

Keeping Secrets, Telling Lies: Fictions of the Artist and Author in the Novels of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

This article explores how Margaret Atwood's novels, in particular *Cat's Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*, engage with the generic paradigms of the Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman, and, in doing so, respond to what Atwood describes as "the paradoxes and dilemmas" traditionally encountered by the female artist and author.

Résumé

Cet article explore la manière dont les romans de Margaret Atwood, en particulièrement *Cat's Eye* et *The Blind Assassin* engagent les paradigmes génériques du Bildungsroman et du Künstlerroman, et de ce fait répond à ce qu'Atwood décrit comme paradoxes et dilemmes auxquels font face traditionnellement les femmes artistes et les auteures.

From an early stage in her writing career, Margaret Atwood has shown a striking interest in the fate of the female artist and author in Canada. While evidence of this can be found throughout her work, her later fiction, most particularly *Cat's Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*, revisits and reformulates this interest in images of the female artist in especially innovative ways. Both novels explore the distinctive aspects of female creativity and question myths of the female artist; both also present painting, writing, or telling a life story as a crucial medium of reading and rewriting the past. The novels share an interest in the challenges and paradoxes of "writing a life" and draw attention to the processes of evasion, subversion, and illusion that are at work in all narratives of selfhood, but are perhaps, necessarily, most dramatically manifested in narratives that are self-consciously committed to writing women's lives. In this way, the artistically mature Atwood makes her most profound exploration of issues with which she and many other contemporary women writers have been perennially preoccupied.

In identifying the ways to "write a woman's life," Carolyn Heilbrun establishes autobiography, biography, and auto/biographical fiction as three equally powerful statements of female subjectivity (1989, 1). Other theorists of women's life writing, such as Leigh Gilmore and Patricia Duncker, have pursued this theme, positing that the act of writing her life is for a woman a deeply political gesture and an important public announcement of selfhood. Sidonie Smith expands on this line of thinking in establishing a series of vital questions regarding female appropriation of autobiography:

at the scene of writing, each woman struggles with inherited autobiographical narratives constitutive of the official histories of the subject. When does she take up the sanctities of official narratives and when set them aside? How far does she accommodate inherited forms, the official and officious calls to a specific subjectivity, and how far does she stretch the form to fill her own needs and desires? What are the pressure points she puts on traditional autobiography as it presses her into a specific kind of autobiographical subject? Where exactly does she find the narrative elasticities and subversive possibilities of the genre? What narrative counterpractices does she import into the text? What formal experiments or out-law practices does she pursue? And how do those experiments enable her to evade narrative fixture in official scripts of the universal subject or the embodied subject? (1993, 23)

These key questions, with their emphasis on the woman writer's need to renegotiate the paradigms of autobiographical models such as the *Bildungsroman* ("novel of development") and *Künstlerroman* ("novel of the artist"), are highly relevant to the construction of a narrative of selfhood as performed in *Cat's Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*. An interesting complication in Atwood's relationship with woman-centred autobiographical fiction emerges on consideration of her relationship with the *Künstlerroman*, as interpreted in the criticism of Jerome H. Buckley. Buckley's seminal work *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* made a powerful case for the existence of the *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* in English. Buckley insists that there is a clearly identifiable sequence of development and influence in the *Bildungsroman* in English and includes Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, Lawrence, and Joyce on this continuum (1974, viii). Since the appearance of Buckley's *Season of Youth*, *Bildungsroman* studies have flourished in English-

speaking countries, as has interest in the genre's influence on literature in English. The growing internationalism of the genre and use of the term in relation to other literatures has become commonplace, as the *Bildungsroman*, though somewhat burdened by its history, moves beyond its native borders and takes on a new relevance in relation to other national literatures.

A revelation by Atwood in an interview in 1978 suggests the extent to which the presence of the English tradition in her work is self-conscious on her part. In it, she notes that she went to study at Harvard in the early 1960s because of Jerome Buckley, who later supervised her PhD dissertation ("Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries") (Atwood 1990b, 78). Furthermore, a recent autobiographical profile of Atwood suggests that she took a course on the *Bildungsroman* as a student (Potts 2003, 20). Atwood's relationship with a major *Bildungsroman* scholar responsible for a seminal history of the *Bildungsroman* in English seems especially relevant given that she was to take up and challenge the tradition so productively in her own writing. And yet, Atwood's characters, most particularly the authors and artists, contribute something radically new to the *Künstlerroman* tradition, particularly in the way that the artist emerges as deeply involved in day-to-day living but is also capable of creating self-protecting personae that jostle for position within the text. This is far removed from the idea of the artist that Atwood encountered as a young woman, which was formed by the archetypal literary portrait of the artist. Or, as Atwood put it, "The writer-as-artist is to be, according to Joyce, a 'priest of the imagination'" (Atwood 2002, 77).

