

SPECTRALITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S "DEATH BY LANDSCAPE" (1990)

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Abstract

This article explores how Margaret Atwood engages with the literary trope of spectrality through the ghost of Lucy in "Death by Landscape" (1990), an enigmatic short story which can be fruitfully analyzed in the light of both the author's critical writings and the spectropoetics introduced by Jacques Derrida. As an outstanding example of the Canadian Gothic, this brief narrative not only addresses the universal concerns of death and bereavement, but also raises more specific key issues, including present-day human relationships with the natural environment and the perception of geographical spaces as symbolic sites. Lucy's ghostly presence haunting Lois draws special attention to the noxious effects of the modern appropriation of Native-American cultures, a controversial topic illustrated by the Indian-themed summer camp where Lucy mysteriously disappears and by her naïve friend Lois's explicit desire "to be an Indian". Additionally, Atwood's short story evokes the physical displacement due to colonial expansion and recalls the ensuing social dislocation of the decimated Native populations, eventually almost erased from the actual and imaginary landscapes of North America.

Keywords: spectrality, ghost stories, Canadian Gothic, death, natural environment.

Resumen

En este artículo se explora cómo trata Margaret Atwood el tropo literario de la espectralidad mediante el fantasma de Lucy en “Death by Landscape” (1990), un enigmático relato breve que se puede analizar fructíferamente a la luz de los escritos críticos de la propia autora y de la espetropoética propuesta por Jacques Derrida. Ejemplo destacado del gótico canadiense, esta pequeña narración no solo aborda los problemas universales de la muerte y el duelo, sino también otras importantes cuestiones más específicas, tales como las relaciones actuales de los seres humanos con el medio ambiente y la percepción de los espacios geográficos como lugares simbólicos. La presencia fantasmal de Lucy que obsesiona a Lois resalta los efectos nocivos de la apropiación moderna de las culturas indígenas norteamericanas, un controvertido asunto ilustrado por el campamento veraniego de temática amerindia en el que Lucy desaparece misteriosamente y por el deseo de “ser una india” que manifiesta su ingenua amiga Lois. Además, el relato de Atwood evoca el desplazamiento físico debido a la expansión colonial y recuerda la ulterior dislocación social de las diezmadas poblaciones indígenas, finalmente casi borradas de los paisajes norteamericanos, tanto de los reales como de los imaginarios.

Palabras clave: espectralidad, relatos de fantasmas, gótico canadiense, muerte, medio ambiente.

1. Introduction: “Hordes of Ghosts”

Long before scholars began to analyze the complexities of Canadian textual spectrality in the light of the principles of Derridean hauntology or spectropoetics, in a 1977 essay Margaret Atwood forcefully rejected the oft-quoted paradoxical statement with which Earle Birney had concluded his poem “Can. Lit”. (1962): “it’s only by our lack of ghosts/ we’re haunted” (Atwood 1982: 230). Back in 1836, while recording her experiences as an early settler in Upper Canada, Catharine Parr Traill had complained: “As to ghosts or spirits, they appear totally banished from Canada. This is too matter-of-fact country for such supernaturals to visit” (1836: 153). These are precisely the words echoed by Earle Birney in his 1962 satirical poem, first published under the title of “Canadian Literature”, illustrating his perception of Canada as a ghostless void. Apart from being occasionally used in Canadian political discourse, Birney’s famous lines about this supposed “lack of ghosts” have been recurrently cited when trying to define the literature of the country and its cultural background. For instance, J.M. Kertzer responded to Birney’s “poetic barb” with the following assertion: “Unlike

America, Canada casts no heroic shadows, because our bland citizens lack the historical traumas and the responsive imagination to expose the dreams on which the nation was built or to name its presiding ghost" (1991: 71).

Atwood, who would later include the full text of Birney's poem—consisting of four quatrains devoid of any punctuation marks—when she edited the anthology *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, had quoted its last two stanzas in her 1977 essay, entitled "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction":

we French & English, never lost
our civil war
endure it still
a bloodless civil bore
the wounded sired off
no Whitman wanted
it's only by our lack of ghosts
we're haunted (1982: 230)

In the same essay Atwood had also quoted the two initial stanzas from Irving Layton's poem "From Colony to Nation", first published in 1956, which carried a similar deploring tone and conveyed an equally pessimistic view of the Canadian literary scene (1982: 231). Firmly denying that Canada had ever been ghostless, she devoted the rest of her essay to examining a number of examples to support her basic contention.

