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'Heavy with the unspoken': The Interplay of Absence and Presence in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye

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July, 1995

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This study explores the philosophical, linguistic and textual interplay of absence and presence in Margaret Atwood's novel Cat's Eye. The premise of the thesis is that the novel posits language as a problematic communicative medium; as such, language conveys that meanings of words are flexible, mutable and transient. It is through frameworks which both establish states of absence and presence as well as destroy binary oppositions between the two that Cat's Eye conveys its positions about language. Thus, textual and extra-textual discourses about the natures of language and linguistic meaning are situated within recurrent thematic and formal attention to relationships between absence and presence. By exploring the roles of absence and presence in various phenomenological and linguistic contexts, this study concludes that absence/presence is a paradigm in Cat's Eye for the way in which words are (alternately as well as simultaneously) spoken and silent, understood and misunderstood, opposed and united.

Résumé

Cette étude explore les aspects philosophiques, linguistiques et intertextuels de l'absence et de la présence dans Cat's Eye de Margaret Atwood. Cette thèse a comme but de démontrer comment le langage dans le roman reflète les facettes ambigues de la communication puisque le langage transmet le sens flexible, labile et transitoire des mots. C'est dans ce cadre où les états de présence et d'absence s'établissent et se détruisent que Cat's Eye prend sa position face au langage. De cette facon, les discours textuels et intertextuels ayant rapport à la nature de langage et au sens linguistique décrivent de la relation formelle entre l' absence et la présence. C'est en explorant les rôles de l'absence et de la présence dans des contextes linguistiques et phénoménologiques différents que cette étude conclura que l'absence/présence est un paradigme dans Cat's Eye du fait les mots sont (en alternance ainsi que simultanément) articulés et inarticulés, compris et incompris, opposés et unis.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Margaret Atwood for allowing me access to multiple materials from her papers at the Thomas Fisher Library as well as for her generous permission to reprint unpublished portions of Cat's Eye and "Theatre of the Deaf." I am grateful as well to the staff at the Rare Book Room at the Fisher Library for their unflagging cooperation and assistance. McClelland and Stewart has provided its permission for me to use sections of the published Cat's Eye. A Humanities Travel Grant from the Faculty of Graduate Fellowships and Research at McGill University made possible my research at the Atwood Papers at the University of Toronto.

Thanks are due to my fellow graduate student Robert Stacey for his clarifying leadership through my most persistent and problematic forays into literary theory. Professor Robert Lecker provided invaluable suggestions for this thesis at its early stages by reading and discussing with me drafts of my preliminary essay, "Clamorous Vision, Silent Speech: Covert Communication in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye." As well, I was able to investigate and test many of the ideas here contained in Professor Lecker's Atwood seminar in the fall of 1994. Finally, my deep appreciation and thanks go to my thesis supervisor, Professor Nathalie Cooke. She has afforded me tireless guidance, has provided innumerable and rigorous readings of my materials, and, most of all, was instrumental in helping me to direct my searches, simplify my meanings and realize the importance of locating precisely what needed to be said about this novel.

"Hearing nothing I am none the less a prey to communication. And I speak of voices! After all, why not, so long as one knows it's untrue."

Samuel Beckett, The Unnameable

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Introduction

it is time to stop
talking, we can't hear each other
anyway. We hear the words.
Margaret Atwood, "Theatre of the Deaf" (13:4)

Throughout her writing career, Margaret Atwood's work has remained true to at least one major subtext. That subtext, which Atwood approaches with both seriousness and innovation, offers language as a manipulating, artificial and imperfect discourse, a discourse with abundant and elusive meanings. For Atwood, language cannot reflect a supposedly objective, external reality; rather, it creates multiple realities. Values in the world, Atwood argues, are not intrinsic and realistic, but artificial and language-based. In a 1986 interview with Geoff Hancock, Atwood says, "The question is, how do we know 'reality'? How do you encounter a piece of granite? . . . People start to feel that there's some kind of inherent meaning in a particular word . . . . But if so, why is [an apple] called something else in fifty-seven other languages?" (209-10).

This notion that reality is based on perception, which is in turn based on language, pervades Atwood's writing. It is not surprising that with such a position comes Atwood's persistent attention to paradoxes, oppositions and dualities--namely, to systems of language which summon linguistic communication through binary conditions. Early on, Atwood's readers began to recognize suggestions in both her poetry and her prose that conceiving the world as duality (for example, as speech vs. story, self vs. society) may foster our understanding of communication and meaning in literature and life. In the first major study devoted solely to Atwood's work, Violent Duality, Sherrill Grace argues that Atwood's writing dramatizes "the duplicity of life and the struggle, in words, for an affirmation that neither denies or succumbs "(6).

What must not be overlooked, however, is that such systems of duality and opposition are not, for Atwood, firmly binary. Rather, Atwood seems to consider binary conditions a paradigm through which she can explore the inherent *multiplicity* of

language and meaning. Neither are such thematic and formal oppositions fixed and mimetic representations of an external reality in Atwood's texts; oppositions are not results of the inherent contradictions of all things. Rather, oppositions and dichotomies signal and are created by the inherent flexibility and multiplicity of all things (which are invariably products of language) and as such, they are reversible and playful.

In Atwood's novel Cat's Eye, language takes root in the schisms and relations *between* opposed entities. Recent critical work on Cat's Eye has indeed realized this and has attempted to make sense of the novel's refusal to maintain duality as interminably oppositional. However, such criticism does so largely by sustaining rather than problematizing theories of opposition. For example, critical readings of Cat's Eye focus on the visual as an opposition to the verbal, on the relationships of subjectivity to visual art and sight to subjectivity, and on the novel as an ideological treatise on topics such as the fictional autobiography and Canadian nationalism.[1]

Perhaps due to the recurrence of such readings which subject Cat's Eye to frameworks of structural and binary oppositions, what has remained largely ignored is a discussion of how language in the novel both fortifies and collapses opposition, thereby reflecting upon itself as a medium for communication and representation. It is significant and illuminating to read Cat's Eye in terms of persisting contrasts and dualities. But to notice only what is said in Cat's Eye--be it visual, psychoanalytical or political--is to miss what is so clearly articulated as *un*said. That is, in Cat's Eye, there is story--the ancient system of narrative--but there is also and contradictorily a rhetoric of

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[1] Concentrations on the visual aspects of Cat's Eye are multi-faceted. See Earl Ingersoll for the relationship of the visual and the verbal. See Sharon Rose Wilson for discussion of the play of visual elements within fairy tale paradigms; Jessie Givner in terms of identity and Elaine's paintings; and Coral Howells for exploration of the visual as it relates to autobiographical discourse. Judith McCombs also discusses the nature of autobiography in the novel, while Shannon Hengen concentrates extensively on psychoanalytic readings of the novel. Frank Davey's reading focuses on the novel as a specifically Canadian one.

absent story.[2] The narrative proper of the novel is the story *of* the narrator Elaine's return to Toronto; yet through the story of Elaine's return, the text offers a discourse on the thematic and formal paradigms of linguistic absence, a commentary on the language *of* story.

In the stories both of and in Cat's Eye, language takes the forms of absence and presence. These forms do not absolutely oppose one another, but occur as displaceable and exchangeable conditions for communication. That is, the relationship of presence to absence is ultimately one of mutuality, not polarity. The two states do not contrast one another, but rather fulfill, negate and engender one another, often simultaneously. Eleonora Rao is one Atwood critic who does recognize the collapse of opposition in Atwood's work. Although her book Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood concentrates more on the sexual and gender politics of identity formation than on linguistic oppositions, the introduction to Rao's study does target the mutuality of oppositional play in Atwood's work:

> Atwood's novels discard binary oppositions, such as truth/fantasy in so far as the dialectics established by dichotomies implies that one term excludes the other. In the reformulation of oppositions achieved in the texts we see how one term of the antithesis can be inherent within the other. (xviii)

It is correct, then, to recognize that words fail to re*present* and to deliver singular meanings and uniform truths. Yet it is crucial to realize as well that systems of duality make a statement that extends beyond dualism. Actually, they mark both the interminable multiplicity of language and the forever receding presence of language. The words *of* Cat's Eye thus successfully represent a discourse on the absence of words *in*

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[2]I use the term "story" in the narratological sense, to mean a reconstructed sequence of events, including events preceding and otherwise omitted from the perceived action of a narrative. A "story," as opposed to a "plot," is abstract, possibly anachronistic, and consists not so much of events as of events *recounted*. My usage of "story" is also distinct from my usage of "text," the latter which I intend to mean the actual wordings and workings of a written piece, regardless of readerly interpretations of story, theme, etc.

Cat's Eye.[3] The point here is not to make a purely linguistic study of the novel. Rather, the point is to explore how it is possible that speech and language function within the novel while, at the same time, they court realms of silence, absence and negativity within the narrative.[4] Such an investigation can allow us to understand how the novel itself can neither deny completely nor embrace completely the connotative and communicative powers of language.

In particular, an interpretation of Cat's Eye which realizes that opposition is not diametrical becomes the most apt way into Atwood's position about systems of communication. Namely, this position is that within the negotiating opposition of Cat's Eye, that of presence and absence, components of the opposition serve to evoke one another, even to become one another, and therefore to displace themselves as binary oppositions. Through the presence/absence matrix, Cat's Eye is able to argue that language is both multiple and specific; there exists between presence and absence a relationship which simultaneously distinguishes them and binds them to one another.

Atwood revitalizes our understanding of the workings of both textual and extra-textual language by enacting presence/absence oppositions and then displacing them *as* oppositions. The very concept of opposition is thereby turned against *what* it presumably supposes as well as *how* it presumably opposes, creating a condition where polarities become simultaneous and exchangeable. The oppositions of presence/absence order the text and create various textual and extra-textual ramifications; these ramifications in turn manipulate and subvert the very diametrics upon which the absence/presence oppositions are founded.

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[3]The nature of such a claim is, of course, highly paradoxical. However, this paradox is precisely what requires address. In other words, we need to consider Cat's Eye a novel in which language is a medium for communication and connotation--a presence--as well as an emblem and initiator of silence, evasion and omission--an absence.

[4]It is important to note that as both narrator and character, Elaine's observations, thoughts, actions, etc. do not directly or self-consciously consider language; this novel is neither self-reflexive nor metafictional per se. However, regardless of the nature of Elaine's intentions, her speech and language do indeed form a narrative that functions as a commentary on the nature of linguistic communication.

Immediately, the primary and fundamental paradox of Cat's Eye is apparent: how can a writer communicate an absence (which by very definition is a lack) *of* language *through* language? The second immediate and relevant paradox regards how Atwood may communicate a theory that language is an ultimately unreadable communicative medium when language also functions as the medium through which she expects her novel to be read? The paradoxes of Cat's Eye are multilayered, complicated and formidable. To resolve or fully explain them is impossible (especially considering that our medium, too, is linguistic and presumably subject to the same constraints as is Atwood's). At best, though, a reader can come to understand the unresolvability of the linguistic paradoxes. The quest in and of Cat's Eye is to find a language with which to explain lack and loss. Atwood's proposed "solution" is that characters as well as readers can explain lack and loss through language by embracing the absence/presence paradoxes of language. However, such a "solution" is a downright conundrum which is manifested in the narrative proper as well as in the more theoretical discourse about absence/presence which Atwood incorporates into the novel.

The key to penetrating (at least partially) this puzzling contradiction lies in recognizing that Atwood seems to realize her own ironies and paradoxes and to write her responses to them into the novel. In the same interview with Geoff Hancock, Atwood remarks, "Language *is* a distortion. . . . But language is one of the few tools we *do* have. So we have to use it. We even have to trust it, though its untrustworthy" (209). Putting this idea into practice, Cat's Eye demonstrates that "trusting" language means attempting to speak what is inherently unspeakable. Cat's Eye is fundamentally concerned with the paradox and problem that "We speak suggesting that something not being said is speaking: the loss of what we were to say" (Blanchot; 21). Language is inherently loss and lost, Atwood argues, but it is speech which marks and articulates the vanishing and inaccessible elements of language. Atwood's approach to literary/textual language understands the intrinsic contradictions and puzzling webs of language, and even

welcomes the realization that (for one) to be articulate and to be silent is inherently contradictory.

In fact, Atwood is so far from ignorance or denial that she creates relationships of absence and presence which inform and illustrate rather than attempt to resolve these linguistic paradoxes. Atwood's own language as well as her characters' languages *embrace* simultaneously positive and negative states of language.[5] By endorsing the fundamental paradox that presence marks absence and absence marks presence--that two apparently discrepant possibilities for speech and language interact interdependently--Atwood highlights neither presence nor absence per se, but the seam that joins these two conditions. She highlights the "site of a loss" (Barthes; 7; emphasis added), where neither deviation (i.e. silence in/of language) nor regularity (i.e. audibility in/of language) triumphs, and where the goal is not to privilege one condition over the other.

Because Atwood directs the novel, both formally and thematically, toward these paradoxical points where the appearance of something--such as words--also marks the disappearance of that thing, Cat's Eye responds to and evokes structuralist and poststrucuralist theories about language and textuality. We might even say that beyond its obvious role as a narrative, this novel serves as commentary about the nature of linguistic communication in a world where language and linguistic meaning are unreliable, unpredictable, elusive and elliptical. This perspective is especially interesting considering Atwood's frequent disavowals in interviews and public speeches of involvements with theory and academia.

For example, in an address delivered at Dalhousie University, entitled, "An End to Audience?" Atwood says, "The critic is that curious creature, a reader-writer, and he

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[5]By "positive states," I mean language that appears straightforward and inferential and does not overtly undo its position as audible and discernible speech. By "negative states," I mean language that is comprised of discourse on elements such as silence, blankness, inaudibility, what is not spoken.

reflects trends more accurately than *Toronto Life* . . . . As for the academic community . . . it's heavily into metonymy and synecdoche, but they don't have a lot to do with what writing is about" (Second Words; 356). In her interview with Hancock, Atwood is even more straightforward in her claim of a distaste for theory:

> I'm not very theoretical in my approach to what I do. As a theorist, I'm a good amateur plumber. You do what you have to to keep the sink from overflowing. I tried for the longest time to find out what deconstructionism was. Nobody was able to explain it to me clearly. (Conversations; 208).

For someone who claims such estrangement from the academic community and from contemporary theory, though, it is interesting that Atwood often seems quite aware of contemporary theoretical sensibilities. Firstly, even beyond the fact that everything she has written is on some level concerned with the problems of and multiplicities within language, Atwood's two "poetic prose" books--1983's Murder in the Dark and 1992's Good Bones--thoroughly work within an experimental, meta-fictional and self-reflexively ironic postmodern mentality.

Second, aside from her creative work, Atwood on many occasions reveals in interviews and speeches an awareness of poststrucuralist approaches to experience and language. For example, there is certainly a degree of awareness on Atwood's part of Derridean sensibility and diction when, in the same Dalhousie address, she says, "The thing being written may bear traces of the process that created it, and indeed it's fashionable these days to *write in* such traces . . ." (344). She may refuse to endorse literary criticism and theory explicitly, but Atwood indirectly demonstrates awareness of it and implicitly refers to it in much of her work. She often even goes so far as to refer to contemporary critical jargon, such as when Elaine notes that the name of the art gallery sponsoring her is "Sub-Versions, one of those puns that used to delight me before they became so fashionable" (15).

If it is read carefully, there is no question that the play of absence and presence in Cat's Eye has affinity with language-oriented critical theory; consequently, acknowledging

Atwood's (intentional or not) applications and manipulations of contemporary theoretical discourses greatly enhances our understanding of the novel. Indeed, a comment of Christopher Norris' on deconstruction reflects Atwood's "fictional" treatment of linguistic communication in Cat's Eye quite accurately: "Speech itself is always shot through with the differences and traces of non-present meaning which constitute articulate language" (Deconstruction; 36-7). For that matter, the play of absence and presence set forth in Cat's Eye accords with Paul de Man's assertion that any literary text "simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode" (17).

To understand the denials and "non-present" meanings of Cat's Eye, it is first necessary to understand the affirmations and depictions of the absence/presence paradox themselves. Thus, the first chapter of this thesis explores the phenomena of absence and presence, with particular attention to how the city of Toronto, various characters and the momentous cat's eye marble become paradigms for the paradox. This chapter of the thesis is essentially about loss, because it is about Elaine's attempts to reclaim, review and repossess her past, and about how such activities and desires demand both her and readers' attention to the relationships between language, absence and presence.

Furthermore, the character of Cordelia is the most powerful and extensive paradigm for the conundrum of absence and presence, as well as the most complex manifestation of it in the novel. Cordelia is both the central figure in Elaine's memory and narrative as well as the most salient example of the absence/presence phenomenon in the novel. Cordelia therefore needs a chapter of her own, and chapter two of this study continues to explore phenomenal forms of the paradox by concentrating on the evolutions of Elaine's perception of Cordelia. This chapter is essentially about how absences--of people, memory, speech--manifest themselves as forms of both literal and figurative presence, about how presence consequently upsets what Elaine receives and perceives as absence, and about how these situations are represented through language.

The absence/presence paradox is so important to Cat's Eye that it ultimately embodies a language of its own. Chapter three explores this language of absence and presence in terms of figures of speech as well as in terms of speech itself. For one, it considers the absence/presence language *in* the novel, how the paradox is spoken on various rhetorical levels. I argue that absence/presence is revealed mainly through figurative language such as metaphor and through an abundance of clichés and puns. In terms of absence/presence as a type of content, I consider the meanings and relationships of three negotiating absent/present words/concepts of the novel: "silence," "nothing," and "wordlessness." Second, chapter three considers the absence/presence language *of* the novel, how the paradox is spoken *about* on various thematic levels. This entails discussing the novel's treatment of states of hiddenness in general and of secrecy and games in particular.

The conclusion of the thesis suggests some questions which the novel provokes from its representations of absence and presence and considers why it is this opposition which is so important a vehicle for the linguistic discourses of Cat's Eye. Referring to components of structuralist linguistics and poststructuralist theory--namely, deconstruction--I suggest the importance of recognizing Cat's Eye's affinity with these discourses. In particular, this entails a discussion of the address--a paradigm which fully embodies the simultaneous imperative to use language and the impossibility of its completion and wholeness. Both Derrida and Atwood summon the idea of the address through a discourse about postcards, a discourse to which both apply Derrida's concept of differance and the communicative failures of language.

Put bluntly, this study aims to explain that the primary concern of Cat's Eye is with language and linguistic communication, and that this concern is both manifest in as well as a result of the fact that words simultaneously denote and erase meaning. This is one of the first Atwood studies that attempts to understand her serious engagement with the theoretical implications of linguistic communication. I am not disregarding the fact that

Elaine Risley is a painter, not a writer, and that she is primarily concerned with visual art and visual discourse. However, the novel's emphasis on visual art and visual communication takes places within the realm of language.

What I mean here is not only the obvious connection, that such visual emphasis occurs within a novel, but also that language is a crucial subtext and subject of all relationships in Cat's Eye--whether between artistic creation and the objects created, between characters, between the author and her readers, etc. What *plagues* Elaine is not her visual art, but conditions of language and linguistic communication, and this is therefore what needs attention. Further, what plagues the *novel* as a whole are the paradoxical transformations of and interdependencies between absence and presence, and attention to how they work within and what they say about language is the most advantageous and useful way to understand these paradoxes.

While much that is both intriguing and illuminating has been said to date about Cat's Eye, a great deal of attention has focused steadfastly on the importance and implications of visual communication and visual art while virtually ignoring linguistic entanglements (see Ingersoll; Sharpe). Further, these explorations of the visual generally consider how the visual manifests itself, but seldom probe further in the direction of why the visual pervades this novel so relentlessly (see Bouson; Hengen); I would argue that if this latter inquiry occurred, critics would find themselves paying attention to the ongoing absence/presence play within the novel. Lastly, if essays on the functions of visual art and the nature of Elaine as a visual artist do attend to language, it is often in an opaque way and as afterthought (see Beran; MacDonald). There is irony in this oversight itself, as critics so often deem language a crucial component of Atwood's other work (see Mendez; Walker): that is, critical readings seem frequently to fall into the traps which the rhetoric of the novel sets. Specifically, they do not realize that absence of language usually also denotes a form of linguistic presence, that oppositions collapse, and that what *seems* absent in and about this novel actually is not.

Put in the context of Atwood studies, this study provides a framework for analyzing her other work, all of which considers presence--of language, people, memory, events, etc.--as potentially realizable or sometimes even actual absence. The very recognition of the manifold presence/absence dynamics and paradigms in Atwood's work provides access to her persistent concern with transformation, deception and loss. Even beyond this recognition, though, understanding that in Atwood's writing, the very structure of opposition is not about polarity but about flexibility and multiplicity can allow Atwood criticism new levels of insight.

The Phenomena of Absence and Presence

I. The City

Before exploring the absence/presence phenomenon as it is manifest in the city of Toronto, we first must discern Elaine's roles as facilitator and perceiver of the absence/presence paradox. On the one hand, Elaine's fundamental (and literal) presence in Cat's Eye is as character and narrator. Returning from Vancouver to her hometown Toronto for an art gallery retrospective on her painting career, Elaine narrates her life story: she thereby becomes witness to both her past and her present. On the other hand, though, the language which Elaine uses to evoke, reconstruct and represent that past is evasive and focused on negativity and absence. Thus, Elaine's "absent" language does not accurately express the "present" condition by which she lives (as character) and speaks (as narrator).[1] By creating such a presence/absence discrepancy between Elaine and her language, Atwood uses one paradigm of many to express that truth is made rather than found, and that selfhood is created by rather than merely expressed through language.[2] In particular, the language of Cat's Eye dramatizes its own presence as fragility, loss and lack--it dramatizes its own presence as an absence. Conversely, when language appears absent from the narration (although, of course, not from the novel entire), it emphasizes the gaps created by and the ramifications of such apparent absence, thus positioning itself, paradoxically, as a form of presence. These paradoxes

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[1]By "present" and "absent" here, I mean to point out that despite Elaine's return to contemporary Toronto with a distinct purpose--the gallery retrospective--and a distinct identity--the "accomplished" artist--Elaine is persistently concerned with what is and what has been obsolete, incommunicable, vanished and inaccessible in her life and her selfhood. Absence, taking various forms throughout the novel, many of which I will detail in chapter three, consistently communicates these fundamental characteristics. Conversely, I will retain a definition of "presence" as that which is depicted in the novel as (unlike the absent) declarative, self-evident, understandable and recognizable.