Margaret Atwood's Ventriloquists

Like Joan Foster's self-construction in Atwood's early *Künstlerroman*, *Lady Oracle* (1976), Elaine Risley's narrative of her early life in *Cat's Eye* relies on two equally unreliable sources: her memory and the visual record provided by her abstract paintings. Like her

fictional predecessor, she juggles different versions of her self, both in her private and artistic life. The first-person narrative of the novel shifts from Elaine's traumatic experiences at the hands of her school-friend Cordelia to her emerging artistic potential as a young woman and her return to her home town of Toronto for a retrospective of her life's work. Judith McCombs summarises the novel as "a bildungsroman portrait of the artist that incorporates transmuted autobiography; and its contrarily re-membering seer-narrator is Atwood's most elaborate representation of the human self as complexly layered, with fluid and sometimes buried layers" (1991, 9). This complexity of the construction of the self is acknowledged early on in the novel: "There is no one I would ever tell this to, except Cordelia. But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up, the one with the roll-top boots and the turned-up collar, or the one before, or the one after? There is never only one, of anyone" (Atwood 1988a, 6). This applies not just to Cordelia but to Elaine herself, as different versions of Elaine are fashioned as her life narrative develops. Elaine's "mean mouth" is a typical illustration of Atwood's rendering of the subject as ventriloquist (Atwood 1988a, 234) and might be read as a preface to the more elaborate role-playing explored in Atwood's later novel *The Robber Bride* (1993).

Indeed, more generally, Cordelia is frequently read as a literary precursor to the character of Zenia in *The Robber Bride*. Cordelia emerges as a catalyst and also as a threat in the way that she dominates Elaine's formative years. Her power lies in a similar promise of inclusion and affirmation to that practised so deftly by Zenia. Cordelia promises access to a secret sorority - "This time her voice is confiding, as if she's talking about something intimate that only she and I know about and agree on. She creates a circle of two, takes me in" (Atwood 1988a, 71) - one based on a cult of femininity complete with exacting rules and expectations. Cordelia uses this unspoken social code to persecute Elaine: "The white socks, the Mary Janes, the

always-inadequate birthday present swathed in tissue paper, and the little girls with their assessing eyes, their slippery deceitful smiles, tartaned up like Lady Macbeth" (Atwood 1988a, 113). The power and danger of Cordelia, the "tartaned up" little girl, is only a short imaginative leap away from her "tarted up" adult version: Zenia. This Shakespearean formulation, drawing together apparently contradictory notions of femininity in its invocation of Cordelia and Lady Macbeth, has an impact on all of Elaine's future relationships with other people, other women in particular. Also, she finds herself bound to her childhood nemesis by the same combination of fear and desire that keeps Roz, Charis, and Tony in thrall to Zenia in *The Robber Bride*.

Elaine's childhood traumas are reconstructed in all of her subsequent relationships with women, such as in her relationship with her rival for Josef's affections, fellow painter Susie, who, in a later dream sequence is cast as another tormentor, another Cordelia (Atwood 1988a, 323). Thus, *Cat's Eye* presents a female *Künstlerroman* that is a collage of selfhood compatible with Atwood's earlier work. The main difference is that while a novel like *Lady Oracle* explores multiple, competing selves, Elaine Risley's artistic and personal retrospective is captured in a frequently-cited passage in the opening pages of the novel as "like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of the other" (Atwood 1988a, 3).

There is a repeated emphasis on the liberating "choices" of self-construction in Atwood's fiction and this is foregrounded early on in *Cat's Eye* where Elaine says of the old ladies she sees on the bus:

This is the kind we like best. They have a certain gaiety to them, a power of invention, they don't care what people think. They have escaped, though what it is they have escaped from isn't clear to us. We think that their bizarre costumes, their verbal tics are chosen, and that when the time comes we also will be

free to choose. (Atwood 1988a, 5)

These choices take on even more significance in Atwood's later novel *The Blind Assassin*.