Once again, when Atwood delivered her 1991 Clarendon lectures at Oxford University, she reiterated her position regarding the prominent role of ghosts in the literature of her country and firmly stated: "Hordes of ghosts and related creatures populate Canadian fiction and poetry" (1995: 63). Moreover, she argued: "Birney's 'lack of ghosts' line is even less true of that non-physical border, that imaginative frontier, where the imported European imagination meets and crosses with the Native indigenous one" (1995: 64). By that time her country's emergent spectral literature had already been enriched by the works of writers such as Robertson Davies, who was equally exasperated with Canada's alleged ghostlessness. In his introduction to *High Spirits: A Collection of Ghost Stories*, Davies identified himself as an avid reader of ghost tales and humorously contended: "Canada needs ghosts, as a dietary supplement, a vitamin taken to stave off that most dreadful of modern ailments, the Rational Rickets" (1982: 2). Atwood and other contemporary Canadian writers would actually meet that need by filling their works with the ghosts of their age because, as Jacques Derrida points out, "according to a historically determined scenography—every age has its ghosts" (2006: 149).

The prominence of the trope of haunting and spectrality in contemporary Canadian literature has been discussed by many scholars in the twenty-first century, including the contributors to the two special issues of *Mosaic* edited by Dawne McCance under the titles of *Haunting I: The Specter* (2001) and *Haunting II: Citations* (2002), the Spring 2006 issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, edited by Marlene Goldman and Joanne Saul, and the special issue of *Ariel* edited by Pamela McCallum under the title of *Postcolonial Hauntings* (2006). Other relevant publications in this area are the collection of essays *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009), edited by Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte, Marlene Goldman's book *DisPossession: Haunting in Canadian Fiction* (2012), and *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History, and the Spectre of Self-Invention* (2014) by Cynthia Sugars. As I argued in my contribution to *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature*, entitled "'Ghost Stories': Fictions of History and Myth":

The "ghost history" that haunts Canadian literature in the post-1960s is the symbolic representation of those elements of the country's society that were previously barred from consciousness, and it is appropriate that revivals of the ghost story have been a preoccupation in contemporary Canadian criticism. (Gibert 2009: 478)

2. Ghosts Haunting the Wilderness and the Modern City

Apart from expressing admiration for the "ghost stories" (in the wide sense of the term) of other writers, including Emily Brontë and Toni Morrison, as well as critically analyzing and persuasively arguing against the once widely accepted notion that ghosts were absent from Canadian fiction and poetry, Atwood has made many notable contributions to the development of the literary trope of spectrality through her poems, novels and short stories. Throughout her cycle of poems collected in the volume *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), Atwood repeatedly invokes the ghost of Susanna Moodie, sister to Catharine Parr Traill, the woman who had regretted the absence of ghosts in the new colony and had yearned for their abundance such as there was in England, the native country of the two sisters, both of them authors of pioneer memoirs. Moodie had echoed her sister's claim when, "in the heart of a dark cedar swamp", she said to her husband that in England "superstition would people it with ghosts" and a Yankee settler who was with them in that "gloomy spot" replied: "There are no ghosts in Canada! [...]. The country is too new for ghosts. No Canadian is afraid of Ghosts" (Moodie 1857: 137). Moodie concluded her argument with a prescient reflection which would resonate down the years to come: "The belief in ghosts, so prevalent in the old countries, must first have had its foundation in the consciousness of guilt" (1857: 137).

Atwood illustrated the first edition of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* with six collages, all of them printed in black and white. The first collage of her book emphasizes the ghostlike quality which the poet wanted to convey when recreating the voice of Susanna Moodie, who appears with her hands high up superimposed on a dark forest and distinctly separated from it by a white border, generating the visual effect that a halo of light surrounds her whole body (Atwood 1970: 8). This opening illustration conveys the idea that Atwood saw the historical Moodie as someone completely alienated from the land, disconnected and isolated from her menacing surroundings. The alarming effect of this illustration successfully transmits the pioneer's feelings of fear and anxiety, which are verbalized both by Moodie throughout *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and by the speaker of Atwood's line: "The forest can still trick me" (1970: 15). In the afterword of *The Journals* Atwood makes some comments about the last poem of her collection which unequivocally confirm that Susanna Moodie becomes a ghost, "the spirit of the land she once hated", and haunts Canadians in a modern urban setting by making "her final appearance in the present, as an old woman on a Toronto bus who reveals the city as an unexplored, threatening wilderness" (1970: 64).