[2]With this assertion, I position myself in opposition to many of Atwood's critics who see her work as immersed in moral didacticism and socio-political representations. See, for examples, Frank Davey, W.F. Garrett-Petts and M.E. Richards. Although Atwood's *intentions* may be socially and politically based, her *texts* fundamentally and primarily see the linguistic as political and the political as linguistic. I believe that above all else, Atwood's work, regardless of the *effects* which its language may have on readers, is about how language functions to determine, create and depict our social and cultural values.

surrounding Elaine as a speaker and narrator declare themselves through Elaine's reactions to her return to Toronto.

Toronto is an extensive phenomenal paradigm for linguistic presence and absence.[3] For example, at one point Elaine narrates that as she walks through Toronto, "Every building I pass down here among the warehouses seems to cry *Renovate me! Renovate me!* " (44-45). It is evident here not only that the buildings convey meaning to Elaine but also, we learn from the italics and the assignation of voice to the buildings, that this meaning is specifically linguistic.[4] However, immediately following this, Elaine says, "The first time I saw the word *Reno* in the real estate section I thought it meant the gambling resort. Language is leaving me behind" (45). Immediately, the language of the text, through the representation of Toronto, indicates that language is both audible presence and retreating, indecipherable absence.

In effect, even, Elaine deconstructs the earlier "Renovate" by linking it with "Reno." That is, by breaking down the word, Elaine also indicates its artificiality as a signifier and demonstrates how a word's meaning depends upon context and upon a reader's/listener's perspective for its significations. What is emphasized through this deconstruction is the mutability of language, the fact that environment is determined by

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[3]Throughout this chapter, I use the term "phenomena" to mean the elements of the world which Elaine is able to perceive, locate and grasp in some way. This definition of phenomena derives from Husserl's phenomenology, which posits a return to things themselves, and argues that there is a concrete essence to objects in the external world that is based on perception, not on empiricism or positivism. Cat's Eye seems to endorse such a position about subjectivity and perception in the many instances outlined here where the absence/presence paradox plays itself out in both the tangible and intangible "things" of the world. However, I would argue in brief that Atwood sees perception as subjective because it is primarily paradoxical and linguistic, not because, as phenomenology would have it, the human subject possesses a sort of omnipotent intentionality that, regardless of language, transforms perceptions in and of the world into universals.

[4] This observation prompts a crucial realization about Atwood's departure from, *through* her deployment of, general phenomenological approaches to knowledge. Whereas phenomenology attempts to discover how consciousness forms a system of being and meaning, Atwood's text, as we see in this example, attempts to understand how language forms the being and meaning of consciousness. For an explicitly phenomenological reading of Atwood's poetry, see Barbara Blakely.

linguistic perceptions, and not vice versa.[5] Even more explicitly, though, Elaine's suspicion that language leaves her behind is in immediate contrast to her previous indication that she *strides past* the linguistic clamor of the buildings. The question becomes, then, do words escape the subject, or does the subject escape words? In other words, on the one hand, if language leaves Elaine behind, it effectively renders her "absent" to its own reality. On the other hand though, the buildings which project this supposed "voice" are conversely left behind and relegated to absence quite literally by Elaine because she walks by them. The knottiness here exemplifies the instability of any presence/absence construction.

It is significant that the city of Toronto is a vehicle through which the text can render language simultaneously absent and present. Toronto, for Elaine, is present in that she is living in it for a few days, she is walking through it and meeting people in it, she is responding to it, etc. Yet most of Elaine's narration concentrates on the Toronto of absence; it is based on the Toronto of the past, of Elaine's childhood, of a Canadian culture and an urban posture which is different from the one Elaine now experiences. Elaine's Toronto is actually an absent Toronto, a city of memory and reconstruction. It is a Toronto that try as Elaine might, she cannot fully retrieve, and it is one which threatens and alarms her, perhaps due to this very irretreivability. For Elaine, the unknowability of the past is not much different from the unknowability of the future, the latter which we normally accept without much contention. Both past and future are problematic phenomena in themselves: we do not know what they "are" because they only exist as their own absences. They both occur in the present in that they affect it, but they do not

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[5]Indeed, Elaine frequently indicates, by deconstructing her own language, that reality is not natural but linguistic, and that as such it is contrived and constructed. Consider the following instance, where Elaine points out that words determine her actions and her environment, in opposition to a sort of phenomenal realism where actions and environment would determine language: "I'm waiting, in a waiting room. The waiting room has several nondescript blondwood chairs in it, with seats upholstered in olive green, and three end tables," and so on (376). The suggestion is that Elaine waits, because she is in a "waiting room"; the waiting room appears generic and banal, because it is a "waiting room."

truly manifest themselves as they so occur. Both the past and the future can only unfold, can only "work" for subjects, through the manifestation of other phenomena such as objects, people and visual and linguistic impressions.

It is with linguistic impressions that this novel is most concerned, and "things" such as Toronto function both as phenomenal "objects" which can affect Elaine's sense of the present and also function as linguistic and subjective impressions which can affect her memory, her narration, and her life experiences. It may even be toward this very chasm between the present and the absent--enacted in her life and in her language--that Elaine directs her narration. That is, perhaps it is not an *overcoming* of the gap between the past and the present, but an *awareness* of the intricacies of this gap, or chasm, which can potentially enable subjects to accept the discrepancy between absence and presence, between what is hidden (in a life, a self and a language) and what is not. At the very least, understanding that presence (of Toronto) is also absence for Elaine and that absence (in the form of the past) is also presence for Elaine helps to explain why the novel is so saturated with the language of loss.

As a matter of fact, the language of Cat's Eye, as Richard Stamelman argues about the language in Edmond Jabès's novels, is "the exilic speech of a wandering, deracinated" subject (98). Elaine certainly is in exile, and in twofold exile at that. Although she has left Toronto for Vancouver years earlier, Vancouver is not a home but "a vacation, an evasion," even "on good days" (15). It is noteworthy that despite her long-time residence there, Vancouver remains for Elaine a presence once-removed, and Elaine's depiction of Toronto's presence further emphasizes her place as an exiled subject. This city also does not offer the luxurious comfort of home to Elaine; rather, she says, it is full of misery and enchantment for her and in her "dreams of this city [she is] always lost" (14). Stamelman puts it well when he writes that "exile is *founded* on the absence, distance, and unpossessability of a lost homeland;" he points out how sensible it is for the language of

the exiled also to reflect and represent such absence, hiddenness and marginalization (98; emphasis added).

When Elaine is confronted with American draft dodgers, she understands their feelings of displacement because, she says, "Toronto is nowhere, and nothing happens in it" (355). Yet the interdependency and reversibility of presence and absence are clear, because Toronto, this exiled land of absence, is also the place in which everything apparently *has* happened to Elaine and in which everything is remembered by Elaine. Thus, on one hand, everything--not nothing--happens in Toronto. On the other hand, Toronto as an exilic land with an evasive and even hidden past *is* appropriately described by Elaine with such "nothing" language of absence.

The displacement of presence and absence is augmented when we realize that Elaine should be using such exilic language to describe the U.S.--that the U.S., not Canada, is the land of exile for the draft dodgers. The fact that Elaine insists instead on describing Toronto with exilic language renders America *truly* absent, renders Canada both present and absent for the dodgers and, most important, points out that it is actually not the dodgers but Elaine who remains exiled. Elaine's inverted reaction to her juxtaposition with the Americans emphasizes the exile that readers likely already suspect.

These complicated tensions between presence and absence in Elaine's language reveal that Elaine's world is one which is bent on documenting loss, on configuring what was and why it was. We may even say, given the abundance of visual imagery in the novel and characters' recurrent problems with linguistic communication (as I will discuss further in subsequent chapters), that Elaine is more of a documentarian than an autobiographer. The city where Elaine's past--her friends, family, homes, etc.--wait to be recovered is empty of all familiarity for Elaine. She is in Toronto not to tell her life story, but to confront and to record loss, to realize and document change and difference. Elaine notes that there are no longer any recognizable names in the Toronto phone books (189);

even physical landmarks such as department stores have metamorphosed into the strange and exotic for Elaine (188-119). Furthermore, Elaine only on one level emphasizes the "presence" of such absence. On another level, we realize at particular junctures in the narration that the "absence" of presence is significant and conspicuous as well. That is, the absent is revealed through specific reference to its *missing presence*; we learn, for instance, of the *particular ways* in which Simpson's department store is not what it once was, of *which particular names* are no longer in the phone book.

Because she realizes the intensity and abundance of absence through the presence of Toronto, the city exists in the novel as a paradigm for how absence remains an integral part of any presence. Her adulthood experiences in Toronto constantly surprise Elaine with their strangeness, newness and unrecognizability. The changes in Toronto make Elaine uneasy, and Elaine expresses her discomfort by pointing out that these changes emphasize absence through ostentatious and obvious presence. For instance, Elaine notes that the window ledges of the Zoology building from which, as a child, she watched parades are "now empty air" and she anxiously wonders, "Who else remembers where it used to be?" The intensity of such loss, the doubled sense of lack inherent in a phrase like "empty air," is increased when we learn immediately of the presence that has created such a potent absence: "There are fountains up and down this roadway now, and squared-off beds of flowers, and new, peculiar statues" (331).

Elaine feels so uncomfortable with the "new" Toronto that she goes so far as to disguise herself; she attempts to emulate and to mediate the unrecognizability of Toronto with her own appearance. She is pleased when she sees an advertisement for the retrospective on the street bearing her face, which has been defaced with graffiti: "I study the mustache and think: *That looks sort of good.* The mustache is like a costume" (20). Descriptions which convey that Elaine's own appearance has transformed into a deceptive one are very often paired with evidence that the city also has transformed into unfamiliarity. For example, Elaine says,

> I pull on my powder-blue sweatsuit, my disguise as a non-artist . . . . I could be a businesswoman out jogging, I could be a bank manager on her day off. I head north, then east along Queen Street, which is another place we never used to go. It was rumoured to be the haunt of grubby drunks . . . . But now its art galleries and bookshops, boutiques filled with black clothing and weird footgear. (19)

Essentially, Elaine is left bereft of any objective, completely reliable presence, and so must summon and conjure Toronto through a system that accepts the interdependence of presence and absence. She must summon and conjure Toronto, that is, through language. As such a model, Elaine's Toronto becomes a medium for language's evocation of its own intrinsic absences and lacks.

II. The People

A. The Retrospective

Cat's Eye's representations of presence and absence reveal to Atwood's characters, as well as to her readers, a world where experiences and relationships always possess an uncontrollable and unpredictable degree of loss.[6] For certain, Elaine's world is one in which it is language which overtly communicates the lacks of entirely present elements in an entirely reliable reality. Besides Toronto, various characters function as simultaneous presence and absence for Elaine throughout her life. For example, at a feminist art show in the 1970s which Elaine has helped to organize and in which she exhibits her work, Elaine repeatedly suggests that she sees people from her past who are in effect absent. Further, what is especially important about Elaine's mistaking phenomenal presence for absence is that the form of her narration also serves to confuse presence and absence for the reader.

Specifically, Elaine's account of the art show initially highlights tangible, visceral, communicative presence:

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[6]I use the word "loss" here to denote what is irretrievable, where elements of the world exist not only as themselves, but also as reminders of what is vanished, inaccessible, and where such elements are often, for that matter, present to Elaine's perception only as marks of their own absence from empirical reality.

> I pace around the show, up and down the former aisles, around the checkout counters where Jody's sculptures pose like models on a runway, past the wall where Carolyn's quilts yell defiance. (370)

Many women arrive: "They have long hair, long skirts, jeans and overalls, earrings, caps like construction workers" etcetera. There is noise and even voice: "There are greetings called, squeezes of the arm, kisses on the cheek, shrieks of delight" (371). The narrative is full of undeniable (physical) presence here; immediately, though, lack and absence begin to reveal themselves as Elaine notes that the other artists at the gallery "all seem to have more friends than I do, more close women friends. I've never really considered it before, this absence" (371).

This newly realized absence in turn becomes a sort of presence. That is, as Elaine notes that there is an absence in her life of female companionship, she also narrates, "There is Cordelia, of course. But I haven't seen her for years" (371). Elaine's perceptions before her realization of absence have emphasized the literal presence of other women and their friends. Her subsequent communication of presence, her "of course, there is Cordelia," confers a purely linguistic presence, and the meaning of such a sentence is ambiguous. That is, it could be either Elaine's response to her own previous comment about the absence of friends or her communication that it is natural to see Cordelia. The reader is unsure whether "There is Cordelia, of course" is meant literally or figuratively, whether Cordelia is actually absent or present at the art show. The solid presence of Elaine's environment and of other people leads to Elaine's realization of absence, and both culminate in ambivalent language that refuses to fully estrange presence and absence.

For that matter, perhaps we are meant to understand this refusal as the expected states of reality and language. Perhaps presence and absence become exchangeable and confused because for Elaine as well as for the reader, Cordelia is both present and absent at the gallery opening. The literal position into which Elaine puts herself even

emphasizes the inextricability of presence and absence: "I'm standing here because it's the exit. Also the entrance" (371).

Elaine's confusion and conflation of presence and absence often lead to the reader's comparable uncertainty about presence and absence. Elaine says that peering through the crowd, "What I see, over the heads, is Mrs. Smeath. Mrs. Smeath is watching me." We believe here, as Elaine also seems to, that Mrs. Smeath is present at the opening. However, Elaine in effect has understood what the reader has not--namely, that Mrs. Smeath is in a painting, and is not a live presence: "She lies on the sofa with her turbanlike Sunday hat on, the afghan wrapped around her. I have named this one *Torontodalisque, Homage to Ingres*" (372). Mrs. Smeath has thus transformed for readers from an actual to an artistic presence. Because Elaine's ambiguous narration has emphasized this presence/absence play, though, we further understand that Mrs. Smeath is present because she is in a painting *as well as* because her literal/physical absence is a form of presence.

Thus, Elaine's language positions the *idea* of physical presence in such a way that it suggests that the accurate linguistic and empirical formulation is not presence *or* absence, but presence *and* absence. Just in case the reader still does not understand the flexibility and reversibility of presence and absence, though, the narration continues to manipulate the idea of Mrs. Smeath. Elaine relates, "I look away from Mrs. Smeath, and there is another Mrs. Smeath, only this one is moving." Elaine thereby narrates that there is a definitive, present Mrs. Smeath in the room, recognized in contrast to the "absent" Mrs. Smeath represented in the painting. However, yet another layer is subsequently added to this presence/absence premise. It seems, that is, that even physical presence does not guarantee full presence, as Elaine describes this "Mrs. Smeath" but subsequently realizes, "But of course this can't be Mrs. Smeath, who must be much older by now. And it isn't" (373).

Elaine's language misleads with a final confusion of presence and absence when she decides for certain that Grace Smeath is at the gallery: "It's Grace Smeath, charmless and righteous, in shapeless, ageless clothing." Elaine does attempt to ascertain the "truth" about this presence, but her question "Is it Grace?" causes people to stop speaking "in mid-word" and no one replies. That is, Elaine's attempt to secure Grace's presence though language leads to silence, and Elaine, believing that Grace is present, is herself stunned into silence: "What is there to be said?"

Ultimately, this "mystery" woman reveals herself as severely agitated by Elaine's work: she verbally assaults Elaine and attacks her painting with a bottle of ink. Elaine and readers now know for certain that the woman is not Grace. Elaine and readers also know that this woman is clearly present: she is loud, aggressive and destructive. Yet despite such obvious presence, the woman exists for Elaine as an absence of Grace, as a form of negativity, and is repeatedly referred to as "the woman who is not Grace" (374). We see through the retrospective episode how easily decisive presence can become indecisive, how any notion of full presence is ultimately illusory. This is in striking accordance with Derrida's notion that the differential play of language "does produce the 'effects' of decidable meaning in an utterance or text, but asserts that these effects are illusory" (Abrams; 227).

For that matter, it is helpful to note that there are many more examples of the "absence as presence" phenomena in the manuscript of the novel than there are in the published version; these examples are usually more explicit, less subtle. For instance, at one point in the published novel, Elaine discusses her daughters in a simple, straightforward manner. They are unqualified and concrete presence. She narrates, "They look you in the eye, level and measuring, they sit at the kitchen table and the air around them lights up with their lucidity. They are sane, or so I like to think. My saving graces" (121).

However, in the manuscript, Elaine's same reference to her daughters is abstract and theoretical. Instead of a temporal experience with her daughters, Elaine communicates a theoretical, linguistic experience. For one, her discussion of them occurs at the end of an extended passage during which she has fantasized about *addressing* the *absent* Cordelia. Second, the entire passage's construction depends upon the idea of speech and articulation, not physical presence and vision. Elaine narrates, "If I were to meet Cordelia again, what would I tell her about myself?" The procession which follows use the potential of hypothetical speech to highlight the importance of both the said and the unsaid: "I would say: I am happily married. I would not say: Despite you. I would not say, for the third time. I would say: I live in Vancouver. I would not say: which was as far away as I could get. I would say how much toronto [sic] has changed" (99:9).

This hypothetical conversation continues for approximately five handwritten pages, culminating with a depiction of Elaine's daughters as absent abstractions:

> I would say, oh, and I have two daughters. I would get out the pictures, which I keep in my handbag. We would [in margin, unreadable] together over them. I would say: they amaze me and I adore them. I would not say: they are my saving graces. (99:9).

In the published version of the novel, this overt manipulation and juxtaposition of the said and unsaid--the present and the absent-- has vanished. This disappearance is compelling as well as somewhat mysterious, because Elaine's *linguistic* (narratorial) emphasis of the relationships between silence and speech would only augment the presence/absence tension in the novel.

B. Stephen

Elaine's brother Stephen is yet another phenomenal sign of absence/presence. When Elaine, as an adult still living in Toronto, receives notification from Stephen of his return to Toronto from his university job in California ("*Arrive Sun. 12th. My paper is on Mon. See you*"), she attends Stephen's brilliant and inaccessible lecture on cosmological physics (351). Stephen at first is fully (physically) present:

> he's thinner, and his hair is beginning to recede . . . . Someone has upgraded his wardrobe for him and he's wearing a suit and tie . . . . He has a look of amazing brilliance . . . . At the same time he looks rumpled and bewildered. (351)

Within a matter of minutes, however, her brother's presence turns into absence. He literally disappears from sight as "The room darkens and the screen lights up." Furthermore, as Stephen becomes an absence within his presence (as opposed to *from* his presence), so does his language: Elaine cannot understand a word of Stephen's as "he continues, in a language that *sounds* like English but *isn't*" (352; emphasis added). The only actual, unmediated presence remaining are the illustrations of Stephen's lecture, which Elaine still does not understand scientifically, as their presence intends them to be understood. Instead, she perceives the illustrations as abstract and disconnected from their purpose; she sees "diagrams and strings of numbers, and references to things that everyone here seems to recognize except me" (352).

Stephen indeed "returns to language" when the lights go back on and he can again be fully present. However, this return to presence occurs at the conclusion of his speech, when Stephen is reentering the social world and leaving the intellectual identity with which he is most comfortable behind him in "the dark" (352). He may be physically present, but his actual identity remains concealed and absent. Furthermore, this regained presence serves as a reminder to Elaine of absence. That is, it enables her narration of many childhood memories when they speak after the lecture: "I remember our life in tents and logging camps . . . . I remember his wooden swords with the orange blood . . . . I see him dive-bombing the dishes with forks" (353).

From her recollection of the past, Elaine understands that Stephen's memories are different from her own, that there is no way to fully render the absent past a presence. "Remember that song you used to sing?" she asks, to which he replies "I can't say I do" (353). Elaine realizes that Stephen has "lost or misplaced" the "things" of his past; his "things" are now only hers. This transference from presence to absence, which Elaine is

able to perceive as a result of her experience with the presence-absence-presence cycle of Stephen's lecture, renders Stephen's presence at the end of the lecture tenuous. That is, through his refound presence as a brother with whom she can communicate, she realizes the absence of shared history and mutual perspective. The novel thus inquires into how stable any recognition of a presence can be. The movement here between presence and absence demonstrates that any movement between elements in an opposition is potentially limitless, and that alternate displacement of each element is potentially interminable. Accordingly, her implicit realization of as much makes Elaine uneasy: "If he's forgotten so much, what have I forgotten?" (354).

This is the quintessential question of Cat's Eye: what has Elaine forgotten? The question also asks, how can Elaine (and Atwood's reader) know what is lost, how can one recognize loss? That is, how can absence become a presence? For that matter, if such absence indeed becomes presence, is it possible to prevent it from forever retreating and returning to the oblivion of absence?

III. The Cat's Eye Marble

The consummate phenomenon embodying this absence/presence quandary is the cat's eye marble. The marble is not only a symbol of both possession and loss for Elaine, but also and more importantly, it signifies the interminable inseparability of possession and loss (or, of presence and absence). When first we learn that the newest trend in Elaine's schoolyard is the game of marbles, the cat's eye marble embodies both presence and absence for Elaine: "They're like the eyes of something that isn't known but exists anyway" (67).[7] Elaine favors one blue cat's eye marble in particular; she will not play with this marble, and risk losing it in the game. Instead, she puts the marble in her red, plastic purse, and it becomes her talisman. In its very hiddenness, the marble holds a protective and captivating power for Elaine. The marble is present for Elaine only, and is especially present for her as an absence to others, as she carefully guards against revelation of the marble. For instance, when Elaine is about to embark with her red purse and the Smeath family on her first Sunday church experience, she removes the marble from the purse and hides it in her dresser drawer (101).

As we learn that Elaine's social experiences worsen, as we read that Cordelia, Grace and Carol manipulate, harass and taunt her with increasing severity, the marble's presence in the narrative declines. When Elaine finally does retrieve the marble from her dresser drawer and brings it to the playground, it remains secretive and private. She rolls it between her fingers, its presence is obviously palpable and full to her, but Elaine's language renders the marble's presence virtually absent: "'What's that in your pocket?' says Cordelia. 'Nothing,' I say. It's only a marble'"(151).