Spanning the years of the World Wars, *The Blind Assassin* chronicles the experience of two sisters, Iris and Laura Chase, their shared passion for a socialist agitator, and their unhappiness at the mercy of Iris's industrialist husband. In an early discussion of the novel, J. Brooks Bouson describes it as "at once an intricately designed literary puzzle featuring a classic Atwoodian narrator - the elderly memoirist Iris Chase-Griffen, who is a master storyteller and illusionist - and an unsettling cautionary tale that, like Atwood's other novels, focuses attention on the power politics of gender relations" (2003, 251). Bouson goes on to focus on the "literary puzzle" of the novel as revealing a "fictional documentation of the ways in which gender and class expectations shaped and confined women's lives in the first half of the twentieth century" (252). While there is certainly an explicit social critique at work in Iris Chase-Griffen's narrative, the novel also presents a "puzzle" of self as narrative in the way that it offers a number of versions of the life of Iris and her sister Laura, none of which are complete in themselves but interact with other, official and unauthorised narratives.

The framing narrative of *The Blind Assassin*, written by a frail and elderly Iris Chase-Griffen, is both a life's retrospective and a confessional. This is interrupted by interpolated sections from the novel within the novel, which is also called "The Blind Assassin," as well as newspaper death notices, social announcements, and extracts from gossip columns that tie in with and illuminate the primary narrative. If *Cat's Eye* presents the development of the self as a collage of reconstructed memories, *The Blind Assassin* offers a scrapbook version of the self. Iris's memoir is interrupted by the official, public version of events, which is revealed to be wildly at odds with the private reality of the Chase-Griffen family. Yet this "reality" is at every point mediated through Iris,

a highly self-conscious, intrusive and audaciously unreliable narrator. Furthermore, the main characters of the novel within the novel are preoccupied with yet another narrative: a science fiction fantasy, which makes up a considerable part of the work. *The Blind Assassin* actually includes a writer of science fiction, Alex Thomas. It also depicts a woman writer (Iris Chase-Griffen) just as caught up in stealthy manipulations of literary personae as her precursor, Joan Foster.

As a Bildungsroman, *The Blind Assassin* bears fruitful comparison to *Cat's Eye*, concerned as it is with a life reconstructed through art. Just as Elaine Risley reconstructs the traumas of her early life through her paintings, Iris's life can be read as a fusion of the interpolated fictions in the novel. The three narrative layers are not mutually exclusive but contain valuable textual clues essential to the development of each narrative strand; they present a "series of liquid transparencies" not unlike that described at the beginning of *Cat's Eye*. As Bouson suggests, the science fiction narrative offers an "intratextual commentary" (2003, 260) on the primary narrative, and so the rape, sacrifice, and trauma in that story contains echoes of Laura's and Iris's suffering at the hands of Richard Griffen. In fact, the former might be read as a more extreme, explicit dramatization of the latter; Laura and Iris are sacrificial victims on the same spectrum as the brutalised figures who inhabit the science fiction fantasy. As a further example of this, the current-time narrative hints at the true nature of Iris's relationship with Alex Thomas long before it is officially disclosed: "We preferred - or I preferred, and Laura tagged along - those with stories about other lands or even other planets. Spaceships from the future, where women would wear very short skirts made of shiny fabric and everything would gleam" (Atwood 2000, 152). In the same way, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an important feature of Iris's Latin studies under the instruction of the misogynous Mr Erskine and is later evoked in the interpolated novel in exchanges between the characters

based on herself and her lover, the aforementioned socialist agitator, Alex Thomas. In the early stages of the novel within the novel, the narrator pauses to consider the fate of sacrificial children in the dystopian Sakiel-Norn. A graphic description of the ritual of cutting out the tongues of young girls to be sacrificed is followed by a meditation on how "tongueless, and swollen with words she could never again pronounce, each girl would be lead in procession to the sound of solemn music, wrapped in veils and garlanded with flowers, up the winding steps to the city's ninth door. Nowadays you might say she looked like a pampered society bride" (2000, 29). The very direct link drawn between the ritualised violence inflicted upon the sacrificial virgins and Iris's own experience as one such society bride is a further illustration of how the fictional narrative in progress replicates key events in the main narrative.