Aside from Moodie's ghost, Atwood has envisioned many other kinds of haunting by various sorts of historical and fictional spectral figures. For example, the temporarily insane protagonist of *Surfacing* (1972a) sees the ghosts of her lost parents in the northern wilderness of Quebec while she is searching for her father, who has been reported missing on an isolated island. This novel, which has been acclaimed as "an archetypal ghost story of Canadian Gothic wish-fulfilment" (Sugars 2014: 155), deserves to be taken into account. Yet, it seems more important to draw special attention to the ghost of Susanna Moodie before focusing on the ghost of Lucy in "Death by Landscape" (1990), a short story published twenty years after *The Journals*, because these two ghosts originate in the Canadian wilderness (both in its literal and figurative sense, that is, as a geographical space and as a symbolic site) and then move into the present in order to inhabit the modern city of Toronto. In Atwood's works, other ghosts also appear in contemporary urban Canadian settings, but unlike those of the historical Susanna Moodie in *The Journals* and the fictional Lucy in "Death by Landscape", they are completely unrelated to the Canadian natural milieu. Two such ghosts are spectral soldiers whose appearance stems from episodes related to military conflicts in foreign countries, the Vietnam War and the Second World War. They haunt the protagonists of the short stories entitled "The Man from Mars" (1977, in Atwood 1989) and "Uncles" (1990, in Atwood 1991), two young Canadian women who never resided in a battleground area, but who are traumatized by warfare and consequently project their psychic anxieties onto the images of soldiers by whom they feel emotionally threatened (Gibert 2018: 91, 95). The use of the ghost motif

as exemplified in these three short narratives as well as in *Surfacing* allows the interpretation of these ghosts as belonging to the kind most admired by Atwood, the Henry James kind. As she observed while discussing *Surfacing* in an interview conducted in 1972, “There are various kinds of ghosts you can see. [...] You can have the Henry James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one’s own self which has split off, and that to me is the most interesting kind, and that’s obviously the tradition I’m working in” (Gibson 1973: 29).

3. Landscape that Kills

“Death by Landscape” was originally published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1990, and one year later it was collected in Atwood’s volume of short stories entitled *Wilderness Tips* (1991: 107-129). Since then, it has attracted wide scholarly and popular attention, and has become one of the most successful stories in the book, both with literary critics and the general public. Some book chapters and journal essays written about this short story focus on it almost exclusively (Hammill 2003; Raschke 2012; Rocard 1996; Vauthier 1993) whereas others analyze it in connection with one or more works by Atwood (Aurylaite 2005; Beyer 1996; Botta 2007; Howells 1996; Rule 2008; Wilson 2009/2010). Some of them deal with it in the wider context of Canadian literature (Mackey 2000) or the literature of other countries (Bruhn 2004; Shoemaker 1992). A number of scholars discuss “Death by Landscape” within *Wilderness Tips*, and thus tend to compare and contrast it with the rest of the stories included in this collection, which bears the title of one of them (Davidson 1996; Beran 2003; Bromberg 2006).

Those who approach this short narrative for the first time may be puzzled by its title, which is not the familiar “Death in a Landscape”, but “Death by Landscape”, a sequence recalling common phrases such as “Death by water” or “Death by fire”. Atwood’s title implies that landscape can actively kill, in other words, that it can be a malevolent monster which destroys people rather than a nurturing mother. Furthermore, Atwood’s titling her short story “Death by Landscape” instead of “Death by Nature” deserves a word of mention. If “landscape” is understood as “all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal”, it involves references to the visual perception of a physical space. On the other hand, if “landscape” is understood as “a picture representing an area of countryside”, then it refers to the iconic representation of a physical space. In both cases, the polysemic word “landscape” denotes an additional dimension related to human intervention which is not inherent in the term “nature”. Humans transform nature into landscape. The existence of some kind of human mediation in the term “landscape” implies that the type of death announced by the ambiguous

title of "Death by Landscape" cannot be exclusively caused by a deadly natural environment. It is not nature that kills, but landscape that kills. Thus, the enigmatic title of this short story signals a mystery expected to be unfolded.