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[7]The idea that the cat's eye marble is the negotiating symbol, motif, metaphor, etc. for Elaine experiences and perceptions is a much discussed and important one, but also one that is too complex to fully explore here. For the intents and purposes of this study, I consider the marble only in terms of the degree to which it fulfills and enacts the absence/presence paradox. However, almost every article that I have come across on the novel discusses in some capacity the implications and meanings of the cat's eye marble. See especially Glover and Ingersoll.

For that matter, the narrative plays an absence/presence "trick" here similar to the one where Elaine's narration misleads the reader at the art opening. That is, this passage marks our first encounter with the marble since Elaine narrated hiding it in her drawer; the marble has since been "absent" to the reader. Yet it has been present to Elaine, unbeknownst to us, as she narrates that she has indeed brought the marble outside with her before: "Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees" (151). We learn, thus, that what we have considered absence in the narrative has actually been a presence within Elaine's experience. This discrepancy between our experience and Elaine's reminds the reader that there is more than one "reality," that language is not entirely trustworthy, and, most importantly, that presence and absence are duplicitous and are unreliable as polarities.

As Elaine becomes more and more miserable in the treacherous hands of her girlfriends, the cat's eye becomes even more than a secretive talisman. It facilitates Elaine's vision, allows her to see what otherwise she can no longer bear to look at: "It rests in my hand, valuable as a jewel, looking out through bone and cloth with its impartial gaze. With the help of its power I retreat back into my eyes" (166). The threat of losing this aid to impartiality is a great menace, and Elaine even has a nightmare that the marble is no longer a part of her, but is also her enemy: "It's falling down out of the sky, straight toward my head, brilliant and glassy. It hits me, passes right through me . . . " (155).

When her misery culminates in a near-death experience in the frozen lake of the ravine, into which she has been coaxed and then abandoned by Cordelia, Grace and Carol, Elaine is at last able to terminate her 'friendships': "I hardly hear them anymore because I hardly listen" (208). It is significant that now the marble disappears entirely from Elaine's narrative and fully becomes part of the absent, repressed past. Elaine acknowledges this disappearance in part when she narrates, "I've forgotten things. I've forgotten that I've forgotten them" (215).

The marble does continue to plague Elaine's dreams; however, it is never again fully present, never again fully itself. From Elaine's narration of one of these dreams, we are made to understand that the marble remains present in Elaine's sub-conscious (and as such it is still a consideration of and in the narrative), but that its presence is as something *other* than itself. The marble is present *as* the absence of its fundamental form. We are thus encouraged to realize the impact which absence has, and this encouragement is accomplished through pointed reference to the marble's transformed presence:

> I dream that I've found a red plastic purse, hidden in a drawer or trunk. I know that there is a treasure inside, but I can't get it open. I try and try and finally it bursts, like a balloon. It's full of dead frogs. (268-69)

The marble makes one final appearance very close to the end of the novel, and its appearance allows Elaine's past to return to her conscious memory. Cleaning out the family cellar with her aged and infirm mother, Elaine finds her red, plastic purse. She lifts the old, flattened purse, hears something "rattle" and opens the purse to find her cat's eye marble. The marble, now fully present (both in the palm of Elaine's hand as well as in her life) nonetheless remains hidden from the public, absent from her social interactions. "A marble!" her mother exclaims, and mistakenly concludes that it belonged to Stephen. "Yes," Elaine agrees with her, not claiming ownership within the narrative despite her narration to the reader that "this one was mine" (420). Elaine's presence is thereby still another's absence.

The marble thus continues to function as multiple realities. Its state as absence or presence is fully dependent on the perceiver, much as presence and absence, the novel argues, are more a matter of perception than actuality. Presence and absence are undoubtedly different here, but their difference is a matter of perspective and not an intrinsic quality.

For certain, despite its flexibility, the marble allows Elaine to remember her repressed past; in effect, its return has enabled her to tell the very story we have been

reading. The marble is indeed present when Elaine's past is present to her, and is absent when her past is absent and repressed. There is no flexible exchange between presence and absence in this sense. However, we must note an irony which undoes this potential polarization of presence and absence. That is, despite the fact that its renewed presence facilitates Elaine's linguistic memory and story, the marble pointedly provides for her (as it always has) a way to see, not a way to speak: "I look into it, and see my life entire" (420). Because of this irony, we realize that a purview of absence and presence as fixed and polarized is inconsistent with the other functions of the marble.

Specifically, it is inconsistent with the fact that the other polarities established by the marble are mutable, flexible and repeatedly de-polarized. Throughout the narrative, we have seen the marble enact oppositions such as speech versus sight, subject versus object and private versus public only to deflate and conflate them. This final assignation to the marble of a visual presence which is actually a linguistic absence is ultimately no different from the others. Full presence is constantly deferred; the possibility for full presence is suggested but never actualized. The very fact that presence and absence of the marble are at some times *but not others* times distinctive elements in a binary opposition indicates that even when structural oppositions *are* binary, they ultimately fail to eliminate the openness and ambiguity of signification.

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Phenomena in the novel are various and abundant. I have explored here only what seem to be the most important and informative depictions of "things" as simultaneous absence and presence. However, phenomena permeate virtually every discourse and concentration within the novel, as separations and collapses of absence and presence persist throughout Elaine's life, in both her narration of the past and in her present-day narrative. As a child, she is plagued by the inaccessible and elusive, and as an adult, Elaine is determined to understand, if not to recoup, those losses and evasions. The novel's focus on the child's, the female's and the artist's development addresses loss

incessantly--there are losses of memory, of language, of friends and lovers, and of familiarity with oneself and one's surroundings.

Yet to configure loss, we learn, it is equally necessary to recognize what comprises that loss, what makes language, people, experience, etc. inaccessible in the first place. Thus, within its dramatizations of loss and lack, Cat's Eye depicts elements and forms of presence which upset and frequently even revise notions and appearances of absence. Nowhere are these paradoxical relationships between absence and presence more fully manifest than they are in Cat's Eye's complex and persistent attention to Cordelia, who at the very best may be deemed an ambivalent presence throughout Elaine's life, and who exists at once for Elaine as friend, nemesis and phantasm.

Cordelia as Absence and Presence: The Tendency to Exist

When a frustrated Elaine tutors a uninterested Cordelia for their high school physics exam, it is Stephen who eventually points out the problem. Unlike Cordelia, Elaine understands that "Mass and energy are different aspects," and Stephen elaborates on the atom. It is "a lot of empty space. It's hardly there at all," he says. "You can only say that it has a tendency to exist" (260). This linguistic abstraction is no help, insists Elaine: "You're confusing Cordelia." But Stephen "considers" Cordelia and realizes what Elaine does not. Cordelia is like the atom, neither completely present nor completely absent. "Cordelia," he answers Elaine, "has a tendency to exist" (261).

In a nutshell, this is Cordelia's central position in Cat's Eye--her elusive, amorphous *tendency* to exist. The character and figure of Cordelia emphasize that presence and absence do not oppose one another as much as they transform one another and even become one another. Cordelia compels Elaine primarily through the mysteries of language; she functions, like language, as what is unreasonable but nevertheless inspires interaction and loyalty. Elaine endorses not Cordelia herself, but what Cordelia offers, which is also what language offers. This offering is of a separate world that is reached not through a system of logical acceptance or belief, but through linguistic experience and the senses--through imagination, ambiguity and multiplicity.

Elaine searches for Cordelia throughout her adult life not necessarily in order to remember the past, but more to understand *how* that past occurred. She even realizes as much at the opening of her retrospective, when she reflects that Cordelia can facilitate not her memory of events, but the reasons behind those events:

> Really it's Cordelia I expect, Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask her. Not *what* happened, back then in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her *why*. (433; emphasis added)

Cordelia can give meaning to loss and absence, Elaine feels. She is the ghost who can explain ghostliness.[1] Yet Elaine also recognizes the ultimate difficulty of such a lesson. She subsequently notes that Cordelia "will have her own version. I am not the center of her story, because she herself is that." Elaine realizes that all she can offer Cordelia is a "reflection," a different perspective on herself and on the past that they have shared (434).

It is not really time or memory which Elaine wants to retrieve, then. Rather, Elaine wants Cordelia, who is the center of her own "story," to help Elaine configure *her* (hi)story. It is not time itself which Elaine wants to retrieve through Cordelia, but the story *of* time, told through language, and the search for an invariably present Cordelia is actually a search for invariably present language. However, the problem, as Elaine realizes, is that Cordelia is finally about *Cordelia* and not about Elaine, just as language, finally, is primarily about *language* and not an external referent. From Atwood's repeated linkage of the nature of Cordelia to a conception of language which is comparably self-reflexive, mysterious, evasive and enigmatic, we realize that Cordelia and Elaine's relationship is about perception and perspective, and not about essence. Thus, what we will see in this chapter is that their interaction ultimately transpires in

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[1]Throughout this chapter, I use the term "ghost" to mean Cordelia's *virtual* presence as a *literal* absence in Elaine's life, her effects on Elaine despite--or perhaps due to--the fact that she is alternately physically absent, linguistically inaccessible, etc. I do not assign agency to Elaine in terms of her having supernatural visions, an intention to fictionalize Cordelia, a desire to be haunted and to render her relationship with Cordelia surreal, etc. Rather, Cordelia's ghostliness is a result of the linguistic relationship between herself and Elaine. That relationship is evocative of ghostliness because it is amorphous, elusive, represented by simultaneous absence and presence, which is also the way in which language and linguistic communication work in the novel. With such an approach to "Cordelia as Ghost," I position myself apart from critics who, from the start of Atwood criticism, have read Atwood's work in terms of: more "literal" and less figurative hauntings, the ghost-story genre, Atwood's response to nineteenth and twentieth century Gothic conventions, etc. For such readings of Atwood's work, see especially Josie P. Campbell's "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing"; Sherrill E. Grace's "'Franklin Lives': Atwood's Northern Ghosts"; Eli Mandel's "Atwood Gothic"; Judith McCombs's "Atwood's Haunted Sequences: The Circle Game, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, and Power Politics"; Ann McMillan's "The Transforming Eye: Lady Oracle and Gothic Tradition"; and Susan J. Rosowski's "Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle: Fantasy and the Modern Gothic Novel."

terms of a virtual reality, not an actual one, and that such interaction is consistently marked by the presence/absence paradox.

The linguistic theories of Cat's Eye, which I will explore in more detail in chapter three, offer language as a medium based on caprice, unpredictability and improvisation, a medium that is decisively not stable and reliable. Language is ambiguous, multi-faceted and multi-leveled. It both facilitates and obstructs communication, and although words may often appear to refer to realities outside of their own presence as words, they are primarily about the natures and conditions of linguistic communication more than about the actions and consequences *of* language. Furthermore, language, with its ambiguous referentiality and simultaneous offers of access and evasion, can be neither fully refused nor fully embraced in Cat's Eye's approach to linguistic communication. And finally, even if a speaker is to opt for silence or non-linguistic communication (which, as I will argue in chapter three, Cat's Eye's speakers often do), linguistic dynamics are invariably present to some degree in all social interactions.

Understanding Cordelia's position within the novel's absence/presence framework means keeping in mind these purviews and functions of language, because it is the novel's "attitudes" toward language which are the foundations for Cordelia's roles. These "attitudes" will become self-evident as we further explore Cordelia herself. Specifically, my discussion of Cordelia views her in two central ways. For one, I demonstrate how Cordelia is a paradigm for Atwood's standpoints regarding and attitudes toward language in Cat's Eye, most of which I have delineated in a general way above. Second, my exploration also considers Cordelia as an embodiment of absence/presence within Elaine's life and perceptions in the same way that language as a whole embodies absence/presence throughout the novel. In general, this chapter focuses on Cordelia's various absence/presence roles in Elaine's life and in the text as a whole, and on what those roles communicate about the text's views of language.

* * *

I. Negativity

The language with which Elaine describes, addresses and imagines Cordelia is frequently one of negative signification; phrasings emphasize what is *not* in attempts to locate what *is*. For instance, when Elaine says that she is searching for Cordelia on her return to Toronto, she notes that "*It goes without saying*" that none of the women who appear in a glimpse to be Cordelia really are Cordelia (6; emphasis added). Similarly, when she is reflecting on Cordelia's name, Elaine thinks, "Cordelia ought to be Cordie, but she's not" (77).[2] Elaine's linguistic impressions of Cordelia reflect the poststructuralist idea that "the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is not" and that because of this, a sign's "meaning is always in some sense absent from it too" (Eagleton; 128). Meaning in language, as we see in Elaine's describing Cordelia's existence (Cordelia "ought to *be*") by describing what is absent about Cordelia, is not derived from clear-cut oppositions. Rather, meaning "is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence" (Eagleton; 128).

To a degree, Elaine seems to realize as much: "There is never only one, of anyone" she says (6). Thus, Cordelia is interminably multiple and essentially amorphous and as such, Elaine realizes, Cordelia is not stable and actual, but is a construct. Never fully present or fully absent, Cordelia will continue to *signify* presence but will never fully *possess* that presence, and she will thereby continually evade any search for "only one" Cordelia. When Elaine thinks, "But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up, the one with the rolltop boots and the turned-up collar, or the one before, or the one after?" (6), she is really asking, "Is it possible to locate a completely singular person, and a single and accurate language and story with which to describe that person? Elaine's search for a

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[2]R.D. Lane's exploration of the language and character of "nothing" in Cat's Eye provides excellent insight into the name and the position of Atwood's Cordelia in relation to the Cordelia of King Lear. Although I do not explicitly refer to Lane's article here, I am indebted to its formulations for directing my thoughts on Cordelia and negativity in the novel.

localized and fully present Cordelia is actually her search for a stable language with which to "speak" Cordelia; Cordelia is a result of "conjurings."

Indeed, Cordelia is the linguistic challenge of the novel and for Elaine. She is the blank page: both threat and comfort, empty and full, absent and present. She asks of Elaine, even, what a blank page would ask had it a voice. That is, throughout childhood, Cordelia repeatedly poses the question to Elaine, "What do you have to say for yourself?"--a question which Elaine remembers and reiterates to herself throughout her adult life. The relationship between Elaine and Cordelia is symbiotic and mutable, like the relationship between the writer and the page. And as such, it is often quite difficult to distinguish who possesses language and who lacks it, to whom language is really "present."

There is considerable insight to gain in creating an analogy between Atwood's various descriptions of blank pages and Elaine's relationship with Cordelia. Theoretically, we may view Elaine as a writer, because she is searching for the language with which to create, communicate and stabilize Cordelia, and we may consider Cordelia the endlessly elusive "blankness" which Elaine must confront, a blankness which functions simultaneously both as a lack and, through that lack, as a formidable presence. Atwood writes in Murder in the Dark's "The Page," "Touch the page at your peril: it is you who are blank and innocent, not the page. Nevertheless you want to know, nothing will stop you" (45). Cordelia, like the page, is threatening and imposing; she may appear "blank and innocent," but this appearance is deceptive.

Nonetheless, Elaine pursues her, pursues language. As Atwood says in response to the question, *Why do you write*?: "There's the blank page, and the thing that obsesses you. There's the story that wants to take you over and there's your resistance to it." Elaine both resists when Cordelia is present and seeks when Cordelia is absent, and Cordelia as well spends their childhood demanding Elaine's resistance--for her very social survival--as well as Elaine's unflagging attention to Cordelia's position as a "demander."

Furthermore, Atwood's "blank page" is interminably present as a mark of its own essential emptiness: "Next day there's the blank page. You give yourself up to it like a sleepwalker. Something goes on that you can't remember afterwards" (Writer; 156). Many terrifying things go on in childhood with Cordelia, of course, that Elaine cannot remember afterwards, much as if she has been in a somnambulistic state of some sort. And just as Atwood's hypothetical writer perseveres despite her continual trance-like loss of memory, so Elaine constantly searches for Cordelia despite Cordelia's repeated and multi-faceted evasions and despite Elaine's various losses of childhood memories.

II. Subversion

Cordelia, who is an emblem of both the inspiration for and the prevention of discourse, is frequently linked with forms of the word "subversion." In the very passage in which Stephen pronounces that the adolescent Cordelia has a tendency to exist, Elaine "feel[s] subverted" because Stephen's language is able to penetrate Cordelia's cloudy mist more than Elaine's is (261). Similarly, at one point in childhood, Cordelia embarrasses Elaine for not understanding Mr. Smeath's apparently "subversive" joke about beans ("the musical fruit"): "You don't know what *that* means? . . . . What a stupe!". Elaine says that she is "doubly mortified" at not realizing the impropriety of this joke "at the Smeath dinner table, stronghold of righteousness" (133). However, she also notes that "inwardly I do not recant" (134). That is to say, Elaine is able to subvert both her misunderstanding of the subversive "musical fruit" pun as well as Cordelia's linguistic intimidations by retaining her loyalty to Mr. Smeath and to his subversive language. Both Mr. Smeath and her brother, Elaine decides, inspire her loyalty because "both are on the side of . . . the outrageous, the subversive."

Even further, Elaine subsequently realizes that such linguistic labels do not fully adhere to reality, that language can refuse to commit even to its own subversive or revolutionary power: "Outrageous to whom, subversive of what?" she wonders. And

Elaine's final realization here is that Cordelia, as both understander of the puns and jokes of language and as threat to those who misunderstand, is both the subverter and the subverted. That is, Cordelia is derisive of Mr. Smeath's breach of dinner table etiquette, and she undermines his subversive language by marginalizing and rejecting it. Yet Cordelia herself becomes subverted when Elaine partially joins Cordelia (through her embarrassment) but inwardly retains her loyalty to the very language which Cordelia opposes.

Elaine says she believes that Cordelia, too, should be on the side of the subversive and the outrageous. Yet Cordelia, as an emblem of both subverting and subverted forms of language, clearly will not commit herself to only one purview of linguistic discourse: "Sometimes she is, sometimes she isn't" on that side, Elaine observes. Most important, Elaine says that "It's hard to tell" which side Cordelia is ever on (134). Cordelia is tricky, whimsical and unpredictable. In this sense, she is subversive in her own right, because she refuses to subscribe to a uniform linguistic agenda and a singular linguistic intention. As long as Cordelia can subvert even the apparently subversive, she can demand from Elaine a cohesive, invariable language that she herself refuses to commit to. Cordelia even demonstrates such a position in her attack of Elaine's ignorance of the beans joke: "'What sort of answer was that?' Cordelia asks me sharply. 'Either you think its funny or you don't'" (133).

III. Ambivalence

Despite the fact that Cordelia seems to determine and control Elaine's uses and perceptions of language, their relationship remains multileveled and ambiguous. On the one hand, Elaine recognizes elements of secrecy and unpredictability in their relationship. For example, she notes that Cordelia's abuses and admonitions ("Don't hunch over . . . . Don't move your arms like that"; 127) are uttered only in privacy, not even in front of other children. Thus, to an extent Elaine acknowledges an inherent unspeakability within language, the way in which the "truth" to a degree always remains

covert and hidden: "whatever is going on is going on in secret" (127). Potentially, Elaine's awareness of Cordelia's secrecy could lead to Elaine's distrust of Cordelia. However, on the other hand, Elaine refuses to decide that such hiddenness is completely adversarial. Although from the distance of adulthood, Elaine's narration seems to stress the irony of Elaine's steadfast loyalty, Elaine nonetheless remains faithful throughout childhood to Cordelia. She comments regarding the linguistic torment wrought by Cordelia that, "Cordelia doesn't do these things or have this power over me because she's my enemy. Far from it. . . . . Cordelia is my friend . . . . I want to please" (127).

Elaine's ambivalence suggests that in some sense, she understands that dichotomies (i.e. friend or foe, secret or disclosure) are complicated and that oppositions are mutable. Whether it is intentional or not, such recognition of the flexibility of oppositions continues to reveal itself when, following the conclusion of this chapter in which Elaine has extensively detailed Cordelia's tactics, she opens the subsequent chapter with "None of this is unrelenting," with a remark that some days "appear normal" (128). The point here is that Cordelia and her language are *occasionally* helpful and non-threatening, that sometimes they *don't* deceive.

The problem with both language and Cordelia, though, is that they ultimately remain mysterious and unreliable: one cannot predict or discern *when* they proffer safety and when they proffer danger. Thus, Elaine worries, "At any time I may step over some line I don't even know is there" (129). This, then, is the lure which both language and Cordelia offer: both possess the ability to masquerade as a safe havens, as reliable presences, at certain unpredictable junctures in linguistic communication. And this is why language and Cordelia are ultimately so dangerous. They are shape-changers, capable of sudden presentations of threats and penalties that their perceiver/user did not even know to be wary of.

As Elaine puts it, "Knowing she's there but not knowing where is the worst thing. She could be anywhere" (134). Cordelia is at once present and elusive. When Elaine

communicates the above realization, she is in attendance at a play in which the actors, like herself and Cordelia, are children and in which, appropriately, Cordelia plays a weasel. The language paradigm is salient; Elaine waits and watches for Cordelia to *perform* (speech and action) before her. Yet we soon learn that although Cordelia is present, her presence is not performative, and is one of deception, indecipherability and silence: "since she's in a weasel costume with a weasel head, it's impossible to tell her apart from all the other weasels" (135).

It seems, thus, that there are really two main Cordelias in Cat's Eye. One is the *character* of Cordelia, who functions as a paradigm for the ultimate formlessness of language, for the endless presence/absence play within language and linguistic communication. She is a character *whose nature* demonstrates for the novel how language works.[3] The other Cordelia is the *theory* of Cordelia, locating Cordelia as a lens *through which* we discover the problems and paradoxes of linguistic communication.

Quite frequently, Cordelia as a character who represents Atwood's discourse about language and Cordelia as an embodiment of the absence/presence play that *is* linguistic discourse exist concomitantly. For instance, when Elaine returns to the section of Toronto in which she grew up, her narration fluctuates between remembrance of herself and remembrance of Cordelia to the point where both are equally present because they are equally absent. Elaine begins with definitive focus on her own former self: "This is my old route home from school. I used to walk along this sidewalk . . . . Between these lampposts my shadow on the winter snow would stretch ahead of me . . . " (408). Soon, however, Elaine's memories of herself "disappear," and the absence is filled with memories of Cordelia. Such a transition is first indicated by Elaine's linguistic emphasis on doubling, which by nature is a condition based on an interdependence of presence

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[3]I define "character" as a persona with an appearance, a mode of speech, a position within the narrative, etc., all of which are particular to her/him. "Cordelia as a character" means "Cordelia as a contextual and empirical presence," existing apart from the fact that such a presence also functions as a sign of the presence/absence play of language.

and absence. Elaine's shadow, she recalls, would "double, shrink again and disappear" as she walked home from school. Sure enough, now Cordelia becomes Elaine's "double": "Here is the lawn where Cordelia fell down backward, making a snow angel. Here is where she ran" (408).