The *Blind Assassin* reveals much about Atwood's critical take on the nature of writing and contains a meta-commentary on Atwood's critical interpretation of ideas of the author and of authorship. The novel is fundamentally concerned with the idea of selfhood as a narrative construction or invention. Iris's daughter, Aimee, reads her aunt's (in fact her mother's) novel as an exposé of a family scandal, particularly in relation to her own origins (she imagines herself to be the daughter of Laura and Alex, who are identified as the fictional lovers), and this knowledge ultimately leads her to her death. On the other hand, Iris makes clear that the manuscript in progress is intended as a redemptive message for her granddaughter Sabrina, which reveals the unknown origins of her biological father (a refugee orphan from Eastern Europe), thus freeing her from the tainted legacy of the Griffen industrial empire and leaving her at liberty to make up her own life story, "to invent yourself at will" (Atwood 2000, 513). Eastern European origins are invoked to undermine the bourgeois suburb of Rosedale's aspirations to an Anglo-Canadian identity, one validated by a conviction of the anglocentric nature of a true Canadian identity. Here, the liberating potential of

invention and reinvention through storytelling and narrative is restated, though the same processes are not entirely without trauma. Nevertheless, the redemptive and positive possibilities of self-construction and reconstruction explored elsewhere in Atwood's fiction are given a new endorsement in the novel.

Negotiations with the Dead

Elaine Risley cultivates different private and artistic personae. For example, there are two versions of Elaine the artist: the Art and Archaeology student and the serious artist who studies life-drawing outside of college hours. From the outset, Elaine plays with the expectations of the female artist in the same way that she responds to critical misconstructions of her work. Thus, to Josef, her Hungarian mentor and lover, she becomes a pre-Raphaelite fantasy, while to her first husband Jon, she takes on the guise of a disconsolate existentialist. These disguises are easily assumed and discarded according to circumstance.

Cat's Eye is the novel most explicitly interested in, to borrow Atwood's phrase, the "paradoxes and dilemmas" of being a Canadian woman artist (Atwood 1984). Early on in the novel, Elaine Risley confesses that, "The word artist embarrasses me; I prefer painter, because it's more like a valid job. An artist is a tawdry, lazy sort of thing to be, as most people in this country will tell you" (Atwood 1988a, 15). In spite of showing an awareness of the occupational hazards of being an artist - "If I cut off my ear, would the market value go up? Better still, stick my head in the oven, blow out my brains. What rich art collectors like to buy, among other things, is a little vicarious craziness" (86) - Elaine achieves notable success. Yet, throughout the novel, she is subject to various imposed views of her work as a female artist, views that seem removed from her idea of herself as a "painter." Atwood's own critical musings on her experience of being a young writer are most carefully documented in Chapter I of *Negotiating with the Dead*:

When I was an aspiring female poet, in the late 1950s, the notion of required sacrifice was simply accepted. The same was true for any sort of career for a woman, but Art was worse, because the sacrifice required was more complete. You couldn't be a wife and mother and also an artist, because each one of those things required total dedication. (2002, 85)

Atwood's comments on her early writing career have real resonance for reading her novels as investigations of a spectrum of myths of the female artist and for understanding the need for women writers to subvert the ideologies which underlie such myths by telling their own stories. This draws attention to the domestic origins of women's writing and foregrounds a moment of clarity in Atwood's own development as a writer: "When Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir came my way, like shorebirds heralding land, I read them with much interest. They got a lot right for me, but there was one thing they got wrong. They were assuring me that I didn't have to get married and have children. But what I wanted was someone to tell me I could" (Atwood 1988b, xvi). In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley's experience as a middle-aged woman in a powder-blue sweatsuit ("my disguise as a non-artist"), resonates very strongly with this as she is made painfully aware of a need to dress the part: "Powder-blue is lightweight. I should have worn nun black, Dracula black, like all proper female painters" (Atwood 1988a, 87). Thus, as an Atwoodian costume, Elaine's tracksuit becomes the bolder statement of not conforming to imposed expectations. This defiance emerges in her encounter with politicized readings of her life as an artist, in particular in an interview just before her exhibition opening with a young journalist, who is disappointed that Elaine does not have "stories of outrage; at least insult, at least putdown. Male art teachers pinching your bum, calling you baby, asking you why there are no great female painters, that sort of thing. She would like me to be furious, and

quaint" (Atwood 1988a, 90).