Although "Death by Landscape" does not mean exactly the same as "Death by Nature", it is clear that the death-by-nature motif appears in the narrative. Atwood has discussed this literary motif extensively in her critical writings, starting with *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, where she defined it as follows:

Death by Nature [...] is an event of startling frequency in Canadian literature; in fact it seems to polish off far more people in literature than it does in real life. In Death by Nature, something in the natural environment murders the individual, though the author, who is of course the real guilty party [...] often disguises the foul deed to make it look like an accident. (1972b: 54-55)

In the essay "True North" (1987), included in her collection *Writing with Intent* (2005), Atwood established a close relationship between death and the landscape of the Canadian North. Granting that "one way of looking at a landscape is to consider the typical ways of dying in it", she mentioned among the hazards of the North: "death by blackfly", "death from starvation", "death by animal", "death by forest fire", "death from something called 'exposure'", "death by thunderstorm", "by lighting", "death by freezing and death by drowning" (2005: 39). This long list underscores the steady association of death with the Canadian northern landscape through numerous ill-fated encounters with the wilderness, but it does not encompass the specific kind of death evoked in "Death by Landscape".

Atwood has also explored the manifold aspects of this recurrent motif in the four Clarendon lectures collected in her volume *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), whose title is a quote from the opening line of "The Cremation of Sam McGee" (1907), a Robert W. Service poem about the Canadian North: "There are strange things done 'neath the midnight sun" (Atwood 1995: 3). It is in this book that Atwood provides her most comprehensive theoretical account of the mythic nature of the Canadian North, an often loosely-used term not restricted to "the high north" (the northern parts of Canada), but encompassing for southern Canadians "wilderness" [...] one of those emotionally charged concepts", as she noted in one of her interviews about *Wilderness Tips* (Kelly 1994: 156). The fact that Atwood delivered the Clarendon lectures in the spring of 1991, less than one year after the publication of "Death by Landscape" and coinciding with the publication of *Wilderness Tips*, encourages an interpretation of this short story in the light of *Strange Things*, where she presented to her foreign audience Canada as "North", a word whose elusive meaning did not go unnoticed by her most exacting reviewer (Wiebe 1996: 82).

4. "She Wanted to Be an Indian"

The first scene of "Death by Landscape" is set in the modern condominium apartment where Lois, a middle-aged woman, has moved now that she is a widow with grown-up sons. She prefers her luxurious apartment to her former large house, where she found it hard to cope with the lawn, the ivy and the squirrels. The first paragraph of the story reveals the protagonist's concern with safety and her desire to shut nature out of her apartment, in which she willingly confines herself. At present, apart from some potted plants in the solarium, the only reminders of the natural world in her urban milieu are the waterfront view of Lake Ontario she sees through the "knee-to-ceiling window" of her living room and the painted landscapes of the Canadian wilderness she has collected over the years. She acknowledges that she was compelled to buy these paintings, sketches and drawings by artists of the Group of Seven for no explainable reason (e.g. as fashionable wall art, or as the profitable art investments which they would eventually become). She acquired them with her husband's money just because she really "wanted something that was in them, although she could not have said at the time what it was. It was not peace: she does not find them peaceful in the least" (Atwood 1991: 110). Despite neither humans nor animals being shown in those paintings, she feels as if someone was looking at her from the pictures hanging on her walls. This comment draws our attention to a typical feature of the Group of Seven, whose members imbued their art with a spiritual or mythic dimension while they seldom included any human or animal figures. Furthermore, this remark indicates to what extent Lois is aware of how her favorite painters tended to refrain from incorporating any visible signs of human activity into their stark images, except for the occasional canoe or settler's cabin, but in some way managed to convey the impression of a haunted wilderness, a ghostly existence beyond the vegetable and the mineral worlds. The fact that looking at these pictures fills Lois "with a wordless unease" gives a first sign of the experience of the uncanny as defined by Freud in his famous 1919 essay, "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (1997: 217). This initial sign of the uncanny is to be followed by many others throughout Atwood's short story.