The line between subjects here is an uncertain one, and Elaine's memory of Cordelia is just as vivid as her memory of herself: both are shadowy. Memory, like Cordelia, is amorphous and transient. And we learn that memory which is conveyed linguistically is even more so. This flexibility enacted within the opposition of a present Elaine and an absent Cordelia reveals the instability of presence/absence oppositions in general. Cordelia does not actually have to be present at this recognition, at this "memorial tour," in order to be just as present as Elaine is at her reminiscence. We learn about Elaine's past by learning about the presence of Cordelia, who does not walk in shadow before long stretches of snow as Elaine does but is instead active and visceral, running and falling and playing. Although Cordelia is absent from the "present" in Elaine's life, her absence is more of a concrete presence in Elaine's memory than is Elaine.

There are other indications that, upon her return to Toronto, Elaine's evocations of Cordelia's presence are her most potent and affective way of confronting Cordelia's absence. Furthermore, such evocations are often ambiguously rendered, so as not to represent clearly whether or not Cordelia is actually present or absent. When Elaine, in the fitting room of a clothing store, looks down to see youthful hands grabbing her wallet from the floor of the cubicle, she says, "I jerk open the door. *Damn you, Cordelia*! I think. But Cordelia is long gone" (47). As readers, we know that it absolutely could not have been the child Cordelia who grabbed the adult Elaine's wallet. What we do not know is whether or not Elaine fully realizes this, and for that matter, whether it even matters whether or not Elaine has a firm grasp on "actual" reality and on the "real" presence or absence of Cordelia.

In a similar vein, when the adult Elaine is approached by a homeless woman who, in "Full-blown booze madness," accuses Elaine of treachery ("I know about you . . . You're Our Lady and you don't love me"), Cordelia again is rendered present for Elaine in such a way that we do not know whether Elaine perceives the presence as virtual or actual. Although earlier Elaine observed that the woman had brown eyes, now she thinks, "Her eyes are not brown but green. Cordelia's" (163). Elaine's conveyed fantasy of Cordelia uses ambiguous language to destroy the boundary between reality and fiction for the reader, to indicate that neither Elaine nor Cordelia fully exists in either realm and, most importantly, that neither has to be perceived (by characters or by readers) as thoroughly present or absent in order to have an impact.

These random utterances, such as "Cordelia's," evocations of obvious absence, unnerve even Elaine at times and cause her to wonder about her own judgment. Shopping in a department store, for example, Elaine is startled by the saleswoman's voice. She notes the woman's age as her own, then adds, "Mine and Cordelia's." When she allies herself so closely with Cordelia, however, Elaine becomes immobilized. She subsequently has no idea for how long she has been standing in one spot "fingering a sleeve." She worries, "Have I been talking aloud?" and realizes, "My throat feels tight and my feet hurt. But whatever else may be in store for me, I do not intend to slide off my trolley tracks in the middle of Simpson's Girlwear" (121).

Elaine's words are ominous, as if she has no control over what is in store for her, and we cannot help but read this not only as the threat of aging, but also as the threat which Cordelia poses whenever she surfaces and haunts Elaine with her sudden presence. Thus, it is not just imagining Cordelia which plagues Elaine. It is also the very possibility of Cordelia which makes Elaine uneasy and causes her to lose her capacity for effective speech. If Cordelia were fully and actually present, her language might not control or immobilize Elaine. But present *as* her own absence, Cordelia becomes

especially significant precisely because she is a sort of ghost, because she is neither entirely present nor entirely absent.

Cordelia's status as one who is effective *because* she is both present and absent accords with the poststructuralist notion that linguistic signification is not about privilege and certainty, but about "a formal play of differences" (Positions; 26). In particular, Derrida says in Positions that "Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present" (26). Cordelia's presence repeatedly evokes what is missing or lacking about that presence; conversely, her absence renders her a potent and pervasive presence in Elaine's perceptions, many of which are linguistic when they concern Cordelia.

IV. Traces

This idea, in Cat's Eye as well as in poststructuralist theory, that signification and meaning are derived from the interplay of differences--or in my sense, oppositions--is given space in Derrida's work within the idea of the "trace." That is, the trace is the sign of the element that is always absent from language. The concept of the trace suggests that nothing in a text is ever simply present or absent; "[t]here are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (Positions; 26). The trace, for Derrida, is part of a larger system of understanding linguistic meaning called differance, the nature of which as well as the significance for Cat's Eye I will explore further in the final chapter of this study. However, the general principle behind differance is that any element--a sign, a letter--depends for its meaning on another element, creating what poststructuralists have come to refer as somewhat of a maxim: "the endless chain of signifiers." What is important about the idea that signifiers/words lead to more signifiers, and not to signs/objects, is that this means that any one element is never wholly present in and of itself.

Linguistic meanings as well as our understandings of language are thereby processes and results of distinction more than anything else. Any word or communication is formally different from preceding words and communication, and it is this formal difference, not some natural essence, which lends an utterance its meaning. And because meaning is always dependent on difference, signification can never actually come to rest in an actual and full presence, but instead participates in an endless series of differentiations and movements, an endless state of deferrals and fundamental lacks, or absences.

It is important that we understand at least this much about differance in order to recognize Atwood's use of the "trace." In many ways, Cordelia marks the "trace" for Elaine; she represents what is interminably present as its own lack. Further, the trace is a form of erasure--it creates awareness of absence by being a sign of incompleteness; thus, even when something has been written-over, changed, or defaced, it still, according to Derrida, retains a permanent trace of what it once was.[4] As M.H. Abrams puts it, Derrida's claim is that

> in any spoken or written utterance, the seeming meaning is the result only of a "self-effacing" trace . . . which consists of all the nonpresent meanings whose differences from the present instance are the sole factor which invest the utterance with its "effect" of having a meaning in its own right. (226)

Atwood's use of the "trace" extends even beyond Cordelia to Elaine's perceptions of her own "defaced" face. Specifically, Elaine notices that the promotional poster for her retrospective which bears her face has been covered with graffiti, as I discussed briefly in the previous chapter. Elaine has been written over, rewritten, with a magic marker mustache. She compares the mustache not to other visual graffiti, but to linguistic graffiti: "Is it more like *Kilroy Was Here* or more like *Fuck Off*?" It is notable that Elaine compares the visual graffiti on her poster to linguistic graffiti because such a reaction suggests the poststructuralist idea that any meaning in and understanding of language is

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[4]See Derrida's essay "Freud and the Scene of Writing" in Writing and Difference for a fuller discussion of traces and "written-over" language.

possible only when we recognize that all words "contain the trace of ones which have gone before, and hold [themselves] open to the trace of those which are coming after" (Eagleton; 128).[5] Elaine is both present in this poster as her "original" self as well as "absent" to that self (because she has been altered by the mustache and now refers also to something outside herself).

The importance of the trace is that it is just that, a *trace*: as it alters, it also calls attention to that alteration, thereby retaining a mark not only of the "new" writing but also of what has been written over. Thus, Elaine's consideration of what remains recognizable beneath such graffiti is understandable: "I wonder if Cordelia will see this poster. I wonder if she'll recognize me, despite the mustache" (20-21). What Elaine really wants to know, what the novel itself wants to know for that matter, is whether it is possible to recognize someone/something only from its traces. What effect do the disguises and alterations within signs--both linguistic and physical--have on their subjects? How do we come to realize and understand that a change--in a word, a character, a person, a memory, etc.--represents both its own state as a presence, as an alteration, as well as draws attention to the absence that its very presence has engendered? And how is it exactly that a presence exists as a sign of and for an absence, and an absence a sign of and for presence?

V. Holes and the Unknown

Cat's Eye poses these questions more as signs that subjects--both textual and extra-textual--need to reconsider their uses of and relationships to language than as potentially answerable inquiries. However, we can draw some general conclusions through the process of charting and considering the many deployments of the

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[5]Besides the affinity which Cat's Eye shares here with poststructuralist theory, Elaine's comment "But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up . . . or the one before, of the one after?" (6), which I refer to earlier in this chapter, also resonates with this poststructuralist notion that words depend for their meaning on what precedes and what follows them, and are never entirely fixed in one sense of themselves.

absence/presence framework. In particular, just as traces within the novel participate in a discourse about the language *of* the novel, holes also have a dual function in Cat's Eye and raise issues similar to the ones that graffiti raise. Cordelia is frequently associated with holes and gaps in the earth. The "ground," we learn from Cordelia, may appear solid but actually is not reliably and unequivocally so. First, Cordelia becomes intent on digging a hole in her backyard. She has dug before, Elaine notes, but this hole is bigger and "more promising" than ever before, and it progressively "gets deeper and deeper" (111). Even further, Cordelia does not want this hole to appear as itself, but to deceive; that is, she wants eventually "to cover it over with boards" (111). In the first place, such a "hole" is interesting because it is simultaneously absence--of ground and solidity, in this case--and presence--a chasm is itself present as its own lack and emptiness. In the second place, Cordelia wants to create such simultaneous absence and presence in order that it subsequently appear as pure, unadulterated presence. Cordelia's hole, like language itself, is potentially undetectable and lurks beneath a supposedly reliable and discernible surface.

In both Cat's Eye and poststructuralist theory, "holes" mark the blind spots in experience. Cordelia's intention to cover her hole corresponds with the moments in self-contradiction, according to Derrida's notion of gaps or "*aporias*," where a structure--i.e. Cordelia, a hole in the ground, a text--betrays its own logic. An *aporia* is a lack of rationality, a "self-engendered paradox" (Deconstruction; 49). Cordelia digs the hole, and then proceeds to demonstrate that it is not completely as it appears, that it is simultaneously a lack and a presence, a paradox. According to Christopher Norris, *aporias* represent the effects of differance, which allows the dismantling of oppositions and the affect of a deviance that is simultaneously a distinction and a deferral of full presence (Derrida; 19).

Indeed, the affect of Cordelia's hole, her "differance," upon Elaine abolishes the boundaries between absence and presence, and establishes absence and presence as

simultaneous and inextricable. Specifically, Cordelia, Grace and Carol lower Elaine into the hole, and proceed to arrange the boards over the top. At once, Elaine perceives both everything and nothing: "I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens . . . I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal." The *aporias* within communication do indeed relegate speakers to this sort of passivity, to involvement within "an insuperable deadlock, or 'double bind,' of incompatible or contradictory meanings which are 'undecidable' in that we [or in this case, Elaine] lack any available and sufficient ground for choosing among them" (Abrams; 228).

The hole is even more literally a "blind spot" for Elaine when she says, "Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror" (112). Stuck in the hole, Elaine experiences the paradox of presence marking absence and absence marking presence, and her remembrance as an adult of this event uses language which reflects this paradox: "I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square *filled with nothing*, a square like a door" (112; emphasis added). The confluence of presence and absence is even more pronounced when Elaine subsequently equates a "marker," or sign, with emptiness: "Perhaps the square is *empty*; perhaps it's *only a marker*" (112; emphasis added).

The second important hole associated with Cordelia is the ravine, and this hole has even more significance in the novel than does the hole that Cordelia digs in her yard. Throughout the novel, the ravine represents the ultimate treachery of the unknown in the novel; the girls are taught that it is a mysterious, dangerous place in which "bad men" lurk and which they must never enter (79-80). The crucial episode involving the ravine, which I mentioned in passing in chapter one, occurs as the final torture inflicted on Elaine by Cordelia, Grace and Carol.

Initially, the event seems commonplace: Elaine has once again transgressed in some unknown way, and Cordelia is deciding on her "punishment": "'Lying again,' she

says. 'What are we going to do with you'?" (199). They walk on the bridge over the ravine--the bridge which covers the "gap" and *appears* as a safe threshold, much as Cordelia's boards were intended to cover her own creation of a foreboding absence. Cordelia throws Elaine's hat into the ravine, and coaxes her to retrieve it: "'Go on then,' she says, more gently, as if she's encouraging me, not ordering. 'Then you'll be forgiven'" (200).

Elaine descends into the ravine and enters the icy creek for her hat. The ice, however, breaks, and Elaine falls through it to freezing danger. The girls disappear, and Elaine finally emerges with "knives going through [her] legs and hands, and tears running down [her] face from the pain" (201-02). Although Cordelia's language ("you'll be forgiven") was an implied promise of social redemption if Elaine were to enter the mysterious and forbidden ravine, when Elaine emerges, Cordelia has vanished. Cordelia initially promises a language of grace and rescue; she promises that if Elaine responds to her prior linguistic denouncement by entering the ravine and retrieving her hat, Cordelia will find other words, words of forgiveness, with which to help Elaine. Once Elaine enters the "abyss" of that underworld of linguistic pacts, however, the speaker of such promise is absent. Cordelia, like language itself, reveals herself as absent just when she is most expected, appropriate and necessary.

In Cordelia's place is Elaine's hallucination of the Virgin Mary, an imagining which becomes the missing presence that Elaine needs and which is able to speak the words that she needs to hear:

> I feel her around me, not like arms but like a small wind of warmer air. She's telling me something.
> *You can go home now*, she says. *It will be all right. Go home.* (203)

Because of this conspicuous absence of Cordelia and the estrangement of words from the subject that should speak them, there is inherent disorder in the Virgin Mary speaking for Cordelia. That is, Elaine's perception of an apparition unsettles the stability of presence/absence as an opposition. For one, like a ghost, an apparition is both absence

and presence. Second, Cordelia is absent, yet the words which she should speak are not. Elaine's narration appropriately communicates such a paradoxical state, where silence is speech and speech is silence: "I don't hear the words out loud, but this is what she says" (203).

Elaine does not indicate that the Virgin Mary's words are unreal, only that they are silent and inaudible, and this is because absence is itself a reality in Cat's Eye. The reality marked and caused by both presence and absence is a virtual and linguistic one, not an actual and essential one. We can gather from this episode that Cordelia is the catalyst both for the presence and the absence of language within the novel as well as for the text's comments about the mutability of oppositions. Cordelia's disappearance reinforces Cat's Eye's suggestion that language is necessary not only to signify speech, but also to signify the potency of the revocation of speech.

The Virgin Mary is surreal, and she does not depend on the appearance of solid ground as Elaine does: "she's coming toward me as if walking, but there's nothing for her to walk on" (202-03). Furthermore, "Inside her cloak is a glimpse of red . . . . It must be her heart, on the outside of her body, glowing like neon, like a coal" (203). Indeed, what rescues Elaine is a state of simultaneous absence and presence, a figure who appears real but is actually not, and who speaks for an absent subject. Thus, whether speech is virtual because its speaker is an apparition (the Virgin Mary) or because its "true" speaker is absent from the words that signify and refer to her (Cordelia), the suggestion is that "real presence" and "absent presence" are ultimately not oppositional. In fact, as Elaine indeed depicts her savior as surreal, she also perceives her and her effects as quite real. She says, "The *person* who was standing on the bridge is moving through the railing, or melting into it. It's a *woman* . . . ." (202; emphasis added).

The ravine episode becomes yet another means through which the novel can establish and then annihilate the idea of full presence, as well as a means through which it can employ a paradigm for the mysterious holes/gaps in language and linguistic

communication. The episode, where a simultaneous presence and absence--in the form of the Virgin Mary -- rescues Elaine, marks the turning point in Elaine's relationship with Cordelia. Her experience with present and absent voices and figures in the ravine is so powerful that Elaine subsequently represses it, and cannot recall it even years later when her mother mentions it (417). Because she forbids the experience--whether consciously or not--from informing her future perceptions, Elaine fails to realize after the ravine experience that it is not absence *or* presence which "saves," but rather absence *and* presence. Thus, Elaine henceforth continues her search to stabilize Cordelia and to resolve the absence/presence paradox.

VI. The Hidden

Cordelia's childhood ring-leading powers are language-based, not action based. Elaine notes as much when she says that the torture engendered by Cordelia's bullying is not physical and stable, but linguistic and multi-voiced. Her brother cannot rescue her, Elaine decides, mainly because "Cordelia does nothing physical . . . . Against girls and their indirectness, their whisperings, he would be helpless" (167). Cordelia's power, which is tantamount to the power of language, lies in her ability to *appear* as presence, to wear a facade of action and consequence, while failing to be truly present as anything but her words.

Indeed, Cordelia is often an emblem of whispers, often a catalyst for fragmented and secretive linguistic communication. For instance, at one point Cordelia initiates and supervises a secret meeting about Elaine. Elaine is relegated to the hallway outside Cordelia's bedroom door, while inside the room, Cordelia, Grace and Carol use a language that, for Elaine, points to its own unreadability and inaccessibility: "From behind the door comes the indistinct murmur of voices, of laughter, exclusive and luxurious" (124).

When Cordelia's sisters ask Elaine, "What's the little game today?", Elaine responds "I can't tell" (124). There is a double meaning to Elaine's response. She cannot *speak* what is going on, because to report the exclusion would be to incur the wrath of Cordelia, and she also cannot *perceive* what is going on in this forbidden room of whispers and voices. Elaine knows what is in the room only to the degree that she knows that language is present to others while it is a lack, an absence and exclusion, to her. Further, beyond the fact that she is absent from social, group language, Elaine is also without access to her own voice, to her own possession of language. That is, language and silence are not just motives and emblems of the Other for Elaine, but they also invade her own subjectivity and ability to use language: "Even to myself I am mute" (124).

Finally, Cordelia, as the form of present language within the room and absent language outside it, speaks from behind the door to Elaine: "You can come in now" (125). We might expect that because Elaine is now permitted entry to this room of apparently discernible and meaningful language, the absence/presence problem will be to a degree alleviated or resolved. However, Elaine's world remains fragmented, and the interplay of appearance and disappearance continues: "I look at the closed door, the doorknob, at my own hand moving up, as if it's no longer a part of me" (125). Elaine's experiences continue to reflect randomness, as objects are alienated from their referents. Parts do not comprise wholes, and everything is a matter of Elaine's fragmented, absent/present perspective, not a product of essentialism. Indeed, the absence/presence play of language even destroys subject/object oppositions: Elaine is just as much a part of, or not a part of, the doorknob as she is of her own hand.[6]

Clearly, Cordelia's and Elaine's relationship centers on language more than action and, most remarkably, actions which do occur usually respond to rather than initiate or cause speech. For example, when Elaine sits alone on a window sill watching a holiday parade (notably, she sits on a dangerous edge, a threatening border, also evocative of the position of words in the novel), the other girls sit "jammed together, whispering and giggling." Elaine must sit alone because the other girls are not speaking to her. They are not speaking to her because she has "said something wrong," although she cannot locate this vague, linguistic "something" because they will not tell her what it is (123). The

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[6]A similar destruction of subject/object dichotomy in relation to Cordelia and language occurs years later, when Cordelia and Elaine get back in touch after at least seven years of silence. It is impossible to tell from the ambiguous narration who has produced language and who has received it in order to facilitate Cordelia's and Elaine's speaking; we do not know who possesses language and who lacks it. Elaine does not specify who contacted whom first, who invited whom into the "linguistic room." She says only, "I am waiting for Cordelia. Or I think it will be Cordelia: her voice on the phone did not sound like her, but slower and somehow damaged" (377). Linguistic communication remains a matter of hiddenness and mystery and Cordelia, appropriately, sounds alien and is "trapped" inside a rest home. As when they were children, Elaine must again enter Cordelia's world if they are to have a full linguistic relationship, beyond the telephone call: "'I can't go out,' Cordelia said, in the same slowed-down voice. "You'll have to come here.' And so I am here" (377).

entire ostracism of Elaine is based on the presence of unsaid and mysteriously absent language; it is impossible to locate the social positionings and potentially violent underpinnings of Elaine's position in a non-linguistic context.

Cordelia tortures Elaine by telling her to recall all that she has said that day in order to find the misspoken words; it is best, she says, that Elaine find the words by herself, with no help from others. This is the ultimate linguistic manipulation, convincing Elaine that non-existent language, absent language, is actually a potent and transgressive present language. As readers, we realize the cruelty of this game, which enables us to realize that there is no ultimately wrong or right language--that all language, rather, is multiple, all language is both helpful and hazardous, tool and absence. At least in childhood, though, Elaine does not realize this, and plaintively searches for what she has "said wrong" despite her suspicion that "I can't remember having said anything different from what I would ordinarily say" (123).

VII. Game and Nonsense

Cordelia's language is frequently this ambiguous; she repeatedly and successfully capitalizes on her ability to turn words against Elaine, on the potential within language to contradict and reverse itself. "How's the little baby today?" asks Cordelia. When Elaine answers, "He's fine," Cordelia has the perfect opening to retort, "I didn't mean him, I meant you" (143). Cordelia enjoys the ambiguity and trickery of word games excessively, relying on puns and linguistic jokes to turn language against Elaine, to point out that Elaine cannot rely on linguistic signifiers for any sort of social refuge.

"If a man who catches a fish is a fisher, what's a man who catches bugs?" Cordelia asks and Elaine attempts to evade the question with "I don't know." Cordelia encourages her to find the linguistic answer, however: "Go on. Figure it out. It's really simple." Of course, when Elaine comes up with the obvious answer, " A bugger," she is successfully ensnared by her own language. "Bugger" is a dirty word, Elaine realizes, and Cordelia

scolds, "You should be ashamed. You should have your mouth washed out with soap" (144).[7] A nonsense language of transient and mutable meaning is the very language which Cordelia employs to limit Elaine's freedom and set her linguistic boundaries.