Her painting plays a crucial role in her development in the novel. Elaine's early life is recorded in her artwork: the early portraits depict the women who most influenced her formative years in domestic situations characterised by surreal, carnival elements, or rendered in caricature. Elaine puts the fragments of her life together in a new order as intimated in her brother's scientific theories: "'When we gaze at the night sky,' he says, 'We are looking at fragments of the past.'" Elaine's paintings are just such fragments of her past and play a major role in the way that they bear meaning in relation to the present. Thus her evangelist tormentor, Mrs. Smeath, comes to have a serious impact on her artistic imagination, as do the more minor details of her childhood. For example, the silver paper from cigarette boxes that she faithfully collects as a child finds its way into one of the key paintings in her first exhibition. Elaine finds ways of engaging with tradition and convention so that it is meaningful to her as a Canadian woman artist in the twentieth century. Hence, the mirror in Van Eyck's "The Arnolfini Marriage" is transformed into Elaine's childhood talisman, the cat's eye marble, and the inscription on the painting becomes graffiti from a spray can (Atwood 1988a, 327; 331-32; 348).

As an author and narrator, Iris Chase-Griffen is most interested in disrupting and challenging official histories and is especially adept at identifying the "narrative elasticities" and "subversive possibilities" identified by Sidonie Smith as crucial elements of autobiographical fiction as a genre. Iris pursues various narrative "outlaw practices" and may be read as another illustration of Ann Parson's observation that woman as artist is very close to woman as "con-artist" in Atwood's fiction (Parsons 1986, 105).

In *The Blind Assassin* such doubling is not the result of self-division but of Iris's and Laura's literary twinning.

You see how quickly we have begun talking

about hands - two of them. Dexter and Sinister. There has been a widespread suspicion among writers - widespread over at least the past century and a half - that there are two of him sharing the same body, with a hard-to-predict and difficult-to-pinpoint moment during which the one turns into the other. (Atwood 2002, 37)

The model of the author outlined here is certainly illuminating in studying Atwood's own work. As an author who has had a high profile as a critic and a journalist, the moment during which "the one turns into the other" is something that has preoccupied and frustrated many critics, particularly readers of the seemingly semi-autobiographical *Cat's Eye*. A key image in the opening chapter of the novel within the novel in *The Blind Assassin* is of a photograph showing "a hand, cut off by the margin, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass as if discarded. Left to its own devices" (Atwood 2002, 5). This can be positioned on the same schema by which Atwood imagines the writing process in her critical prose. A recent real-life complication of this idea of the detached writing hand has appeared in the form of Atwood's invention of the "LongPen" (a device that transmits a real autograph via the Internet), which some critics interpreted as her attempt to keep readers at bay. While it perhaps added to Atwood's mystique, as a writer she has long been remarkably forthcoming and generous in discussions of her writing in numerous interviews and in lecture series. Atwood's writing in the mode of cultural critic steers clear of offering any definitive readings of her work but it is always illuminating when read in conjunction with her contemporaneous fiction. I would argue that Atwood's fiction and her critical prose, with its playful irreverence in relation to established literary discourses, occupies a mid-ground between traditional Anglo-American and French Feminist models of women's writing. Atwood is a writer most concerned with infiltrating traditionally

male-centred literary genres and conventions and productively renegotiating the terms that define them. She represents the Anglo-American commitment to engaging with patriarchal discourses in a way that also finds sympathy with the French feminist idea of *Écriture Féminine*. Indeed, in a 1988 essay, Hélène Cixous develops a very similar metaphor that complements the double-handedness invoked by Atwood in a discussion of the differences between writing poetical fiction and writing for theatre: "I have been writing for a long time with my right hand and now I am writing with two hands [...] It's a metaphor. I write with my right hand. But it's my right-left hand that I use. That is, I use a hand that is very awkward [...] It's not really contradictory; in a way, it's a complement. However, it makes me travel all the time between two countries and remark again on differences" (1990, 191-92). Atwood's descriptions of the writer at work, and more significantly the models by which her female artists work, has much to say to this dual reality.