Immediately after this opening scene in the apartment crowded with landscape paintings, the setting moves to the actual region represented in them. Using Lois as the focalizer of the story, the third-person narrator flashbacks to the 1940s and recounts a traumatic event which had a crucial impact on her when she was thirteen and has deeply affected the rest of her life. The fateful incident was the mysterious disappearance of Lucy, her best friend, an American girl who vanished in the wilderness when both teenagers were at a summer camp in Northern Ontario. Since Lois was the last person to see and hear Lucy, she was interrogated and even

suspected of having pushed the girl off the sheer cliff they had climbed together on their own to reach a lookout point with a view over the lake. There are also hints that Lucy, who was particularly vulnerable because she had little experience of life in the woods and generally moved in a rather clumsy way, may have accidentally slipped. Or perhaps she committed suicide by jumping from the summit of the cliff into the lake, given that she was very unhappy after the divorce of her parents, disliked her stepfather, hated her new school and did not want to go back to her Chicago home, from which she had considered running away. She could have thought of suicide as an easy escape from suffering in a time of depression, when she was even "apathetic about the canoe trip", whereas Lois felt that she had "to disguise her own excitement" about it (Atwood 1991: 117). The enigma remains unsolved, however, because Lucy's body was never recovered, and the narrator, whose reliability may be challenged, claims to know nothing for certain. Readers are left to decide for themselves what might have happened.

Ever since that day, Lois was left with unresolved grief and a permanent sense of guilt. She spent years obsessed with remembering all the significant details of Lucy's disappearance again and again, in a continuous effort to understand what had happened, yet to no avail. Ultimately Lois comes to a point when she "has told her story so many times" that "she knows it word for word [...] but she no longer believes it. It has become a story" (Atwood 1991: 126). Notwithstanding, she applies her reasoning skills to interpret her memories from the perspective of the knowledgeable adult she has become. For instance, now that she is acquainted with the current debates about cultural appropriation, she is conscious of the ominous implications of giving to that summer camp the name of Manitou, a term for a Supernatural Power or supernatural power in the abstract, according to Algonquian religious beliefs. To make matters even worse, the dining hall of the Indian-themed camp was presided over by Monty Manitou, "a sort of mascot" described in the story as "a huge moulting stuffed moose head, which looked somehow carnivorous" and supposedly "came to life in the dark" (1991: 112). Those two naming decisions were a double gaffe.

Additionally, Lois recalls with unease how every canoe expedition was "given a special send-off" in which the head of the summer camp (whose name was Cappie, alias Chief Cappeesota), the section leader and the counselors, all of them disguised as stereotypical Hollywood chiefs, would perform a mock ritual "to the sound of fake tom-toms" (Atwood 1991: 118). The girls were treated as if they were bloodthirsty boys when they were told by Chief Cappeesota, "Do good in war, my braves, and capture many scalps" just before each of them stood up, stepped forward and had "a red line drawn across her cheeks" by the head of the camp (118). In retrospect, Lois realizes the dangerous potential of staging that ceremony

before she and Lucy embarked with their group on a canoe trip which was apparently auspicious, but ended in tragedy. Lois has eventually learned that Natives “should not even be called Indians” and now she knows that “taking their names and dressing up like them” is actually “a form of stealing” (117), but at the time she did not consider that “playing Indian” could be offensive to anyone. The third-person narrator of the story, using Lois as the center of consciousness, justifies her girlish desire to turn herself into a Native: “It was not funny, it was not making fun. She wanted to be an Indian. She wanted to be adventurous and pure, and aboriginal” (118). At present, she reexamines her former naïve attitude, searching for clues about the ill fate of the girl who dared to enter a wild space in order to seek adventure and primeval purity, free from the taint of civilization, without realizing that such a space was doomed. While contending that “physical landscapes are crucial in a discussion of national identity and indigenous rights”, Adam Shoemaker remarks that “the strangely discomforting atmosphere” of Atwood’s short story “is strongly reminiscent of the mystery of Joan Lindsay’s Australian novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in which school-age girls vanish into another dimension” (1992: 120). Professor Shoemaker, one of Australia’s leader researchers in the area of Indigenous literature, highlights “the disjunction between non-native cultures in Canada and the indigenous landscape” and rightly observes: “Atwood emphasizes the sense of not belonging to the land; of underestimating the animistic power of the landscape” (121).