As a matter of fact, in her study on nonsense, Elizabeth Sewell suggests that despite the fact that nonsense speech appears flexible and playful, it has definite rules; nonsense, that is, is not "something without laws and subject to change, or something without limits" (5). Sewell's argument illuminates Cordelia's "bugger" language, which fits the realm of nonsense because in Cordelia's question as well as within Sewell's conception of nonsense, " . . . the language is simple and the subject-matter concrete, causing the mind to pass rapidly through the words, so to speak, to the things to which they refer" (17). This puts Elaine in a precarious position because, of course, a "bugger" does not truly exist, and further, should Elaine mentally transfer the word "bugger" to the object to which it refers--one who catches bugs--she is caught deprecating her own father, who is an entomologist. As Cordelia says, "Is that what you think of your own father?" (144).

Cordelia's nonsense language is especially significant because it epitomizes the absence/presence positions of language throughout the novel. For one, nonsense is more about appearance than actuality. In nonsense, the structure of language conveys more meaning than does the content; nonsense thus surprises its listener with its revelation of a content which actually lies *hidden* with a structure/form--in this instance, within a riddle. Elaine therefore must learn to read the nuances of Cordelia's speech; she must recognize that words mean more than they seem to. Nonsense invites the realization that

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[7]Riddles and jokes such as this one are a form of unanswerable linguistic communication which poses as answerable communication--hence, their effectiveness lies in their linguistic duplicity, not in their resolutions, and I would argue that this is why they work particularly well within this novel. On a similar note, in her essay "On Questions," Esther Goody maintains that jokes are a sub-division of the rhetorical question, and she calls jokes "joking-challenge questions," suggesting that their social use is so influential and important because they are primarily about relationships, not about information (29-30).

in all verbal language, words do not always fully manifest their speaker's intentions or the ramifications of their speaker's words. As Sewell puts it, "What is to be conveyed will have to be gathered not from *what* is said so much as *how* it is said" (22).

Furthermore, nonsense is ordered, but takes the form of linguistic disorder, or play and flexibility. In fact, nonsense must be organized in order to concentrate on the divisibility and instrumentation of language; it is a methodical approach to the fragmentation of words (see Sewell; 44-60). Above all else, nonsense is about words, and only the words are truly *present* in the speaking of nonsense (Sewell; 17-18).

For that matter, Cordelia's riddled language of nonsense may also be seen as a kind of compelling charm. That is, in his essay on charms and riddles, Northrop Frye locates "riddle" as language which is visually oriented, as in crossword puzzles and shape poetry, while "charm" has to do with spoken language, with sound and audibility. At the core of charm, argues Frye, is nonsense speech. Frye's argument about nonsense expands Sewell's understanding of it, as he suggests that nonsense has at its core the ability to "reduce freedom of action, either by compelling a certain course of action or by stopping action altogether. The technique is hypnotic" (124).

Cordelia's language, like the nonsense language of charm, does indeed inspire allegiance, a sort of hypnotic, unreasonable following. Besides its position within the categories of nonsense, this is due at least partially to the fact that both Cordelia and her language may *appear* to be logical and safe, but actually are not without their deceptions and betrayals. Once language can *seem* trustworthy, it can also undo any of its apparent meanings; thus, it can emphasize its own unreliability. Cordelia is able to appear to be Elaine's friend, her peer, when she offers her "harmless" questions and riddles, and this encourages Elaine to trust her and to fall directly into Cordelia's linguistic traps. As Atwood writes, "The page waits, pretending to be blank. Is that its appeal, its blankness? What else is this smooth and white, this terrifyingly innocent?" (Murder 44). The jokes, puns and rhymes that accompany Cordelia's verbal harassment of Elaine promise

linguistic success but betray Elaine and actually function for her as linguistic transgression.

VIII. Development

We may even say that Cordelia is a sign not only of language, but also of Elaine's potential to acquire and use language. At one point, Cordelia takes to bringing a mirror to school and holding it before Elaine. "Look at yourself! Just look!" Cordelia says in a voice which is "disgusted, fed up" (168). The mimetic encounter which Cordelia fosters with her introduction of the mirror into their linguistic dynamic indeed signifies self-image for Elaine and Cordelia's position as reflector of that image. Such mimetic signification is reminiscent of the Lacanian notion of language acquisition. In "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," Jacques Lacan links language acquisition with the onset of children's recognitions of themselves in mirrors. Lacan holds that within as well as because of the mirror stage of development, identity and speech are formed simultaneously and interdependently.

According to Lacan, the problems which arise from the child's self-recognition stem from the fact that although she recognizes herself as separate, she still is not independent. This idea bears a striking similarity to the fact that Elaine can stand neither fully apart from nor fully with Cordelia, who is for Elaine both her voice and, with her frequently parental speech, a mother model.[8] The task at hand, which Lacan argues proceeds throughout identity development, is for the child to learn to use language as verbal power, one that supports rather than destroys her identity.

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[8]I am aware that the idea that Cordelia and Elaine's mother exchange places is a large and complicated idea. My point is that regardless of the psychological or psychoanalytical reasons for and implications of the role-playing, any substitutions are accomplished through linguistic presence and absence above physicality and psychology. For more detailed discussion of how Cordelia steps into roles which Elaine's mother is expected to play, see Chinmoy Banerjee's article on the novel.

Cordelia offers Elaine the mirror, but the crucial problem is that she doesn't allow Elaine the speech that must coexist with Elaine's reflection. She speaks *for* Elaine, instructing her to search in the mirror for something transgressive and wrong about herself. Elaine realizes that she does not "see anything out of the ordinary," but at the same time can find no language with which to respond effectively to Cordelia's challenge. As a matter of fact, Elaine has torn the skin off her lips, and this symbolic act is realized, in the place of language, through the mirror: "It's just my face, with the dark blotches on the lips where I've bitten off the skin" (169). Elaine's self-recognitions in the mirror are essentially *mis*recognitions; instead of seeing her own face and voice, Elaine becomes merely a site for Cordelia, the perpetual ventriloquist.

Cordelia's interference with Elaine's development through the control of her language extends to Elaine's burgeoning sexual identity. When one day the girls are playing "doctor" and Carol lies squirming and moaning on the bed, Cordelia lifts Carol's sweater and commands Elaine to "feel her heart." Elaine sees the young adolescent Carol's breasts as repulsive and monstrous; they are "puffy-looking, their nipples bluish, like veins on a forehead." They are "swollen, unnatural flesh," and we may infer that the breasts are so foreboding and horrifying to Elaine primarily because Cordelia is in command of what Elaine's relationship to them will be.

When Cordelia's language again takes on the characteristics of a mother with "Go ahead. Do as you're told," Elaine obeys. She touches the left breast, is gripped by nausea, and is promptly belittled by Cordelia (betrayed by her mother-figure): "Her heart stupid," she says. "I didn't say her tit. Don't you know the difference?" (177). Elaine's first experience with sexuality is thus fully determined by Cordelia's linguistic duplicity. Cordelia plays a parental role, but substitutes what should be benevolent, nurturing language with her own language of harassment; she is present as an authority figure only to emphasize, basically, that its language suits her only at occasional and unpredictable junctures.

IX. Stolen Speech and Artificiality

In childhood, Cordelia's relationships with Elaine, Grace and Carol have at their center Cordelia's absolute and persuasive language. In other words, Cordelia's words to a large extent determine the girls' sense of their worlds. For example, in one instance the girls pick berries and wild flowers and arrange them like "pretend meals" along a path. Cordelia's language is authoritative about this activity:

> Cordelia says we have to wash our hands really well because of the deadly nightshade berries; we have to wash off the poisonous juice. She says one drop could turn you into a zombie. (80)

Further, when they return the following day to find their arrangement gone, the girls' explanations are ambivalent: "Probably boys have destroyed them . . . or else the lurking men." Cordelia, however, has the definitive and final word about this mysterious disappearance: "But Cordelia makes her eyes wide, lowers her voice, looks over her shoulder. 'It's the dead people,' she says. 'Who else could it be?'" (80). Furthermore, Cordelia's language reveals a self-confidence that overwhelms the other girls. When Elaine, Carol and Grace, frightened and confused by the onslaught of puberty, steal covert, surreptitious glances at women's bodies, Cordelia speaks neither hesitance nor fear. Opening up a catalogue, Cordelia proclaims, "'See this? It's for pumping your titties up bigger, like a bicycle pump,'" and Elaine confesses, "And we don't know what to believe" (97).

However, Cordelia's language is really not her own. It is removed from the child that she really is, an unoriginal mimicry of the language of adults. For example, when Carol tells Elaine that "Jews are kikes," Cordelia retorts, "Don't be vulgar" in her "adult voice," and she admonishes, "Kike is not a word we use" (143). Cordelia and her sisters have "an extravagant, mocking way of talking, which seems like an imitation of something, only its unclear what they're imitating" (76). Cordelia stands behind Elaine on the school bus and whispers, "Stand up straight! People are looking!" (127). Cordelia's

language is one of plagiarism and ventriloquism. She must steal the language of adulthood, and she must have it appear to have emanated from an authoritative subject in order that it possess power over Elaine.[9]

Cordelia signifies threat and instills fear in all of the girls, not only Elaine.[10] As ring leader, Cordelia is the character most frequently quoted as speaking and using language potently. She issues threats and challenges that no one risks taking her up on: "'Try it and see,' says Cordelia. 'Go on down there. I dare you.' But we don't" (80). However, Elaine frequently represents Cordelia's speech with indirect quotations, such as,

> Cordelia says that because the stream flows right out of the cemetery it's made of dissolved dead people. She says that if you drink it or step into it or even get too close to it, the dead people will come out . . . . . She says the only reason this hasn't happened to us is that we're on the bridge . . .

and so on (80-81). Because Cordelia's language is frequently reported more than directly represented, we may say that at least to a degree, Cordelia does not speak for herself. Rather, she is spoken *for*, and is thereby to a degree "absent" even when language is present to represent her. More than revealing Cordelia's lack of linguistic control, however, this emphasizes that language is Cordelia's and Elaine's primary mode of interaction. Cordelia becomes less a speaking subject with dangerous and powerful

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[9]Cordelia's language repeatedly emulates parental language, and I will argue in the forthcoming pages that Cordelia steals a maternal voice. Molly Hite suggests the opposite in her article "An Eye for an I: The Disciplinary Society in Cat's Eye" (192). She argues that Cordelia attempts to appropriate her father's linguistic power with expressions such as, "Wipe that smirk off your face!" and "What do you have to say for yourself?" (124;271). However, as Hite indeed notes, fathers primarily possess not linguistic power but "real, unspeakable power" in Cat's Eye (176). Hite fails to reconcile this "unspeakability" with the fact that she cites Cordelia's linguistic power as paternally ordered, likely because she fails to note that such paternal speech is seldom direct, but is usually, as in the above cases, reported by someone else and quoted indirectly. I would maintain, therefore, that the fathers are rendered absent within their own supposedly present and potent language. It is the girls' mothers, in contrast, who possess an abundance of direct speech and convincing language and are the true linguistic role models for their daughters.

[10]For instance, even when Elaine notes that Grace or Carol have certain intriguing powers and positions within the group, as in "Grace is still the desirable one, the one we all want," Cordelia remains the center of attraction for all of the girls and the one in charge of the dynamics of their relationships (100). It is Elaine's story, though, that we hear, and it is to her subjectivity that we are supposedly given access. Thus, it becomes Elaine who, from our perspective, is the most affected by Cordelia's linguistic powers.

intentions than a mark of linguistic meanings and affectations, a site for displaced language.

The point at which Elaine realizes the artificiality and inauthenticity of Cordelia's language is the point at which she is able to walk away from Cordelia. "Don't you dare walk away on us" Cordelia warns, but now Elaine "can hear this for what it is. It's an imitation, it's acting. It's an impersonation, of someone much older. It's a game" (207). Even walking away, however, does not allow Elaine full freedom from the plagues and problems of Cordelia; even Elaine's recognizing Cordelia's powers as deception, self-modification and mimicry does not fully eliminate Cordelia from Elaine's life.

Displaced and stolen language functions throughout the novel as a language of simultaneous absence and presence, and Elaine and Cordelia's uses of language in high school are no exception. Just as she did in childhood, Cordelia speaks words in adolescence that are unoriginal and stereotypical; instead of mimicking the language of adults, however, Cordelia now embraces typically teenage language. She affects the linguistic tones and meanings of other high school students: "Cordelia has been to high school for a year already and knows how to do this . . . . 'He's a pill,' she says; or, 'What a creep'" (222). Elaine, in contrast, cultivates a "mean mouth" in high school (251). Her language is short, sharp and incisive, and it pleases Elaine that, unlike Cordelia, her language isolates her from teenage culture instead of insulating her in it.

Thus, Elaine continues to treat language as a potential shield from the social world, but that language takes the very form of "verbal danger" which Cordelia's language took as a child. Elaine savors her use of risky, subversive language, not necessarily in *imitation* of the "former" Cordelia's abrasive, threatening speech as much as in *appropriation* of Cordelia's former verbal stance. We learn, though, that Elaine does not actually expect power and control over others from her language, as Cordelia once seemed to. Rather, Elaine relishes the sensation of her language, the illusions and

impressions which it offers her. It seems she is aware of the limits inherent in creating one's own linguistic limits:

> I've come to enjoy the *risk*, the *sensation* of vertigo when I realize that I've shot right over the *border* of the socially acceptable, that I'm walking on *thin ice, on empty air*. (252; emphasis added)

Cordelia's language is not as influential and aggressive as it once was and as Elaine's now is; rather, it has fully become one of trickery, wit and empty phrases. Whereas Elaine once needed to use language as a source of cleverness, to buy her way into (illusory) social safety, while Cordelia wielded even playful words like a knife, now their positions are reversed. Further, Elaine is disassociated from and non-responsive to Cordelia's new mode of linguistic communication: "When Cordelia says, 'Don't you think he's a dreamboat?' I have a hard time understanding what she means" (222). Attempting to ally herself with the teenage mentality to a degree, Elaine does note, "Occasionally I do cry for no reason, as it says you're supposed to." However, she "cannot believe in [her] own sadness" (222). As in childhood, Elaine still cannot find a genuine self-image in her reflection in the mirror. Although she looks into it when she cries, she says, she cannot take herself seriously and is "intrigued by the sight of tears" (222).

Even Cordelia's letters to Elaine in the summertime use a language that is not hers and has no original content, but is instead full of cute and empty form. They are

> full of superlatives and exclamation marks. She dots her I's [sic] with little round circles, like Orphan Annie eyes, or bubbles. She signs them with things like, 'Yours till Niagara Falls,' 'Yours till the cookie crumbles,' or 'Yours till the sea wears rubber pants to keep its bottom dry.' (236)

Unlike earlier in her life, though, Elaine now recognizes Cordelia as a mimic and notes that Cordelia's "burbly style does not ring true" (236). Although Cordelia continues to represent dislocated and artificial language in adolescence just as she did in Elaine's childhood, this language has betrayed Cordelia; it is no longer a potent disguise, separating her intentions from her appearance, but rather is transparent and obvious.

Linguistic communication, we see, is based on both production and reception. Elaine now sees Cordelia's language for the guise that it is, which limits Cordelia's

linguistic authority, and she acknowledges that employing language as performance can be problematic, attributing Cordelia's problems with teenage boys to her inability to understand "the nuances of male silence" (262). Cordelia, it seems, is abundantly present as *a* speaker as well as problematically absent to herself as a speaker with a voice of her *own* . Using language only for its social appeal, for what it performs, accomplishes and appears *as*, rather than approaching language for what it may mean and signify about the identities of its speakers and listeners and about its own truth claims, Cordelia cannot *hear* male *silence*, and misses the intricacies and nuances of presence/absence play.

Elaine even says that Cordelia's attempts at social conversation are pure imitation and performance, and that "she's mimicking something, something in her head, some role or image that only she can see" (262). Although Cordelia's language has long centered around mimicry, now this mimicry does not enable Cordelia's linguistic control over her own or others' lives. Rather, the mimicry is realized as the unoriginal language that it is, and it thus augments Cordelia's nature as a speaker who does not fully possess her own linguistic self-representations, but rather must look outside herself for what she wants to say, as an imitator, and overtly take her linguistic cues from elsewhere.

The duplicities of language and its production are increasingly noteworthy when we realize that although Elaine and Cordelia occupy positions in adolescence which oppose those of their childhood, they continue to wrestle with the problematic nature of presence. In adolescence, that is, Elaine serves as *Cordelia*'s linguistic mirror, pointing out to Cordelia when her words are inaccurate and inadequate just as Cordelia used to do to Elaine. When, for instance, Cordelia (the budding actress) remarks that "real actors will never say the name out loud, because it's bad luck," it is Elaine who points out, "you just said it" as well as Elaine who comments, "She pretends to laugh it off, but it bothers her" (263). Elaine frightens Cordelia with ghost stories (which is ironic considering that in the other narrative line of the novel, Elaine's memorial, Cordelia is herself a ghost).

These stories unnerve Cordelia and reveal to Elaine her own linguistic prowess: "'You can stop playing that' says Cordelia sharply. I'm surprised at how much pleasure this gives me, to know she's so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her" (249).

X. Performance

During their university years, when Cordelia finally contacts Elaine and they meet, the fact that Cordelia is about (failed) appearance at the same time that she is about (failed, linguistic) performance is sharply pronounced. Elaine describes Cordelia in keen and extensive visual detail: "Her arms are angular, her neck elegant; her hair is pulled back like a ballerina's. She's wearing black stockings although it's summer, and sandals . . . thick-soled and artistic, with primitive peasant buckles" and so on (319). This is thus far the most particular physical description of Cordelia in the novel; perhaps this is because Cordelia's speech has always conferred her presence more than her physicality has.

Now, however, Cordelia has once again "reinvented herself" (320). This reinvention takes the forms explicitly of overt physicality and artificiality, but implicitly of problematic linguistic communication. Unlike in high school, where Cordelia did attempt a role in Macbeth but turned the production into a fiasco from off-stage (263-64), now Cordelia is capable of being on stage. As a matter of fact, Cordelia *is* her "appearance," she *is* her own image and facade, and seems to be nothing more. Specifically, Cordelia has received yet another part in a Shakespearean production, this time as a nun in Measure for Measure. She emphasizes mostly her speech, and not her acting, when describing this role to Elaine: "'So you have to project to three sides. It's such a strain on the voice,' Cordelia says with a deprecating smile, as if she is projecting and straining her voice all in the line of work" (320). Cordelia's own language points out that she now has even more of a problem with linguistic communication than she did in

high school. Cordelia is "making herself up as she goes along. She's improvising," and she is having trouble doing so at that (320).

She recites for Elaine the only lines she speaks in the play; these lines are about the play of presence and absence, about simultaneous appearance and disappearance:

> *Then, if you speak, you must not show your face,*
> *Or, if you show your face, you must not speak.* (321)

Even further, Cordelia cannot master such paradoxical language, and she tells Elaine, "At rehearsal I kept getting mixed up" (321). One reason, perhaps, why Cordelia cannot get her presence/absence lines straight is because linguistic paradox has never really affected her. Rather, as Cordelia has heretofore been the emblem of and the catalyst for linguistic paradox, it has been Elaine who must confront the duplicities and inconsistencies of language. Absence/presence has been important only because it is perceived and received as such, not because it in some way exists on its own accord. Cordelia's inability to position herself on the receiving end of absence/presence, rather than on the creative end, threatens her status.

Although Elaine perceived during high school that Cordelia's language, and not her own, now functioned as more of a threat to her than a safe masquerade (" . . . energy has passed between us, and I am stronger"), the linguistic relationship between Cordelia and Elaine is consistently and actually one of mutuality more than of alternation. Eventually, Elaine realizes this when, as an adult, she reflects upon as much when contemplating her painting of Cordelia called "Half a Face,":

> Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture.
> I am afraid of Cordelia.
> I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of *being* Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when. (243; emphasis added)

However, although she may realize the complexity of their relationship through a visual representation, Elaine still cannot understand it through linguistic communication. Elaine's realization is that presence--"being"--is not singular but multiple, but that conception of presence is based on physicality, not language. Considering that Cordelia

embodies the complexities--the duplicities and inconsistencies--of existence, Elaine must also consider these complexities in linguistic terms which, at least at this point, she does not. Thus, the idea that Elaine and Cordelia have switched places remains rooted in an idea of essence, and does not address what Elaine eventually must (and does) come to terms with: that their relationship is not about essence, but about flexibility and exchange, and as such, it is also about the linguistic.

It is apparent that language is the foundation of their relationship when we note that even when Cordelia's language demonstrates kindness, Elaine is uneasy. For instance, when Cordelia says of grade school, "I didn't really have any good friends there, except for you," Elaine notes, "A wave of blood goes up to my head, my stomach shrinks together, as if something dangerous has just missed hitting me." She feels shame, guilt, terror and self-hate, none of which she can explain, when Cordelia mentions the past (272). Clearly, Cordelia's apparent change in linguistic status does not liberate Elaine; this is because, despite Elaine's suggestion that they have changed places, they actually do not do so. Rather, they begin more fully to occupy the *same* place. That place is one where language is amorphous, and where the abilities and advantages granted by language are multifaceted and ambiguous.

Furthermore, when Cordelia's language is hyperbolic, Elaine's is restrained, and neither linguistic position renders power dynamics clear and definitive. Cordelia rebels, does poorly in school and "comes up with new, complicated swear words: *excrement of the ungulate*, she says, meaning *bullshit*, and *great flaming blue-eyed bald-headed Jesus*." Elaine cannot identify with Cordelia or with her linguistic performances; she imagines that their teachers must have difficulty understanding why they are even friends. Indeed, Elaine does not know the reason for this herself, and while Cordelia flings herself into creative and rebellious language, Elaine by contrast is "silent and watchful" in school (244).

Elaine begins to dread Cordelia, because she cannot (or perhaps will not) participate in such demonstrative, hyperbolic language. She begins to avoid Cordelia without knowing why, and becomes more and more silent around her: "[Cordelia] talks and talks as if there's nothing wrong, and I say little; but then, I've never said a lot anyway" (272). Clearly, although Elaine may be in the stronger social position in their relationship, Cordelia continues to determine their linguistic positions, and Elaine cannot fully overcome the silence to which Cordelia's presence has always relegated her.