The symbiosis of literary selves just described is most fully realised in the form of Laura's and Iris's literary doubling in *The Blind Assassin*. The novel opens with a dramatic death: Laura Chase's suicide. Laura is sacrificed by the text in order to provide the writing persona that Iris needs in order to publish her work. While the true author of the notorious novel is not revealed until towards the end of *The Blind Assassin*, a series of clues are provided. Laura is described early on as "A tabula rasa, not waiting to write, but to be written on." At the same time, at the moment at which the true identity of the author of the novel within the novel is revealed, Iris explains that "Laura was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It's a left-handed book. That's why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it" and, thus, Laura's iconic literary persona serves as Iris's "slippery double." Iris, the true author of *The Blind Assassin* (the novel within the novel), hides behind the persona of her dead sister; the novel is published posthumously as the

work of a gifted but troubled young woman. Iris comes to think of herself as "Laura's odd, extra hand, attached to no body - the hand that passed her on to the world" (Atwood 2000, 46; 513; 287). This provides Iris with a release on two fronts as she manages both to execute a risqué literary coup and at the same time make a bold statement of her contravention of social expectations. The stereotype of the tormented, suicidal woman writer in Laura Chase is evoked perhaps as an ironic footnote to Atwood's own critical interrogation of received stereotypes of the woman writer and artist discussed previously. Iris, the actual author of the cult classic *The Blind Assassin*, hides behind a fabricated persona, all the better to serve that persona. The most striking example of this is in the way that she positions herself as executor of Laura's estate and curator of Laura's memory: the guardian of Laura's *Künstlerroman*. The hostility of her response to queries and requests from academics and readers interested in further researching the life and writing of Laura Chase is further evidence of her need to exert full control over her sister's legacy. On her reply to an academic seeking access to her sister's manuscripts, she writes: "I have no wish to satisfy your lust for phials of dried blood and the severed fingers of saints. Laura Chase is not your 'project.' She was my sister. She would not have wished to be pawed over after her death. Whatever that pawing over might euphemistically be termed" (2000, 287). This careful preservation of a literary mask or persona might be read as a postmodern innovation, but also as the continuation of a long tradition of subterfuge on the part of the woman writer. Ellis, Acton, and Currer Bell and George Eliot can be thought of as literary precursors to Iris Chase-Griffen, whose literary alter ego is also borne out of necessity, but who turns it to her advantage by indulging in elaborate narrative game playing.

The *Blind Assassin* shows a similar awareness of the danger of a commitment to words to that explored in *Negotiating with the Dead*; in one of her many self-conscious narrative intrusions, Iris warns, "Anyone

intending to meddle with words needs such blessing, such warning," and later ponders that "Things written down can cause a great deal of harm. All too often, people don't consider that." These sentiments are echoed in *Negotiating with the Dead* in Atwood's discussion of the "anxiety of authorship": "No wonder St. Matthew looks so apprehensive in Caravaggio's painting of him, clutching his pen while a rather thuggish angel dictates to him what he must write down: the act of writing comes weighted with a burden of anxieties. The written word is so much like evidence - like something that can be used against you later" (Atwood 2000, 41; 287; 48). Yet, in spite of Iris's apprehension and anxiety, she shows herself to be capable of narrative trickery on two fronts - she is the secret author of *The Blind Assassin* and manages to sustain this secrecy throughout her current-time memoir. At the same time, she sees herself as being controlled and overpowered by her writing hand: "my hand has taken on a life of its own, and will keep going even if severed from the rest of me [...] Certainly it's been writing down a number of things it wouldn't be allowed to if subject to my better judgement" (Atwood 2000, 373).

A valuable coda to Atwood's explication of "the writing hand" in *Negotiating with the Dead* is the way in which Iris draws a similarly Barthesian conclusion about the fate of the text: "That's what happens a set number of years after the death of the author: you lose control. The thing is out there in the world, replicating itself in God knows how many forms, without any say-so from me" (2002, 283). In *The Blind Assassin*, literary narrative is fluid, changing, and far removed from the control of the author. In fact, the author is similarly "ownerless," a myth that is both fabricated yet carefully preserved.

Cat's Eye and *The Blind Assassin* present a critical subtext that raises urgent questions closely related to those in Atwood's non-fiction writing, and such questions define another phase in Atwood's oeuvre as author and literary critic. Atwood has long been regarded as one of Canada's most important literary ambassadors

as well as a stellar figure in the constellation of Canadian literature. Perhaps as significant, as we have seen, is the way in which, in her fiction and critical prose, she provides an ongoing commentary on the life of the writer and artist that establishes her as an author who is fundamentally concerned with the complications, complexities, and hazards faced by "anyone intending to meddle with words" (Atwood 2000, 41).

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