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Another important aspect which brings Native issues to the forefront of Atwood’s story is to be found in its allusions to the symbolic meaning of the raven. Camp Manitou adopted “a sort of totemic clan system” according to which bird names were assigned to the different age groups (Atwood 1991: 114). Lois and Lucy “graduated from Bluejays and entered Ravens” (116), and just before starting their canoe trip they were addressed as such with the salute “Greetings, my Ravens” (118). Looking back, this seemingly innocuous game can be seen as a sinister foreshadow of the fatidic day, because when Lucy disappeared at noon, “Off to the side, in the woods, a raven was croaking, a hoarse single note” (123). Taking into account the transforming attributes of the Trickster, a bearer of magic and a keeper of secrets according to Native folklore, Lucy could have gone all the way and metamorphosed herself into that raven. If “the Aztecs thought hummingbirds were the souls of dead warriors” according to one of the two protagonists of Atwood’s short story “The Resplendent Quetzal” (1989: 154), there is some room, albeit small, for envisaging that Lucy’s soul might have ended up inhabiting the body of a raven. However, there is no textual evidence to support that Lois imagines Lucy mutating into the raven she heard croaking. Instead, Lois explicitly contemplates the possibility that her friend might have turned into a tree, another fantastic option which would be in tune with many legends deriving from

classical mythology. She ponders that, since nobody counted “how many trees there were on the cliff just before Lucy disappeared [...] Maybe there was one more, afterwards” (Atwood 1991: 129). This detail increases the Gothic undertones of the narrative.

“Death by Landscape” illustrates an important topic concerning the cultural role of the Native population in the fashioning of Canada’s imaginative space and its social implications. In the second lecture collected in the volume *Strange Things*, Atwood refers to “the curious and anxiety-ridden phenomenon of whites reinventing themselves as Native people” in the wilderness, which they perceive as “the repository of salvation and new life” instead of a place to die (1995: 9, 35). This phenomenon is linked to the problematized relationship between the colonial/postcolonial space and politics, as exemplified both in literature and in the visual arts by the haunting presence of the Native peoples who were historically first displaced and then almost erased from the actual Canadian landscape. It has often been contended that the notion of an uninhabited wilderness entails an imaginary exclusion of the Native population from a mythical territory erroneously conceptualized as empty. The paintings of the Group of Seven, with their iconic representations of the void Canadian wilderness, constructed an aesthetic which reinforced and disseminated a definition of their national identity that assumed the obliteration of Natives. Hence, it seems appropriate that their emblematic art is given a prominent role in a short story which revises and intensely questions the multifaceted spatial metaphor of the Canadian wilderness and its related discourses.

5. “The North Focuses our Anxieties”

Although Tom Thomson cannot be counted as one of the Group of Seven, he exerted a strong influence on it and had been associated with it before it was officially founded and labeled in 1920. The fact that Lois has, among other paintings, “two Tom Thomsons” in her apartment leads us to connect Lucy’s mysterious disappearance at noon with the death of one of the most famous painters of the Northern Ontario landscape (Atwood 1991: 110). Tom Thomson was last seen alive around mid-day on 8th July 1917, when setting out alone across Canoe Lake, in Algonquin Park, to begin a fishing trip. His overturned canoe was found empty within hours of his departure. His body, spotted floating on the lake more than a week later, was recovered, but based on the available evidence, it is still not known if he died by accident, suicide or murder. Atwood’s essential remarks in her first Clarendon lecture about this real-life case—which she had already used as an example to illustrate the same point in 1987 when she published

her essay “True North” (2005: 40)— can be applied to the unsolved mystery of her fictional Lucy, except that there was no trace of the girl’s body:

There was no indication of how he had come to drown. But everyone knew, or thought they did: the Spirit of the North had claimed him as her own. [...] Significant deaths, like significant lives, are those we choose to find significant. Tom Thomson’s death was found significant because it fitted in with preconceived notions of what a death in the North ought to be.

To sum up: popular lore, and popular literature, established early that the North was uncanny, awe-inspiring in an almost religious way, hostile to white men, but alluring; that it would lead you on and do you in; that it would drive you crazy, and, finally, would claim you for its own. (1995: 19)

In the same lecture, a couple of pages above, Atwood had mentioned “the uncanny lure of the North and the awful things it could do to you” (1995: 17). Fear of the North is the main reason why adult Lois would not set foot on it again: “She would never go up north, to Rob’s family cottage or to any place with wild lakes and wild trees and the calls of loons” (Atwood 1991: 128). The North for Lois is obviously not the Arctic, but it is nevertheless the North from her point of view as an inhabitant of Toronto. In her first Clarendon lecture, Atwood makes us think about the various meanings of the North, depending on where we are located:

What do we mean by ‘the North’?