In fact, Cordelia remains for Elaine a mirror through which Elaine perceives her own distorted image. That is, when Cordelia puts on her sunglasses, Elaine narrates, "There I am in her mirror eyes, in duplicate and monochrome, and a great deal smaller than life-size" (322). Indeed, despite a grand appearance which indicates Cordelia as more visual than verbal, and despite her difficulties with speech, Cordelia continues to function before Elaine as a linguistic threat. Because the narration emphasizes how Cordelia looks in conjunction with its discussion of her problematic voice and language, we understand that the two are interrelated. We understand that language itself is largely about appearance and not only about content, as well as that the threat Cordelia poses is communicated through and provides a commentary on the absences and presence in/of language.

The focus on Cordelia as absent through her presence, as occupying a position which simultaneously emphasizes appearance and absence, continues when Elaine watches Cordelia perform in The Tempest. Cordelia does not speak when she is on stage before Elaine; rather, she *appears* in a state of *hiddenness*. Elaine says, "I peer hard, trying to see which one she is, behind the disguise of costume. But I can't tell" (322). In a draft of this passage, it is even more obvious that Cordelia plays the same "role" that she always has in Elaine's world. In a draft, that is, Atwood actually reminds the reader that Cordelia is "unreadable," as she *always has been*. Elaine says, "I peer hard, trying to see which one she is. *But it's like the time she was a weasel*; I can't tell" (100:3; emphasis

added). Despite the fact that Cordelia is on a new and different (theatrical) stage, Elaine's relationship to her remains in the same (developmental) stage of indecipherable presence and absent language.

At the final "stage" of their relationship, when Elaine visits Cordelia in the Dorothy Lyndwick Rest Home, Cordelia is again absent from her language, indecipherable, and more about performance and appearance than about essence and "truth." In particular, we learn that Cordelia has remade herself yet again, and that she is absent in the present time, and present in the past and the future: "She is in an earlier phase, or a later one" (377). The description of Cordelia is again quite visually detailed; Cordelia wears "the soft-green tweeds and tailored blouses of her good-taste background." Her hair is in "tight waves" and "The long bones have risen to the surface of her face, the skin tugged downward on them" (377).

Again, Cordelia's difficulties with speech are emphasized in conjunction with this appearance: "'Better late than never,' Cordelia says with the same hesitation, the same thickness I've heard over the phone" (379).[11] Elaine feels that she should ask questions of Cordelia such as "What about her acting, what became of that? Did she get married? Have children?" But she realizes as well that it is impossible to ask questions of Cordelia; any questions, Elaine says, would be "detachable" and "added on." To interrogate Cordelia would be useless, we may conclude, because Cordelia is not about external referents such as marriage and children, but is about her own existence--as a person/presence, ghost of a person/presence, emblem of the absences/presences of/in language, etc.

However, Cordelia remains, despite her mental breakdown, her artificiality, and her linguistic difficulties, capable of making linguistic demands of Elaine which Elaine

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[11]It is interesting that both of Elaine and Cordelia's "reunions," here and in high school, are initiated through the telephone, which is itself a medium which alienates linguistic presence from physical presence, and in which a speaker is present to a listener through a telephone "receiver" (a sort of interpreter in its own right), primarily *because* that speaker is displaced (physically absent).

cannot fulfill. "Elaine," Cordelia says, "get me out" (379). Elaine is upset at this plea, but not specifically *because* she cannot fulfill the demand. Rather, she is upset because the very fact that the demand cannot be fulfilled ironically maintains Cordelia's position of power over Elaine: "It's as if Cordelia has placed herself beyond me, out of my reach" (379). It is Cordelia's ability to transform herself while maintaining her power which infuriates Elaine. Cordelia is not what she once was--her former selves are "absent"--yet her presence remains as a powerful mark of its own flexibility and mutability.

Cordelia's language communicates her penchant for manipulation and trickery. "I can fool them any day" Cordelia says of her nurses and Elaine thinks, "Of course . . . She can counterfeit anything." "There's nothing wrong with me. You know, you said yourself," Cordelia says, and although Elaine knows that something is indeed wrong with Cordelia, all that matters now is what she has *said* to Cordelia. Cordelia thus succeeds in turning Elaine's words against her, just as she always has. And when Cordelia says, "I guess you've always hated me," Elaine is shocked by Cordelia's accusation. She continues to think of Cordelia as her ally despite Cordelia's linguistic power over her: "Why would she say such a thing? I can't remember ever hating Cordelia" (381).

Following this visit, which is the last time that Elaine sees Cordelia, she writes Cordelia a note which is returned undelivered. Through this event, we are reminded that Cordelia is never silent, even when she has no language with which to return Elaine's linguistic offerings. She may be absent as a receiver of Elaine's language, but she is quite present, through that absence, as a ghostly presence who speaks from that very silence. Specifically, not two pages later, Elaine confesses: "the last time I saw Cordelia, she was going through the door of the rest home. That was the last time I talked to her. Although it wasn't the last time she talked to me" (385).

XI. Absence and Presence

Thus, as Elaine and Cordelia grow up, Cordelia becomes more and more present--both as a person in Elaine's life as well as a linguistic paradigm--precisely because she is absent. Cordelia begins speaking less and less for herself, speaking less and less socially effective language, explicitly tricking and manipulating Elaine through language less and less frequently. Yet the hold that Cordelia has over Elaine does not lessen despite the fact that Elaine now realizes and communicates Cordelia's linguistic fallibility and her frailty; actually, Cordelia seems to become important to Elaine precisely because she lacks the linguistic prowess and presence that she once possessed.

This is especially apparent during Elaine and Cordelia's high-school years. When they have not spoken for year in their early adolescence, Cordelia's mother calls Elaine's house one day. Elaine, nonplussed and assuming "it's boring grown-ups' business," puts her mother on the telephone and leaves the room (notably, Elaine is once again outside of the room in which linguistic communication with Cordelia occurs). When her mother subsequently relates to Elaine that Cordelia will be attending Elaine's high school and would like to walk to school with her, Elaine reacts to Cordelia's very name as if she is a mystery: "'Cordelia?' I say. I haven't seen or spoken to Cordelia for a whole year. She has vanished completely" (218).

Elaine decides that Cordelia's disappearance has been "complete" because Cordelia has been both physically absent and silent. Elaine attempts to keep this disappearance "complete," because although she nonchalantly agrees to walk the next day with Cordelia, she also has "no particular wish to speak to Cordelia right now" (218). Yet Elaine cannot render Cordelia fully absent even when she renders her non-present and silent. Rather, we see that the highest degree of "absence" that both Elaine and Cordelia can really attain from one another is an absence in the form of displacement. That is, both Elaine and Cordelia's mothers have spoken for them, have been their linguistic emissaries. Thus, both Elaine and Cordelia are disassociated and once-removed--nay, they are absent-- from their language. Yet that language also successfully

represents them and their presences through their mothers, as it causes them to interact and to acknowledge one another.

From the first time that Elaine leaves Cordelia, in childhood, to their final encounter at the rest home, whenever Elaine departs from Cordelia, thus emphasizing Cordelia's physical absence from her life, Cordelia also becomes newly powerful (and thereby present) *because* absent. In the case of Elaine's original departure from Cordelia, Grace and Carol, Cordelia becomes less literally present and more present as a form of indeterminacy; she becomes like a rumour (216). With this initial transformation, Cordelia begins more overtly to represent the presence that absent language can have. Elaine's memory of Cordelia and of the torment she inspired with the other girls becomes forgotten to Elaine, like obsolete, ineffectual but *nonetheless present* language. Elaine's memory renders Cordelia, Grace and Carol

> something like a sentence in tiny dry print on a page, flattened out, like the dates of ancient battles. Their names are like names in a footnote, or names written in spidery brown ink in the front of Bibles. (215)

Certainly, this is not an entirely new role for Cordelia to play, nor is it an entirely new position for her to occupy. That is, she has at other times been present to Elaine as a linguistic effect and affect, even when they have been physically separated. For example, when Elaine leaves Toronto in summertime for the bush, she is temporarily free of linguistic repercussions and torment: "I can . . . talk without hearing the way I sound. I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be free of words now . . . " (153). At first it seems that Cordelia, along with language, is simply absent. However, although Elaine's dreams are filled with objects and physicality, Cordelia still becomes present through her absence. Elaine's narration of her dreams begins with a comment that points directly to the absence of language: "My dreams are brightly colored and without sound." It concludes with similar emphasis on the absence of Cordelia: "None of my dreams is about Cordelia" (155).

Thus, Cordelia's absence is explicit and noticeable to Elaine; it is a *virtual* presence. Free of words, Elaine is *conspicuously* free of Cordelia. Even further, when Elaine returns from her silent and visual summer, Cordelia immediately reappears. This reappearance is ominous, because now, Elaine is not only required to deal with language again, but she also must confront the fact of its dangers and hazards: "Cordelia has been waiting for me . . . . She's backing me toward an edge, like the edge of a cliff: one step back, another step, and I'll be over and falling" (165).

Elaine's physical departures from Cordelia continue to emphasize Cordelia as simultaneous absence and presence throughout the novel, but the significance of this presence/absence play becomes different for Elaine at subsequent departures. Specifically, following her visit to the rest home in which, Elaine notes, "well-off people" put their family members "who are not considered fit to fun around in public" and in which Cordelia then resides (376), Elaine feels "free, and weightless" (381). However, this freedom is notably dissimilar to the freedom that Elaine found as a child, when she received summertime reprieve from Cordelia in the bush of northern Quebec. This time, Elaine consciously realizes that her freedom is not actual, whereas as a child, Elaine did not *express* understanding (although she may have had understanding) that she would eventually have to return to Toronto--that she would return to Cordelia and to language. Now, Elaine says immediately after declaring her freedom and weightlessness, "But I am not free, of Cordelia" (381). That is, now Cordelia remains physically absent from Elaine's life, but Elaine has come to realize that absence of Cordelia as its own sort of ghostly presence.

Further, following her visit to Cordelia, Elaine again has vivid and visual dreams which refer to the absence and presence of both language and Cordelia. Yet unlike Elaine's earlier dreams, about which she pointedly notes that none is "about Cordelia," the dreams after this departure from Cordelia fully realize the absence/presence paradox which Cordelia embodies. Elaine dreams of Cordelia falling into empty air; she

dreams that Cordelia stands in their former schoolyard, but that the actual school no longer exists; she dreams that Cordelia wears the clothing of a child but is not a child (381). Elaine seems to sense now the fragility with which Cordelia/language operates, but she still cannot overcome its effects. Again, Cordelia becomes almost more powerful through her (literal) absence than she has been through her presence.

Thus, from this final encounter with Cordelia as an actual person Elaine seems able to recognize that Cordelia speaks to her through silence, that there is always a degree of linguistic presence in its own absence. Yet what Elaine does not fully realize is that this presence, because linguistic, is always virtual and constructed, never actual and essential. Thus, in the final pages of the novel, when it finally dawns on Elaine that Cordelia is not going to arrive at the retrospective and is never again going to be actually present in her life, Elaine is immobilized.

Specifically, the play between presence and absence as they relate to "appearance" and language is especially operative in the scene of Elaine's retrospective. This is when Elaine mistakes the absence of Cordelia, Grace and Mrs. Smeath for their presence, as I discuss in the previous chapter. There, Elaine mentions ambiguously, "There is Cordelia, of course. But I haven't seen her for years" (371). She does not actually think that she sees Cordelia, and never denies that Cordelia is absent, as she does with Grace and Mrs. Smeath; however, Elaine's above remark does suggest the *possibility* of Cordelia's presence.

The published "version" of Cordelia is decidedly different from the Cordelia Atwood considers in drafts of this episode. That is, in drafts, Atwood plays with the possibility of Cordelia's appearance even more fully, and indicates more dramatically and pervasively that Cordelia is simultaneously absence and presence. In particular, in a handwritten draft marked, "Cordelia I," Elaine narrates, "I'm thinking, Cordelia would have loved that . . . when the door opens and Cordelia in actuality walks in. I can tell it's her at once." Cordelia certainly seems "actual" enough: she is in "muted sea-green . . . a

sort of cape thing, Irish tweed." But as Elaine approaches her and says her name, "Cordelia" looks at Elaine "blankly." Of course, it is not Cordelia whom Elaine has "found." It is, however, Cordelia's sister Mirrie, and she promptly says to Elaine, "Not Cordelia" (99:3).

The absence/presence manipulation here, where the reader is misled as much as Elaine is into perceiving absence as presence, is like the manipulations enacted in the published version with Grace and Mrs. Smeath. However, what is notably different about this presence/absence interplay is that Elaine knows the person who is "not Cordelia." Thus, the interplay can continue beyond the initial recognition of mistaken identity; it can continue even when Cordelia transforms from "actual" to "virtual." Elaine asks, "But where is Cordelia?" and Mirrie responds, "You didn't know? Cordelia is no longer with us." Of course, Elaine is shocked, not so much that Cordelia is dead, but that Cordelia could be absent when she has been so clearly "present" to Elaine. Elaine says that she doesn't "believe it": "How could Cordelia be dead? She's been hiding from me for days, the city is alive with her" (99:3).

The textual play with absence and presence goes even further than this, though, as Mirrie "resurrects" Cordelia for Elaine, rendering her absent in an entirely new way: "No, not dead," she says. "Just not with us," and Elaine understands that Cordelia has gone fully insane, once and for all. "I could go to see her," Elaine suggests, a possibility which Mirrie squelches: "'Better not, dear,' she says. 'Very much better not'." We learn, thus, that there is more than one sort of absence, as well as multiples versions of presence, and that, finally, there is no way to confront and overcome such multiplicity. For that matter, the draft emphasizes, or reminds, that this absence/presence paradox is irreconcilably linguistic, because Elaine realizes, "Cordelia is to remain unsaid."

Finally, the manuscript adds yet another level, to undo even the previous undoing of presence through absence. That is, "Cordelia I," concludes with "This in fact does not happen" (99:3) It turns out, thus, that even the play of virtual presence to actual

presence and even the appearance of absence as presence has all, in effect, been one large absence. It has been present to the reader as a full narrative with internal manipulations of the paradox, but Elaine's final suggestion reveals that such internal manipulations of content can also mislead and misrepresent on the level of form. Language thereby represents the paradoxes of absence and presence on multiple and sophisticated levels.

The problem is that Elaine has expected that if Cordelia *can* be present, namely when Elaine is back in Toronto, then she *will* be present. Cordelia's failure to materialize at the retrospective reveals to Elaine that during her return to Toronto, Cordelia has been present as an interminable absence, not as a deferred presence which is potentially actual. Thus, at her retrospective Elaine is confronted with the fundamental paradoxes of language and existence.[12] Instead of Cordelia greeting Elaine, what greets her is the fact that language and presence are not always partners in a clear-cut duality. Elaine has expected presence, and so she has expected voice. The subsequent explicit breakdown of the present/absent and speech/silence opposition unnerves Elaine.

Her discomfort is evident when Elaine begins to speak in clichéd and recycled language: "I'm bone-tired" she tells Charna and even notes the artificiality of her own speech: "Bone-tired, an old phrase, of my mother's. Though bones as such do not get tired" (435). Furthermore, Cordelia and Elaine's relationship is closely aligned here with their linguistic relationship and with the absence/presence play of language. That is, Elaine decides that the absence of Cordelia will relegate her, Elaine, to a future of speechlessness: "I'm headed for a future in which I sprawl . . . shedding hair and drooling, while some young stranger spoons mushed food into my mouth." As Elaine loses this capacity for speech, Cordelia "vanishes and vanishes." (435)

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[12]With these revelations and confrontations, Cordelia's roles as a paradigm for linguistic absence/presence and as an embodiment of absence/presence--her roles throughout the novel as a linguistic character and ghost and as a discourse on language--conflate in a final, culminating synthesis of absence/presence.

It is almost as if Elaine can no longer distinguish between her own capacities for speech and Cordelia's. As she leaves the gallery and attempts to hail a taxi, she says "I can barely lift my hand." Finally, she finds the source of her grief: "I've been prepared for almost anything; except absence, except silence" (435). Elaine can find no way to respond to what she finally realizes that Cordelia/language embodies: the absence of presence as the presence of voice.

Attempting to adjust to the demolition of clear and logical boundaries between presence and absence, Elaine appropriately notes that her body and her voice do not necessarily form one logical unit of opposition. Climbing the stairs, she says, "The sound of my breath comes to me, a disembodied gasping, as if it's someone else breathing" (436). This disassociation of subject and object, this fragmentary disassociation of Elaine from herself, may seem unfavorable. However, it actually marks Elaine's recognition, finally, that Cordelia (and all that she represents) is multifaceted and complicated, a simultaneous presence and absence. Elaine can now appropriate the knowledge of Cordelia which Stephen suggested years earlier, as she thinks "*Cordelia has a tendency to exist*" (436).

Once Elaine realizes that Cordelia is not a full presence, but a tendency, Cordelia remains present for the remaining pages of the novel only as her own absence. "*So, Cordelia. Got you back*," thinks Elaine, although there is no concrete evidence of Elaine having retaliated for anything, no real way in which she has set any wrongs right (436). Rather, Elaine "gets back" at Cordelia by uttering the final, unanswerable words not to Cordelia, but to Cordelia's absence, to her ghost:

> *You're dead, Cordelia.*
> No I'm not.
> *Yes, you are. You're dead.*
> *Lie down.* (437)

These words were originally Stephen's, spoken to Elaine in childhood as they played war games. Now, as Elaine accepts Stephen's pronouncement that Cordelia is virtual and not actual, his words serve Elaine well.

One final play of absence/presence concludes Elaine's linguistic relationship with Cordelia. As Elaine stands on the bridge from which Cordelia inflicted the final childhood torture on Elaine, and through which Elaine first fully experienced the absence of Cordelia through a displaced linguistic presence, Elaine says, "I know that if I turn, right now, and look ahead of me along the path, someone will be standing there" (443). She realizes that this premonition of a ghost, this expectation of surreality, will bring not her own presence, but Cordelia's: "At first I think it will be myself, in my old jacket, my blue knitted hat. But then I see that it's Cordelia." Initially, although we know that it is not actually the child Cordelia whom Elaine sees, Elaine's language is a language of actuality and presence:

> She's wearing her gray snowsuit jacket but the hood is back, her head is bare. She has the same green wool knee socks, sloppily down around her ankles, the brown school brogues scuffed at the toe, one lace broken and knotted, the yellowish-brown hair with bangs falling into her eyes, the eyes gray-green. (443)

Even Elaine's address of this apparition plays with the idea that absence can be a powerful and active presence, as Elaine speaks: "*It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*" (443). Elaine speaks the words to Cordelia which Cordelia was long ago supposed to speak to her. It is sensible that this brings finality and closure to Elaine's relationship with Cordelia, because Elaine is claiming Cordelia's once absent language as her own present language. This effectively strips Cordelia of her most fundamental role, of all that she embodies, which is a position of simultaneous absence and presence. Instead, Cordelia is now pure absence, with neither a language of presence to represent her absence, nor a physical presence to represent her evasive or manipulating language.[13]

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[13] Susan Strehle's essay on Cat's Eye points out that this episode is especially significant for its refusal to "order the fluctuation, to fill the gaps," which exist precisely because Elaine's final confrontation of Cordelia is not ordered and temporal, not possessive of secure insight that can fully "restore, resolve, console." If Elaine did use her experience as "culminating insight" to lead with total coherence to a final and full experience with Cordelia, Strehle argues, the importance of absence would be reduced (or, in my view, the play of absence and presence would be reduced) and "the novel's recurrent absences would be redeemed by the exposure of an underlying presence." However, because Elaine addresses the *ghost* of Cordelia, her experiences remains disordered, mysterious

Thus, the "natural" and the "supernatural" presence conflate here, and as Elaine reenters actual reality and leaves virtual reality, she notes, "Cordelia is no longer there. Only a middle-aged woman, pink-cheeked and bareheaded . . . . She passes me with a civil and neutral smile." Elaine does not say that Cordelia *never was* "there," only that she *no longer is* "there." Ultimately, Elaine makes no abiding distinctions between person and ghost (Cordelia and Cordelia) and person and person (Middle-aged woman and Cordelia), and this, then, is an ultimate revelation of the flexibility and inextricability of absence and presence.

Even more important, Elaine seems aware that perception is based on subjectivity and that as such, it is constructed by the play of absence and presence. She notes that now, "The bridge is only a bridge, the river a river, the sky is a sky. The landscape is empty now, a place for Sunday runners." Such essentialism is immediately qualified, though, by the idea that such "emptiness" is not really filled by "things" like bridges and rivers, but by absence and emptiness themselves, as Elaine corrects herself, "Or not empty: filled with whatever it is by itself, when I'm not looking" (443).

Elaine never locates a fully present Cordelia, not does she find a language of full essence and presence. Rather, through the ghostly absence/presence play of Cordelia, Elaine comes eventually to realize the impossibility of finding perceptions and perspectives which are either present or absent. She realizes instead the necessity of incorporating an idea of "both/and" into the absence/presence play of experience and language, into a life and communication of that life.

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and outside the realms of predictability and full, temporal closure. Therefore, even though (or maybe because) Elaine's eventual confrontation of Cordelia occurs as mirage and not actuality, Cat's Eye ends with "real and unmitigated absence." As Strehle puts it, "Cordelia is not there in the ravine. She is absent; she is the abiding absence throughout the novel" (188).

The Language of Absence and Presence

When they are children, Elaine's brother gets a chemistry set, one with "little sulfurous explosions, amazing illusions." Observing Stephen's chemistry set, Elaine is impressed in particular by its linguistic illusions: "There's *invisible writing* that comes out when you hold the paper over a candle" (emphasis added; 109).[1] This "invisible writing" may, on one hand, be actual enough: writing is invisible until the candle coaxes it into revelation. At the same time, however, it is Elaine's *language* that is important here, because the words through which she describes the "illusion" represent contradiction and paradox. It is such "observations" of "invisible writing," on the parts of both Atwood /the text and Elaine/the narration,
which are consistently responsible in this novel for a reader's awareness of the absence/presence play of language.

