep happening now? / Is there a secret?” (116). Growing elderly, she sees “many steps going down. / But what is that shining? / Is it water?” (117). Finally, she is alone in bed, and the poem ends as she gives herself over to death:

The door swings open:
 O god of hinges,
 god of long voyages,
 you have kept faith.
 It’s dark in there.
 You confide yourself to the darkness.
 You step in.
 The door swings closed. (117)

While its meditation on death is apparent when “The door” is read in isolation, its commentary becomes broader when read in the context of *The Door* as a whole — in the context of metaphors which cast poetic mediation with the past and the unknown as a trip below the ground. The door in this poem is not simply the passage from life into death; it is the gateway into the cellar, the disturbed earth, the well, the tomb, the dug garden. It is the point of access for poetic knowledge. In Abram’s terminology, it is the passage into the under-the-ground that supports the perceived landscape, the buried past upon which present-tense life is built. Atwood’s call, “O god of hinges, / god of long voyages, / you have kept faith,” is spoken ambiguously, either *by* or *to* the “you” of the poem. The person entranced by the gateway upon which her life, quite literally, hinges, is also ultimately her own gatekeeper, making her own way into the unseen realm.³

There is a significant echo here as well from “Gasoline,” the first poem in *The Door*. Recounting the childhood memory of a leaking outboard motor on a small wooden boat and the child’s desire to drink the shiny gasoline, this poem sets up a key tension: the person who carefully observes the world feels compelled to internalize both its beauty and its danger. “I knew that it was poison,” Atwood writes, “But still, I loved the smell. . . . I would have liked to drink it, / inhale its iridescence. / As if I could. / That’s how gods lived: *as if*” (3). The *as if*, the power of mastery and creation by which gods live, is also the poetic power of metaphor. The frustration that the child feels in her inability to internalize the mystery of the gasoline is inverted in the power the poet has to internalize the world through metaphor. (Think of the opposite inflections of the slang phrase “as if!” and the “as” of poetic simile.) By calling the gasoline other names — “a slick of rainbow” or “my shimmering private sideshow” or “essence of danger” (3) — the poet lives by the *as if* of metaphor and finds, despite her shortcomings, the godlike ability to bring impossible states of affairs into existence. This is the power by which the poet negotiates her relationship with reality and truth; and in many ways, *The Door* carries out a protracted struggle with the complications and dangers of the *as if*, a site of great power and knowledge that can be reached only through the symbolic death of the poetic project. The god of hinges in “The door” is also the god of *as if*, of the gateway to the beyond-the-now through which the seen can be understood in terms of the unseen. Through the *as if* of metaphor and the *as if* of the journey underground, the poet flirts with the final *as if* of death.

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood asks, “Where is the story? The story is in the dark. That is why inspiration is thought of as coming in flashes. Going into a narrative — into the narrative process — is a dark road. You can’t see your way ahead. . . . The well of inspiration is a hole that leads downwards” (176). This depiction of the underground journey, being more suggestive of a continuous process of exploration than it is of a transition from one discrete state to another, again tempers the uneasy separation that Atwood attempts to envision between normal and creative consciousness. Bringing knowledge back from the unseen realm may be a matter of moving through the darkness — continuously inhabiting both the past and the present at all times. While the ultimate journey of death is different because through death one *becomes* the past

and cannot return to the present, the initial trajectory of these voyages is the same. The assertion that Atwood's metaphorical framework makes is that everyone must travel into the dark, whether this darkness is conceptualized as a discrete realm or a property of normal consciousness. Everyone must cope with the issues of being a poet because everyone interacts with the world across time and engages with revelations outside of real-time physical perception; everyone is a storyteller by virtue of the narrative flow of human experience and memory, even if stories are perhaps inevitably shaped to suit an audience. The final journey into death happens only once, but negotiation with the unseen is continual and is by no means exclusive to writers. "The traditional fall of Adam deprived him of immortality," writes Frye, "and made death the one certain and inevitable condition of human existence. But there is also the temporary death in which we 'fall' asleep and wake 'up,' where there may be imaginative rewards not afforded by the waking consciousness" (234). If narrative is motivated by a fascination with mortality, then the narratives of human life, the constructed forms of identity as experienced over time, are just as invested in mediation with the underworld as a novel or a poem. A person's continual everyday interactions with the past and the unseen are, in this sense, little deaths, momentary departures from the lived present and the visible; they are just as necessary to consciousness as ongoing perception. The poet and the ordinary person share the same fundamental preoccupations, and the one can become the other in an instant. The difference, *The Door* tells us, is that while the ordinary person sometimes notices the door swinging open, the poet aims to unlock the door of her own accord.

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NOTES

¹ While I am interested here mainly in the way that the concepts of doubleness and authorial subjectivity function within and across Atwood's writings, an opportunity also exists to investigate her use of these concepts within the context of German Romanticism, a body of work that raises many of the same issues and which has long served as a topic of interest to Atwood.

² Another echo of this construction occurs in "Owl and Pussycat, some years later," whose first line, "So here we are again, my dear" (29), is spoken within the "here" of poetry, from one poet to another. In this poem, again, as in "The poet has come back . . .," the two subjects seem almost to blur together, or at least to encounter the same situations, eventually travelling in the same "leaky cardboard / gondola," playing "our paper guitar" (34).

³ In her analysis of Doctor Faustus and Ebenezer Scrooge in *Payback*, Atwood discusses the phrase "hinge moment," which in contemporary times refers to a turning point but in the past was used to refer to "certain moments — Halloween and the solstices, for instance — when the actual doors between our world and other worlds swung open on their hinges" (170). A "god of hinges," then, would presumably be able to open such a door at will.

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