Until you get to the North Pole, ‘North’, being a direction, is relative. ‘The North’ is thought of as a place, but it’s a place with shifting boundaries. It’s also a state of mind. It can mean ‘wilderness’ or ‘frontier’. (1995: 8)

The perception of the North (merging with the notion of “wilderness”) as “a state of mind” rather than merely a place illuminates the complex psychological process undergone by Lois, who denies that Lucy is dead because she cannot cope with her unexplained definitive disappearance. Instead of coming to accept her loss, Lois tries to keep the girl alive in her imagination, continuously struggling to believe that her summer friend may be hidden in each of the landscape paintings of her collection (1991: 129). Thus, a reading of the story in the light of Margaret Atwood’s arguments enhances our awareness that, as she wrote in her essay “True North”: “The north focuses our anxieties. Turning to face north, face the north, we enter our own unconscious” (2005: 33). Facing the north, however, does not assuage the crippling guilt felt by Lois, because there is no cure for her split self.

In the final scene of the narrative the place setting moves back to the apartment of the opening scene, with Lois still looking at her paintings of the Group of Seven, which are no longer called “painted landscapes” as they were denominated at the beginning of the story (Atwood 1991: 110). Her wilderness paintings are now appraised in stark contrast to those landscapes falling within the bounds of

conventional taste: "And these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense, with a gentle hill, a curving river, a cottage, a mountain in the background, a golden evening sky" (128). Deliberately breaking away from colonial tradition, the members of the Group of Seven wanted to create innovative art forms so as to develop a distinctly Canadian school of painting separated from those working under the influence of European traditions. As anthropologist Eva Mackey remarks, the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven "reject the European aesthetic in favour of a construction of a 'Canadian' aesthetic based on the obliterating and overpowering sense of uncontrollable *wilderness*" (1999: 56). The samples of this new artistic production which are owned by Lois are not soothing, but disquieting, even dangerous, because "there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path" (Atwood 1991: 128). They are dynamic rather than static, since they are always mutating and have the extraordinary capacity to catch the viewer in their constant untamed movements: "There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock" (128-129). Instead of being stable, "the trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour" (129).

In the last paragraph of the story the paintings in the living room are metaphorically conceptualized as "the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors" (Atwood 1991: 129). As Simone Vauthier points out in an exemplary essay, the rejection of the windows metaphor can be explained as a dismissal of a framed static image which can only be passively observed, like the waterfront view of Lake Ontario seen by Lois through the window of her apartment (1993: 23). On the contrary, the doors metaphor conveys the idea that the paintings are "lines of flight" (in Guattari and Deleuze's terms), open passages allowing transit and escape from a constricting frame of action and experience (Vauthier 1993: 24). These doors destabilize the thresholds between life and death, between the city and the wilderness represented in the paintings which elicit the ghostly presence of Lucy's physical absence.

6. The Split Subject

In the last chapter of *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), a book collecting the six Empson Lectures delivered by Atwood at the University of Cambridge in 2000, the author formulates the hypothesis 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” (Atwood 2002: 156). This motivation certainly plays a crucial role in her writing of “Death by Landscape”. Readers are likely to agree with Atwood when, a few pages below in the printed version of her last Empson lecture, she reminds them that “dead people persist in the minds of the living” (2002: 159). However, Lucy’s persistence in the mind of Lois is of a different order from that of most individuals bereaved by the death of a friend. We are led to suspect that the strong bond by which Lois remains linked to Lucy is an indicator of a pathological condition. For instance, it seems strange that Lois is able to describe Lucy’s physical appearance in minute detail despite having lost track of her many years ago, whereas she cannot remember what her own deceased husband looked like (Atwood 1991: 127). Likewise, she acknowledges that the most important events of her life have been effaced by her obsessive memories of Lucy. Indeed, she remains fixed on the circumstances of Lucy’s disappearance while the scenes of her marriage and the birth of her children have been obliterated from her mind not by the passage of time, but because “even at the time she never felt she was paying full attention” (127-128). Leading a lonely existence, Lois is deprived of a full life while still immersed in the material world. Her predicament epitomizes the theme of death in life (or living death) which pervades the last section of this short story.

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Lois believes that her tiredness is due to her living not one, but two different lives, “her own, and another, shadowy life that hovered around her and would not let itself be realized —the life of what would have happened if Lucy had not stepped sideways, and disappeared from time” (Atwood 1991: 128). This appreciation implies that Lucy has become her own dark double lingering about her, a separate self which functions outside but very close to her own self. Although Lucy is not really an example of the doppelgänger, because she does not fit its definition as “a mysterious, exact double of a living person”, she can be seen as a split feminine subject shadowing Lois’s conscious self.