Elaine's language here prompts a paradoxical inquiry: if writing is invisible (absent), how does she actually know that it is writing (present)? If not a resolution, then at least a response to this question lies in assuming the position that language is simultaneously present and absent, and in realizing that as such, language is not necessarily logical and straightforward. As Elaine's paradoxical language suggests, Cat's Eye is a space within which language may freely and obviously embody its own contradictions. The distinctions and amalgamations between presence and absence are ones of both degree and kind. That is, at times, presence represents absence and contains *elements of* absence within it, and vice versa. At other times, what Elaine and/or readers perceive *as* presence is actually absence , and vice versa. Refusing to

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[1]The conclusion of this study more explicitly discusses the theoretical implications of absence and presence linguistic play. However, the theoretical discourse of the novel, because language-oriented, is not completely estranged from its primary discourse on language (attended to in this chapter). It is thus worthwhile to consider at this juncture the affinity of Elaine's language about the chemistry set with that of Roland Barthes' later writings: "I write because I do not want the words I find: by subtraction" (Pleasure of the Text; 40). Elaine's language frequently resonates with such post-structuralist phraseology.

adhere to diametrical oppositions, language in this novel functions on multiple levels, levels that manipulate opposition and paradox, thereby manipulating assignations of privilege and hierarchy as well.

In many instances, this multiplicity results from Elaine's repeated emphasis that what *is not* and what *is* go hand in hand. The very first sentence of the novel communicates as much: "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space" (3). Even further, such juxtaposition of the absent and the present frequently extend to linguistic communication and exist as absence/presence due to the very structure of that linguistic communication. Consider Elaine's attention to what is said because it is *unsaid* in the opening of chapter two: "'Stephen says time is not a line,' I say" (2). This language of the "unsaid" (which I discussed in the previous chapter in terms of its place within Elaine and Cordelia's relationship), is not really about reading between the lines--that is, it is not about *understanding* unspoken words by understanding subtexts of speech. Rather, it is about *articulating* negativity, and thereby abolishing all "lines" of predictable communication. Stephen's language here is based on exclusion, based on what *is not* more than what *is* . Indeed, the questions remains, after Stephen's claim about what time is not, as to what time *is*; and time indeed is a very important element in the novel. What is crucial here for the absence/presence structure, though, is not what the content of Elaine's sentence implies about its meaning, but what the structure of her sentence implies about language. Whatever Stephen has "actually" said to Elaine, Elaine's report of his language demonstrates that silence and speech are not in opposition to one another; rather, silence is an implicit and inherent aspect *of* speech. Thus, from its very beginning, the novel offers numerous moments where lack and loss are fundamental elements of language.[2]

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[2]For certain, the trope of simultaneous absence/presence in the novel does not mean that absence is always worked out as a theoretical presence; sometimes, silence seems simply to facilitate typical elements of narrative such as character and plot. For instance, when

Indeed, diction in Cat's Eye often refers to a potential within language to self-limit, to the perameters within language which are part and parcel of linguistic communication. There is an abundance of phrases such as, "We squabble in whispers and monosyllables . . ." (31). On the telephone, "a long conversation goes on that is mostly silence" (254). Minimalism is a part of, not an alternative to, conversation; silence may be literally opposed to words, but both are inherent components of linguistic communication. Quite frequently, communication is explicitly dramatized as bare and minimal but nonetheless linguistic, as in "The women chat together in quick, incomprehensible languages" (173-74). Or, as children, Elaine and Stephen send messages to one another "written in the cryptic language of the aliens, which is filled with X's and Z's and must be decoded." Elaine's main communication with her brother in childhood is in "raspy tin can words, sentences without vowels" (49). Such linguistic communication renders language complicated, evasive and tricky; it revolves around words which are indeed present but lack vowels, and are therefore highly problematic--even inaudible.

The language in and of Cat's Eye's is *about* how language can and does legislate the perameters of its presence through its own disappearance. Yet if words signify absence, they also cannot avoid signifying their own presence *as words.* In this way, Cat's Eye not only repeatedly communicates the disappearance of linguistic communication, but also emphasizes this disappearance. Words become metaphors *for* absence. Silence as an alternative form of speech cannot escape the fact that it represents "wordlessness," that its presence as a double-voiced discourse conveys not only absence, but also a conspicuous lack of presence. Just as phenomena embody this linguistic paradox,

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Elaine relates that "Cordelia manages to convey" her tastes in clothing but that "She doesn't say this out loud," silence functions as a relatively one-dimensional concept (96). It would be foolish to argue that non-linguistic communication and language of silence always represent discourses on paradox and contradiction. Rather, the passages in which language functions as both silence and speech, absence and presence, are the passages that truly create the linguistic discourse within the novel, and it is these passages which need close attention.

language itself communicates its own paradoxes. What therefore needs to be worked out is *in what ways* the paradoxes of absent and present language are manifest in linguistic communication in this novel. As Michel Foucault puts it, "There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things" (27).

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I. Speaking and Listening

In one sense, then, diction and syntax facilitate the absence/presence paradox as, for example, when Elaine emphasizes the unsaid in her response to Andrea, her interviewer: "What I hear is what she isn't *saying*" (95). In another sense, we will see in the course of this chapter that the oppositional tension between absence and presence is often contained within single, recurring words such as "nothing" and "wordlessness," or in paradoxical phrases such as "filled with wordlessness" (98). The many ways in which the text conveys its positions about language and silence illustrate that silence is not univocal--it is not merely one way of communicating--and it is not entirely negative. Understanding the paradoxes of the novel's silences hinges upon the realization that "There *is* not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (Foucault; 27).

Reconsider Elaine's response to the interviewer: "What I hear is what she isn't saying" (95). The inversion inherent within and the irony of hearing what is not said are augmented by the fact that this "not hearing" occurs during an interview--a genre which, by definition, intends to court positive linguistic referentiality from subjects. Elaine subverts the oppositions of speaker/listener and refuses, by "hearing" but not "listening," her role as either one. For that matter, Elaine's response follows a passage which is, for this novel, a rare instance of prolonged dialogue, and we know that Elaine certainly has been "hearing" Andrea, because she has been answering her sensibly. However, Elaine's remark that she hears the unsaid undermines all that she has

previously said to Andrea, renders it unreliable and peripheral. Elaine's denial that her communication is a response to present, audible words throws into question the very concept of present, linear and unifaceted linguistic communication.

Elaine's careful notation to the reader of when she is listening to her interviewer and when she is not draws purposeful and significant attention to the power dynamics generated by linguistic communication. From Elaine's comment, we realize that "hearing" is neither passive nor natural, but is willful and is produced as much as speech is. The *production* of speech, which Andrea exhibits and encourages Elaine to exhibit as well, paired with the *production* of listening which Elaine claims as her own, positions neither interview participant as a pure receiver. Rather, they are both producers of a presence--one presence is of speech, one is of silence--and their relationship as such doubled presence is necessarily combative.

Elaine, at least, certainly feels as if she is engaged in a sort of warfare with Andrea, the interviewer. Her replies to Andrea's questions are both evasively unhelpful and sarcastically confrontational. She is aware of this, eventually admitting, "I hear her exasperation, with me and my refusals" (95). Elaine even narrates that she feels captured, as if she is caught speechlessly with her mouth pried open at the dentist, and at one point she thinks, "In a minute my teeth will be chattering like those of cornered mice" (95).

Elaine's subsequent engagement with Andrea's appearance ("I can hardly *hear* her. But I *see* her, very clearly: the ribbing on the neck of her sweater, the fine hairs of her cheek, the shine of a button") occurs at the expense of linguistic communication; it becomes a means of escape and self-preservation for Elaine (95; emphasis added). In her study of the philosophy of listening entitled, The Other Side of Language, Gemma Corradi Fiumara pays considerable attention to the roles of the listener and listening in oral communication. Fiumara points out that "Hostility . . . appears to be an intense, acute, and tiring emotion . . . The indifference of non-listening is incomparably more extensive

and less demanding. It extends in time and space without losing anything" (112). It seems that the way for Elaine to escape what she perceives as an exhaustingly hostile linguistic environment is to pose as a "non-listener."

A consideration of Atwood's draft of this interview reveals that Elaine's tactic of evasion, her literal and figurative non-listening, is not accidental, but rather is carefully constructed by the author. In the published version of the novel, Elaine replies to the interviewer's question, "Why do you paint?" with "Why does anyone do anything?" (95). She asks a rhetorical question which reveals nothing outside of itself, a question which has no obvious referent and no simple or concrete linguistic answer. Elaine has been listening to Andrea's silence, to what she "isn't saying," and Andrea's "Why do you paint?" question has disrupted Elaine's reverie and made clear Andrea's exasperation with the wrench Elaine has thrown into what should be their "simple" communication (95). Elaine's refusal to reply at any level but a rhetorical one allows her to remain detached from the conversation and to avoid any "soul-searching" which a non-rhetorical reply to an interviewer's questions might require. As we might expect, this rhetorical question brings the interview as well as the chapter to a close.

However, in the manuscript of this scene, Elaine replies, "Revenge" to Andrea's final question and confesses to the reader that "This surprises me. It's something I haven't known in words. Till now" (99:8). The exception from the published version of a revealing, personal answer ("Revenge") is significant. To reply self-reflectively, as Elaine does in the drafts, is to allow oneself to enter fully the linguistic exchanges of the interview; with such a reply, Elaine becomes more responsible for linguistic responses to linguistic questions than she does with a rhetorical reply, more present as a "personal" speaker as opposed to as a sort of orator . Furthermore, with a response of "Revenge," Elaine is forced to consider the implications not only of possessing knowledge, but of possessing knowledge in a linguistic context. In other words, she is forced to consider the distinction between knowing something and knowing something "in words."

Participating in the interview with rhetorical replies and as a non-listener, though, Elaine can refuse such language. Thus, she can also refuse tidy, oppositional orderings of language such as listening versus speaking, silence versus words, etc.

II. Figures of Speech and Figures of Thought

Besides using particular words to communicate lacks of and in linguistic communication, another type of linguistic absence is created from linguistic presence when words are *depicted* as pronounced and spoken, but are at the same time decontextualized and disconnected from their referents. For example, when Elaine subsequently reads her interview in the newspaper, she "skip[s] to the last paragraph: the inevitable *eclectic*, the obligatory *post-feminist*, a *however* and a *despite*" (242). These are printed words, which by nature are literally inaudible, and it is noteworthy that Atwood refrains from the more usual method of quoting print with quotation marks. This is likely because quotation marks also imply dialogue, speech and audibility, and they do not cultivate the silences of and in language which the novel so relentlessly courts. Even further, by disconnecting words from their contexts, Elaine also interrupts the written line, indicating that words which are read and "seen" are not necessarily more resistant to manipulation and distortion than are words which are spoken and "heard." The language of Cat's Eye does not at any moment or on any level allow its readers to presume that language--either oral or written--is by nature linear, cohesive or stable.

Clichés are one way for Atwood to highlight such a proposition. Especially handy are clichés which use tropes of non-linguistic communication to signify linguistic communication, such as "It goes without saying" and "chewing the fat," to name just two of Cat's Eye's many (6; 69). Clichés render language concretely communicative, because they can be shared by speakers as a type of meaning. At the same time, clichés are in a way "silent" because they reduce the polyvalency of language to a single phrase, one

which runs the risk of being easily disregarded and perceived as mundane. We may even view clichés as forms of metaphor or, as George Bowering puts it, as "fossilized metaphors" (85).

There is a distinction which seems to originate in classical rhetoric between figures of thought and figures of speech (the Roman Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory* from first century A.D is a frequently cited source for this distinction). Many contemporary language and rhetoric philosophers seem to find the distinction important (although they also acknowledge that the difference between the two figures is ultimately a blurry one). Samuel R. Levin, for example, argues that figures of thought, one of which is the metaphor, are a matter of conception, that they are not dependent on their exact words for their meaning, and that "their figurativeness is a function of their use, not their meaning" (112-13; 120-21). M.H. Abrams clarifies this when he posits that figures of thought do not depend on their *syntactical* meaning, but still depend on a conceptual meaning, that figures of thought are those "in which words or phrases are used in a way that effects a conspicuous change in what we take to be their standard meaning" (66).

Thus, the metaphor is decisively discrepant from the pun in which, as a figure of speech, "departure from standard usage is not primarily in the meaning of the words, but in the syntactical order or pattern of the words" (Abrams; 66); I will elaborate on the natures of these figures further in forthcoming discussions of puns and rhetorical questions. In general, though, the text's most prominent figure of thought is the metaphor; metaphor allows Cat's Eye to manipulate and even confuse states of presence and absence. Metaphors provide mobility and flexibility for linguistic meaning; they rely by nature on the idea that linguistic meanings can be abstracted and transferred. The metaphor can distinguish between the literal meanings of words and their expressive meanings, but when and if it does so, both of these linguistic aspects remain present within the metaphor. Thus, metaphors help to articulate the idea that language

is never fully present to itself, and the metaphor is a bridge between the present and the absent--between the thing and its consciously constructed abstraction.

A metaphor, that is, compares a more or less discernible linguistic image to one which is, although understandable, valued because it is *not* that same linguistic image, because it is an "absence" to the pre-established "presence." Of course, such a theory privileges presence as existing prior to absence, and renders absence somewhat marginal and secondary. Although Atwood's project seems specifically to labor against such prioritizing, it is nonetheless valuable to an analysis of Cat's Eye to suppose that a metaphor "refers to a particular set of linguistic processes whereby aspects of one object are 'carried over' or transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first" (Hawkes; 1).

More than the assignation of privilege within linguistic oppositions, it is this idea of linguistic mobility, of a "carrying over," for which Cat's Eye values metaphorical language. In a sense, even, all of Elaine's language is metaphorical. This is because in offering a particular discourse on the nature of linguistic communication, her language is intended for something beyond itself--it has both explicit (present) and implicit (absent) functions. Metaphorical language is a language of the perpetual chasm and transference that occurs both within and between presence and absence, between a "something" and a "nothing," and in its very nature as an abstraction, metaphor in turn reveals itself as a crucial "something."

Clichés make apt use of the double premise upon which metaphors operate, and Cat's Eye's clichés in particular often undo, or deconstruct, clichés themselves, revealing yet another layer to the "something/nothing" relationship within the metaphor. For example, as an adult, Elaine narrates that the sensational, commercialized language of contemporary Toronto is a commercialized, mundane one: "Sunday's sermon is announced on a billboard identical to the kind for supermarket specials: Believing is Seeing" (332). Church may well have turned into a commodity, as Elaine declares. But

even more important, the clichéd language of Elaine's environment points out, on the one hand, that it takes very little for language to be appropriated and to become ineffective and mundane. At the same time, this cliché is reversed (the conventional cliché is "Seeing is Believing"); it thus subverts even the cliché's subversion or negation of "original" language and emphasizes the reversi*bility* of all linguistic communication.

In his article entitled "Action and the Absence of Speech in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Joseph Bentley points out that all figurative language, which I interpret as all language that does not explicitly mean what it says it means, enables its user to value language more for its form than for its content. It thereby insulates the speaker from the hazards engendered by language's inherent imprecision (1). This is much like the gap established for Elaine by the constant fluctuation between absence and presence which allows her refuge from the confinement and limitations which forcibly stabilized and fixed linguistic oppositions can potentially confer.

Metaphor, which Atwood uses in colloquial forms such as puns and clichés as well as in a more "literary" sense throughout the novel,[3] "refers to a condition of permanent suspense between a literal world in which appearance and nature coincide and a figural world in which this correspondence is no longer *a priori* posited" (de Man; 151). The literal and figurative worlds of Cat's Eye which metaphor bridges are respectively the present and absent worlds of textual language and linguistic communication among characters. And like clichés, puns are also a valuable version of metaphor for Cat's Eye. They function not necessarily to replicate language by making it doubly present and

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[3]It is these "colloquial" forms of metaphor, which are forms executed by the narrator and characters of the "story" more than by the author of the "text," upon which I wish to concentrate because they have more to do with speech and less to do with writing than do more "literary" forms of metaphor. Such "literary" forms of metaphor, which I consider simile, hyperbole, etc. to be, are nonetheless prevalent throughout the novel, such as when Elaine says her cat's eye marble is "like the green eye of a radio; like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet" or Josef's girlfriends Susie remarks that "It just *kills* him" to be separated from his children through divorce (66; 305). See my notes in the introduction for explanation of my distinction between "text" and "story."

doubly meaningful as much as they work to undo presence by rendering any meaning within a phrase transient and mutable.

Puns indicate that previously present meanings are absent, and they subvert a reader's and listener's comfort with language by rendering it surprising and deceptive. As figures of speech, puns work because they rearrange language for special effects and thereby "depart from what is experienced by users as standard, or literal, language" (Abrams; 182). They do not operate through a "radical change in the meaning of the words themselves," (Abrams; 182) as metaphors do, but through a change in word orders and patterns. This is a deviation which can indeed effect an originary linguistic meaning, but does not *inherently* alter meaning (as a figure of thought does) as much as it alters words themselves.

Consider the many puns that derive from Elaine's realizations in and recognitions about Toronto: " . . . *just deserts* used to be what everyone could expect to get, in the end. Now it's a restaurant specializing in cakes. All they had to do was add an s" (332). Besides Elaine's notion that language has been manipulated into commodification, this linguistic communication signifies the nature of puns. That is, puns are emblems of the artificiality of language, the flexibility of linguistic meanings. Just "add an s," and you have a pun, just as changing exactly one letter turns "difference" into differance.[4] In arguing that the past is estranged from the present, puns in Cat's Eye also argue, as metaphors do, for a world in which "literal and figural forms of language can be distinguished, a world in which the literal and the figural are properties that can be isolated and, consequently, exchanged and substituted for each other" (de Man; 151-52).

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[4]I mention differance here because, for one, it is a crucial component of Atwood's theoretical discourse in this novel, as I indicated in the previous chapter. Second, her particular discussion of the "deserts" pun resonates with the ideas behind différance- namely, that altering only one letter in a word can have a powerful affect on its meaning and that such a linguistic "difference" can be simultaneously present in print and absent to the ear. Thus, we realize through Atwood's discussion of the "new" language of Toronto her implicit recognition of yet another "modern day" fragmented, revisionist language (deconstruction).

However, this argument for flexibility and exchange is made through diction and syntax itself, and not primarily through abstraction, as it is with the metaphor.

When Elaine and the other women involved in her brief political activities in the early 1970s organize an all-female, feminist art show, they are conscious of being somewhat subversive. "This is risky business, " Elaine says, "and we know it. Jody says we could get trashed, by the male art establishment" (367). This subversion repeatedly takes the form of deconstructive puns. On one art piece, there are "condoms stuffed with tampons (unused), glued onto it in the shapes of letters, spelling out WHAT IS LUV?" Another piece bears the message:

UP YOUR
MAN
IFESTO! (367)

Their work is about dismemberments and artificiality, and the banner outside the gallery door reads, "F(OUR) FOR ALL" (370). This amendment of the cliché "all for one and one for all" is also, as Elaine points out, a pun on "free for all" (370). Even more noteworthy, the parentheses within the pun imply both separation and conflation (absence and presence); they denote fragmentation, thus signifying a space of ultimate indeterminability. Even further, created in this pun between the parenthetical and the non-parenthetical--created from such flexibility--is new linguistic meaning. That is, puns are emblems of both absent and present meaning, and as such, they constitute a presence themselves. They allow a new "presence," an alternative state of revisionist, deconstructed, absent/present language, to flourish. Puns are important to this novel because they offer the *illusion* that subjects are moving beyond language to a more "concrete" reality, but in effect reveal that word and object are inextricably interdependent.

What seems especially significant here is that although Elaine is considered a member of the "four for all" conglomerate, she feels alienated and absent from the language which is supposed to represent her. We realize that she does not feel fully

present within this supposedly self-descriptive language when we realize that she cannot communicate its meanings effectively. She tells Jon the meaning of the pun but notes the irrelevance of her explanation, notes her awareness that he already understands her puns and she can offer him no new interpretations of her group's apparently "subversive" language. And for that matter, Elaine is not even sure that the language is entirely hers; when she adds to her explanation of the pun ("Plus it encapsulates the word *our*"), she also narrates, "*Encapsulate* is also one of Jody's words" (370).

One senses that Elaine cannot locate a language in which she can fully and completely exist and through which she can accurately represent herself. Her discomfort with and disassociation from puns may signify her suspicion that puns look to a "second meaning" of language for resolution to the slippery deception in language, in contrast to Elaine's usual form of speech, which embraces the unsolvability of linguistic uncertainty. Regardless, though, of why the language of puns is not fully Elaine's language, the important fact remains that Elaine simultaneously uses language as a communicative presence and comments on its incompetence, on the degree of absence--personal, linguistic-- which is always extant within and which problematizes linguistic presence.

Indeed, puns allow the text to imply that language embodies multiple and reversible meanings; they also function even more explicitly as vehicles for the absence/presence paradigm. When Elaine, alienated and sad, draws a completely black picture in grade school, Miss Stuart, her teacher, asks why the picture is so dark. "Because it's night," Elaine answers, and immediately regrets such a reply: "This is an idiotic answer, I know that as soon as it's out of my mouth." Idiotic or not, Elaine cannot revoke the reply, which lurks in the air as linguistic presence and demands a response from her teacher. Elaine cannot render her own words absent even when she decides that "My voice is almost inaudible, even to me."

However, what *can* happen, the text argues, is that words can come close to transformation from presence to absence through a pun. Indeed, Elaine's teacher

accurately hears her "inaudible" voice as a presence, and she responds to Elaine's "Because it's night" with "I see." This language which is not about language, but about vision, also serves as a way for Miss Stuart to reassure Elaine linguistically. And the flexibility of meaning that the pun offers Elaine does indeed comfort her. When Miss Stuart touches her shoulder, Elaine narrates, "Her touch glows briefly, like a blown-out match" (174). The touch comforts like a burnt match: the simile is one of a presence, the match, which is made of absence, made of its own "burnt-out" nature. With the pun, and with Elaine's subsequent presence/absence simile, language has become overtly metaphorical, and it is this flexibility which actually liberates and comforts Elaine.