In her recollection of Lucy, Lois provides many relevant details about their relationship which may explain why her teenage friend became a fragment of her repressed inner life when she reached adulthood. The fact that both girls were only children encouraged them to pretend they were “sisters, or even twins”, in spite of their striking physical differences (Atwood 1991: 115). Lucy was “blonde, with translucent skin and large blue eyes”, whereas “Lois was nothing out of the ordinary —just a tallish, thinnish, brownish person with freckles” (115). This brief description of their bodily features corroborates the preceding categorization of the two girls in terms of national identity, social class, personality and behavior. Middle-class Canadian Lois defined herself in opposition to wealthy American Lucy and felt inferior to her in most respects. The United States meant for Lois the

country “where the comic books came from, and the movies” (114). Thanks to such movies she had probably learned about Hollywood, one of the only three American cities which she knew by name when she first met Lucy at the age of ten (114). The only reason why Lucy was sent to Camp Manitou on four consecutive summers was that her mother, a former Canadian, had also been a camper there. Lois resented what she perceived as small gestures of Lucy’s sense of superiority, such as the way “she cast a look of minor scorn around the cabin, diminishing it and also offending Lois, while at the same time daunting her” (114).

Though friendship overcame past rivalry, the fact that Lois had seemed envious of her American friend may have been a factor taken into account by Cappie, the head of the camp, while interrogating her about Lucy’s disappearance. During that interrogation, searching for a plausible explanation, Cappie openly suggested that Lois could have pushed Lucy off the cliff of Lookout Point because she got angry even though perhaps she did not realize her anger. Lois denied that veiled accusation of murder by saying that she “wasn’t ever mad at Lucy”, but simultaneously thought to herself: “The times when she has in fact been mad at Lucy have been erased already. Lucy was always perfect” (Atwood 1991: 126). This contradiction between what the thirteen-year-old girl said to Cappie and what she actually thought, in the immediate aftermath of the tragic event and/or in the course of further recollections, reveals an internal conflict which would last forever.

Cappie’s unfair charge of murder had a pernicious effect on Lois’s development into adulthood and played an important role in the psychotic splitting of her personality. Lucy’s ghostly presence brings to mind that of Mary Whitney, whose ghost is supposed to haunt the possibly schizophrenic Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* (1996). Lois and Grace are split feminine subjects whose consciences are shadowed by their deceased friends, who act as their dark doubles. Both in the 1990 short story and in the 1996 novel the literary trope of spectrality serves to illuminate the shadowy or repressed aspects of their protagonists, who cast themselves as remorseful survivors and share the same malaise arising from a similar sense of guilt for having somehow failed to prevent the untimely death of their most beloved friends, or at least to have behaved differently in their regard after their disappearance.

7. Conclusion

According to Jacques Derrida, “The specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects —on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see” (2006: 125). Lois projects Lucy’s disembodied figure not on an empty screen, but on the painted canvases and drawings of her

living room, where she does not really live, but leads a life-in-death existence. Because she is plagued by the compulsive memories of the trauma arising from Lucy's loss, which took place in the wilderness represented in these landscapes, they become a sort mirror for Lois, who inspects them in order to look for the twin she pretended to have when she was a child and desperately needs at present. Lois is certain that, if Lucy faded into landscape and did not reappear anywhere else, she must still be there.

Although the word "death" is only employed in the title of the story, its meaning suffuses the whole narrative. Obsessed with death, Lois denies that her friend is dead for the simple reason that her body was never found, but vanished without a trace. Her neurotic musings are rendered by the narrator through a series of apparently logical statements leading to a nonsensical conclusion: "But a dead person is a body; a body occupies space, it exists somewhere. You can see it; you put it in a box and bury it in the ground, and then it's in a box in the ground. But Lucy is not in a box, or in the ground. Because she is nowhere definite, she could be anywhere" (Atwood 1991: 129). These reiterative thoughts allow Lois to cling to the idea that her friend is somehow "entirely alive" in her apartment, because "everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is" (129). Recalling how Atwood once said that she was most interested in one kind of ghost—"the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off" (Gibson 1973: 29)—the ghost Lucy can be interpreted as the fragment of Lois's own self which has split off. Since Lois feels that she has lost that fragment of hers while "playing Indian" in the wilderness, she is compelled to look for it in her collection of landscapes where she is sure that the ghost of Lucy is hiding.

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