III. Rhetorical Questions

When they are growing up as well as when Elaine imagines meeting Cordelia in adulthood, Cordelia's standard response to statements to which she, Cordelia, has no answer, or to statements which it is not to her advantage to answer, is a rhetorical "So?" This "So?" is useful and effective in a variety of ways. Sometimes, it satisfies both Cordelia as well as the person with whom she converses (5). Sometimes, it indicates that the other speaker's words are irrelevant and ineffectual, as when Elaine remembers the teenage Cordelia responses to "Cordelia! Put on your gloves, it's cold out. *So*? I can't come over, I have to finish my homework. *So?*" (213). At other times, it renders the other speaker completely powerless and *aware* of her own powerlessness, as when the adult Elaine thinks, "Cordelia . . . . You made me believe I was nothing." Cordelia responds "*So*?' and Elaine says, " To which there is no answer" (213). As Levin puts it, the rhetorical question is an alteration in which "an act of subversion is committed on the illocutionary force of the utterance by foreclosing the possibility of an answer" (115).

The rhetorical question is a convenient tool for Cordelia's linguistic evasions as well as for the novel's approach to language as a whole, because it is a figure of thought which is abortive and preemptive, which interrupts conversational patterns of speaking

and answering. It poses a problem, much as the absence/presence exchanges do in general in this novel, for which there is no certain resolution. Thus, it is no surprise that throughout the novel, Cordelia's rhetorical questions mark forms of linguistic challenge, because rhetorical questions (much like Cordelia herself) are in a sense masqueraders. That is, the rhetorical question only masquerades as a inquiry; it is more nearly an assertion, and this discrepancy renders the entire speech act of the rhetorical question an indirect one. Where is Elaine situated when Cordelia asks questions that, as Levin puts it, "serve as conveyances for their own answers"? (115).

One of the first challenging moments of Cordelia's rhetorical questions occurs during Elaine and Cordelia's introduction, and this passage employs the rhetorical question to augment its nature as a *linguistic* confrontation and test. The first thing that Cordelia says to Elaine is "There's dog poop on your shoe." Cordelia is testing Elaine to see if she will act squeamish and "girlish" about such a thing as "dog poop." Elaine, though, is used to the grotesqueries of life from her entomologist father and adventurous brother, and she replies with complete command of her language and her position: "It's only a rotten apple." Cordelia is stuck now. She has not ruffled Elaine; instead, her words have been accepted and her tone returned with matching equanimity and capability. To solve her problem, Cordelia resorts to the rhetorical question, the ultimate silencer: "It's the same color though, isn't it?" (75).

Of course, Elaine is silent in response to Cordelia's remark, because there is no necessary or concrete answer to utter. Elaine likely is even unsure of how to perceive Cordelia's question. As Paul de Man points out, understanding and responding to the rhetorical question literally is not necessarily simpler or easier than understanding and responding to it figuratively (11-12). Elaine is immobilized by the ambiguity of the rhetorical question, and Cordelia has successfully seduced Elaine into passivity and silence with her rhetoric: "This time her voice is confiding, as if she's talking about something intimate that only she and I know about and agree on" (75).

At another point, Cordelia, chastising Elaine, asks, "Lying again . . . . What are we going to do with you?" (199). By asking Elaine such rhetorical questions, by seeming to request information, Cordelia masks her linguistic control with an appearance of deference. The questions she poses to Elaine are really commands, but by phrasing commands as questions, Cordelia manipulates the appearance of linguistic responsibility and makes it seem as if Elaine is responsible both for her replies and for the consequences of those replies.

Thus, the rhetorical question is effective because it is an assertive and declarative presence that appears also as an absence. It is both an interrogation and a form of speech which is intended to be unanswerable. Cordelia's rhetorical language is thereby persuasive because it is both present and absent, both precise and evasive. That is, her question's potency stems from the combination of a direct question, a "grammatical structure devoid of ambiguity," with a rhetorical mode that serves to upset "the mood as well as the mode" of the entire linguistic exchange (de Man 12). Cordelia's question is a "syntactical device" which is "made to operate on a grammatical as well as one a rhetorical level" (de Man; 13) This doubleness allows Atwood to emphasize the duality of communication, while at the same time forbidding grammar and rhetoric to be mutually exclusive, to be fully estranged from one another. With rhetorical questions, oppositions encompass a flexible idea of difference rather than represent binary separations; therefore, the text (as de Man argues about Yeats's employment of the rhetorical question) "disrupts and confuses the neat antithesis of the inside/outside pattern" on many levels (de Man; 13).

Cordelia wins her initial struggle as well as subsequent struggles with Elaine for linguistic victory by employing the rhetorical questions. Their relationship from its outset is based on a premise of unanswerability, on questions which presuppose particular answers. Jean Francois Lyotard suggests the importance of all types of questions in social dynamics, and argues that the question is the primary component

and the organizing factor of the power politics in social relationships: "the question of the social bond, insofar as it is a question, is itself a language game, the game of inquiry. It immediately positions the person who asks, as well as the addressee and the referent asked about: it is already the social bond" (15).

Of course, Elaine is not helpless, and does not at this point even conceive of herself as being linguistically helpless. As Lyotard puts it, "one is always located at a post though which various messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressed, or referent" (15). Indeed, Elaine is neither entirely powerless *nor* entirely powerful, and the novel's suggestion is that linguistic "power" is always by necessity amorphous, mutable and a form of *dis*empowerment. Throughout the novel, Cordelia's questions are a systematic way for her to elicit Elaine's recognition of their power dynamics as well to assure Elaine's adherence to Cordelia's determination of those dynamics.

Rhetorical questions "minimize the emphasis on the information channel (the report function) and stress instead the social relationships involved in the exchange (the command function)" (Goody; 30). We see this even in Elaine's aforementioned response to the interviewer's question, "Why do you paint?": "Why does anyone do anything?" (95).[5] Cat's Eye constantly draws attention to the differences between and intersections of informational and social language. The novel maintains that on one hand, subjects must realize and incorporate into their communicative goals that there are limits to one's abilities to control language, to remain a free and autonomous subject in linguistic

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[5]As a matter of fact, Elaine's question here, like many of Cordelia's, can be seen not only as rhetorical, but also as antiphrastic. That is, in the antiphrastic question, "the point is not to suggest a particular answer, but to implicate someone in the assertion that it indirectly makes" (Levin; 116). Elaine can gain a reprieve from her discomfort with the interview form by implicating the interviewer with her question, by implying that the interviewer herself should consider why she does what she does.

relationships.[6] On the other hand, subjects must also recognize and understand that these limits are vague, amorphous and elliptical, and that they do not abolish the necessity of linguistic presence.

IV. Silence

The fluctuations of presence and absence in Cat's Eye lead on many levels to states of unknowability, where desires for predictable and stable linguistic communication must be at least suspended if not abandoned entirely. It does not seem, however, as if Cat's Eye's use of silence is intended as a frame for speech and to indicate the sheer omnipotence of the absence/presence paradox, to remark on itself as a self-contained framework. Rather, language of negativity, such as silence, functions more to communicate that language is inherently complicated and that the perimeters and paradoxes of language exist as forms of their own subversions. On the one hand, to be silent is still pointedly and clearly to speak. On the other hand, to speak is also to create a silence, or an erasure. A lack of speech not only induces speech, but also marks its own failure to exist completely as a lack.

In the text's approach to the absence/presence play of language through portrayals of silence, form and content frequently echo and affect one another. When Elaine passes a homeless woman on the street, her language embodies the paradoxes of silence perfectly: "Every day there's more of it, more of that *silent wailing* . . ." (335; emphasis added). Subsequently, it is clear that italics are an integral part of the ability of "silent wailing" to express itself. The wailing says, according to Elaine, "*need need help help*" (335). This inclination toward italicizing in the novel is not surprising: with italics, words are not dialogue; instead, they are as hypothetical and fictive as their

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[6]I mean "linguistic relationships" here to emphasize the linguistic component of all communication in and of the novel. However, "linguistic" may be superfluous, as it becomes obvious in Cat's Eye that language cannot be avoided in any social relationship.

presence as words can allow them to be. Even further, italics mark inaudible voice; they draw attention to silent language.

Similarly, when Elaine remarks that she hears "a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head," we realize that this "voice" is internal and headed nowhere external. Why, then, is the "voice" not called a "thought"--is there a difference between an internal voice, one inaudible to anyone but the originating subject, and a thought? The italicized text and general diction call attention here to a presence of silent voices. They highlight a voice that may well "say" "*It serves her right*, " but is technically by no one in Elaine's world but Elaine, and does not function audibly as linguistic communication.

This paradox of "silent voice" is apparent throughout the novel. For instance, when Elaine says that Josef, her middle-aged art instructor and lover, will not speak about his European past, silence appears first as a straightforward absence: "Josef won't tell me about the war, or about how he got out of Hungary during the revolution." Yet immediately following this revelation, the narration depicts not silence, but speech: "He says these things are too disturbing . . .;" "He says there are many ways to die . . ."; "He says I am lucky . . ."; "He tells me I am untouched." Further, there is even dialogue: " 'This country has no heroes,' he says." Thus, the passage initially appears to be saturated with concrete, communicative language despite Josef's reluctance to speak. What we learn, though, is that speech is not merely a matter of willful silence or willful audibility, because even when Josef finally does speak, he also communicates and commits an erasure. Specifically, Elaine's subsequent and final remark undoes any notion that language is fully and irrevocably present, as well as that linguistic dynamics exist only in speech; as Josef speaks, "he runs his hands over [Elaine's] skin as if he's *erasing* [her]" (317; emphasis added).

The novel's repeated attention to such paradoxes of self-expression imply that Elaine is searching for an alternate way to exist and to communicate in a linguistic world

that demands the impossible from her--a world that demands linguistic communication which is actually (as opposed to apparently) honest, comprehensible and effective. Silence, because it is multiple and multi-faceted, is one way through which Elaine may potentially find this alternate existence. We might even understand Elaine's silence as, paradoxically, a way for her to potentially implement and learn from language; as Fiumara suggests, we may understand silence "to mean that only when we know how to be silent will that of which we cannot speak tell us something" (99).

Cat's Eye endorses the paradoxical situation which Fiumara suggests, where a deliberate act of "not speaking" is particularly informative, in the countless instances where silence facilitates speech and marks the absence of speech. For example, when the young Elaine and her mother bake muffins in the kitchen, Elaine relates a fear that her mother "might tell the other mothers" that Elaine is being harassed. Such a prediction anticipates speech and language: put simply, her mother might speak on her behalf. The potential for linguistic communication, however, is subsequently annulled, made absent. There are only *linguistic* silence and *physical* presence in Elaine's continued imagination of the event: "My mother will turn up on their doorsteps, wearing slacks, carrying a bouquet of weeds, incongruous."

Furthermore, what is crucial is that this silence evidently "speaks," because although her mother will "turn up," "wearing" and "carrying"--all action verbs, distinct from the self-reflexive abstractions of other speech---nonetheless "They won't believe her" (167). Elaine prediction offers that her mother's language, her voice, will be absent, but at the same time, Elaine's description of others' reactions to her mother is comprised of words which are about *being believed* ,and thereby suggest linguistic communication. What this language about speech conflated with actions about physicality signifies and highlights is Elaine's mother's ultimate lack of fully present and communicative speech. In the place of audible language, silence and physicality function as the form through

which a listener--be it an "other mother" or a reader--may *understand* what is apparently not to be believed.

Such *conspicuously* absent voices continue to construct the novel's codes of silence, and silence often speaks with more significance for Elaine and for the narrative line than does present, audible language. When Elaine's mother has a miscarriage, no one directly informs Elaine, but she realizes the event through the silences and gaps in her family's linguistic communication. Her father says only that "there has been an accident," which confounds Elaine: "How can you have an accident lying in bed asleep?" Stephen does indeed tell Elaine that it was "a baby that came out too soon," but Elaine's only slightly older brother is neither an appropriate nor a credible enough speaker: "I don't believe him."

Her father's speech is one of indirect truths, and Elaine is eventually able to interpret the silence within such linguistic indirectness and hiddenness: "Our father tells us to help out more, which means that he's frightened as well." It is Elaine's mother's reaction to the miscarriage, however, which most completely embodies the linguistic theory of the passage, which is that silence engenders both absence and presence of voice. In the most explicit juxtaposition of presence and absence in this passage yet, Elaine notes that her mother "looks as if she's listening to a sound, outside the house perhaps, but there is no sound. Sometimes I have to repeat things twice before she hears me" (178).

It is important to realize that silence is emphasized as both absence and presence at many of the most formative points of Elaine's life and the most informative parts of her autobiography, as I delineate above. The irony is that modes of *silence* in life, because they function as both presence and absence, are what enable Elaine to *speak* her life. D.A. Miller puts it well when he says that in David Copperfield (which is, like Cat's Eye, a *künstlerroman*), "Writing the self, then, would be consistently ruled by the paradoxical proposition that the self is most itself at the moment when its defining inwardness is

most secret, most withheld . . . " (200). As a matter of fact, we repeatedly see such "inwardness," paired with instances where silence informs linguistic communication, in the novel's attention to secrecy.

A. Secrets

Secrets are important to Cat's Eye because they embody the liminal space of indeterminacy and play between absence and presence. In the mode of the secret, something is hidden, but something is also known--that is, the state of hiddenness is known. This state of hiddenness functions for the receiver of a secret *as* the secret. Thus, the secret is the presence that marks absence as well as the absence--the unknown and potential linguistic information--that marks the presence of "secret." Miller argues that a secret must be intimated in order to exist as a secret, and not to exist only as the secret holder's subjective knowledge. Conversely, in only intimating and not fully disclosing the secret, the secret becomes linguistic theater and performance and so is "already rather *given away*" (194).

When Stephen has a girlfriend "so secret she doesn't even know about it herself," Elaine is sworn to secrecy (108). Their verbal pact, thus, ensures the secret. Elaine is not allowed to refer to this girl by name, but--because the secret must be intimated in order to retain its secretive status--Stephen "will sometimes murmur [her] initials" (108). Stephen writes Elaine cryptic notes about this secret girlfriend, notes which are nonetheless translatable into a discernible language which articulates its own secrecy: " 'Talked to B.W.' 'Saw HER today'." (108).

Furthermore, the places where secrets are revealed, we learn, are also the places where secrets are encoded. Stephen's secrets, for example, are enacted within the narrative *at the same time* that Elaine's secret *of knowing* Stephen's secret is narrated to the reader. The result is that modes and gestures of secrecy appear to the reader as simultaneously hidden and revealed, absent and present. Elaine even articulates this

presence/absence tension within the linguistic secret when she says that knowing Stephen's secret "makes me feel important. But it's a negative importance, it's the importance of a blank sheet of paper" (109). The power of a secret's presence lies its own position as lack; it lies in the very fact that a secret exists in negative and absent realms, in voids of and potentials for presence.

At one point, Elaine relates, "Carol tells me that her piano teacher hits her fingers with a ruler . . . and that her mother spanks her with the back of a hairbrush or else a slipper. When she's really in for it she has to wait until her father comes home and whacks her with his belt, right on the bare bum" (51-52). The details of Carol's reported language are sharp and vivid; Carol's language cannot be more straightforward, present and revealing than it is. Yet we learn subsequently that "All of these things are secrets" (52). Elaine could say "*supposed* to be secrets." Yet she does not qualify "secrets," despite the fact that this information cannot be secretive, of course, because Elaine knows it. The suggestion is that secrets are always both known and unknown, said and unsaid, present and absent.

On a related note, Elaine's secrets are always also the reader's knowledge, gleaned from Elaine's language, just as Elaine knows Carol's secrets from Carol's speech. However, despite that we know, for example, both the torment wrought on Elaine as well as her silence about it, we remain intrigued by the fact that it is hidden information, a "secret." Perhaps it is the very suppression of Elaine's voice that intrigues, even. That is, the simultaneous obscurity and revelation in the novel is what creates secrets as well as what maintains the reader's interest. We must "forget" that we know Elaine's secrets in order to maintain "the pleasures of suspense and surprise" of the novel (Miller; 206); if we thus suspend our knowledge of the secrets' contents, it cannot interfere with the importance and intrigue of the novel. As Miller suggests, perhaps the function of secrecy is "not to conceal knowledge as much as to conceal knowledge of the knowledge" (206).

Because the premise exists throughout the novel that there is always an element of the unsaid in the said, secrets are an invaluable communicative vehicle. It is precisely because secrets can embody the terrain of silence as a presence that they are so important to the novel. As Elaine says about Susie, Josef's other girlfriend: "But we are not to tell her about me; we are to keep it secret . . . . In this there is the satisfaction of all secrets: I know something she doesn't" (316). We may even imagine that Elaine's discussion of her secrets with other characters is also Atwood's address of her readers on the natures of oral communication, writing and reading: "whatever is going on is going on in secret, among the four of us only. Secrecy is important, I know that: to violate it would be the greatest, the irreparable sin" (127).

B. Whispers and Nothing

Like the secret, the whisper is a convenient form of practically inaudible speech in Cat's Eye. Whispers recur throughout Elaine's relationships in childhood with Cordelia, Grace and Carol. Not only, though, do little girls whisper in Cat's Eye, but the powers of whispering extend to all of Elaine's relationships. In the most revealing instance, Elaine narrates that during her family's long car rides to the bush during her childhood, "It's difficult for me to whisper into my brother's round ears when we're in the car. In any case he can't whisper back, because he has to look straight ahead at the horizon . . . " (23). Stephen is silent, but his silence is nonetheless a form of linguistic communication, manifested as non-linguistic communication. If Elaine were not to initiate their communication with whispers, the silence would lack linguistic connotations, but she clearly does initiate speech (albeit with difficulty). The presence of language, minimal and restrained but nonetheless fundamental, thereby facilitates the presence of silence.

For that matter, if instead we interpret "It's difficult" as a sign that Elaine does not even attempt to whisper, then the passage becomes significant on a formal level. Indeed, to interpret it as such prompts inquiry into why Atwood introduces silence in the first

place, why she writes into the novel an absence of linguistic communication. One explanation may come from our recognition that such meta-linguistic writing can argue that language is always to a degree absent from linguistic communication and, at the same time, it can render that linguistic absence a novelistic and thematic presence.

Silence exists not only as a lurking subtext of secrets and whispers, but also as utterance. Namely, these utterances occur as the articulation of nothing. For example, when Cordelia falls down in the snow and questions Elaine ("'Were you laughing? . . . Just yes or no'") Elaine narrates, "I say nothing." Silence as a form of voice, the use of silence *to say* nothing, is Elaine's response to Cordelia's physical actions and verbal demands. Firstly, for the reader, *nothing* has a presence here not only as the absence of language, but also as a way of saying *something.* Secondly, for Cordelia, Elaine's silence is also a duplicitous presence. That is, on the one hand, Elaine's silence is an attempt to silence Cordelia, to avoid the entanglements and ramifications of linguistic communication with her. On the other hand, however, Elaine's silence is also an implicit insubordination, as Cordelia indeed interprets her "nothing" as "something." That is, Cordelia seems to sense the doubleness of silence when she responds as if Elaine has indeed spoken. She says "Lying again . . . . What are we going to do with you?" (the rhetorical implications of which I discussed in more detail above) (199).

Furthermore, "nothing" is important as a form of *non-linguistic* communication which is nonetheless given a *linguistic* sign. "Nothing" accomplishes for Elaine's communication with the other girls what "wordlessness" accomplishes for Atwood's communication with her readers, as I will discuss in the ensuing pages; both allow a linguistic presence to function as self-expression and communication, but to do so through connotations and creations of absence. Elaine remembers Cordelia's habitual question, "What do you have to say for yourself?" and recalls, "*Nothing*, I would say"

(44).[7] Elaine relies on the utterance "nothing" as a linguistic safety to fill the required "air time" even when she knows that she has "something" to say: "'What's that in your pocket?' says Cordelia. 'Nothing' I say. 'It's only a marble'" (151).[8]

"Nothing" allows Elaine to "fill" silence appropriately, to fill it as she is expected to. Fiumara points out that by "filling" silence, a subject can gain more freedom from linguistic communication that s/he might by remaining silent: " . . . by completely saturating the reciprocity space one can ultimately annul it" (103). Filling silence with "nothing," Elaine can fulfill her obligation for speech by speaking a word, which in itself is a presence. Yet the meaning of this word is one of absence and lack, and the word does little to explain Elaine's "true" thoughts or to foster continued conversation; thus, Elaine actually offers a linguistic absence which *poses* as a presence. And although at times Elaine's is a qualified nothing--for instance, *readers* learn eventually that "nothing" is actually a marble--the "linguistic stage" within the narrative itself is set for absence.

"Nothing" is comparable to silence because neither word allows a perceivable, visual manifestation of itself, and both are abstract linguistic signifiers. In Elaine's hazardous conversations with the other girls, where an utterance is expected of her and to remain silent means fear and danger, silence is a way of bridging the gap between

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[7]This question is a favorite of Cordelia's, and Elaine's response to it is always either silence or "nothing." Aside from the implications of the response which I discuss here, it is also worthwhile to consider Esther Goody's suggestion that the questioner who asks questions of a linguistically immobilized source such as Elaine is (a pre-verbal infant is Goody's example of such a source) is at a special advantage over the "average" questioner and respondent. This is because the questioner thereby constructs a dynamic where s/he can set the questions *as well as* interpret the "speechless" addressee's responses, thus to a large extent determining in full what both subjects are able to communicate (24).

[8]Indeed, I cited this last quotation about "nothing" and the marble in chapter one. It is important at this juncture, though, to reconsider the position of "nothing" in this sentence, in order to note that these two textual articulations of "nothing" are slightly discrepant. That is, the first functions as an indirect use of nothing, thus reflecting on the word as a form of linguistic rhetoric to readers. It is a sentence *about* the state of nothingness, about the frequently silent conditions of linguistic communication. The second sentence, however, is a speech act, a word which itself is speech *about* silence; it is a statement of value employed to deflect and respond to others' language, and as such it is directed toward other characters.

language and the world to which it refers. Consequently, replies of "nothing" to requests for speech are a way to *articulate* that bridge. They are a way for Elaine to attempt to accommodate and understand the irrevocable chasm between language and experience, and such replies signify her desire to alleviate the gaping blackness of that chasm. Like silence, "nothing" has a dual nature. One nature is as positive and generative: speaking "nothing" creates a presence, a possibility of linguistic communication with the reader. The other nature is as negative and isolating, which breeds linguistic disassociation among characters.

When Elaine finally leaves Toronto for Vancouver, she narrates that the northern Ontario landscape viewed from the train window "looks like emptiness and silence, but to me it is not empty, not silent. Instead it's filled with echoes" (399). Silence here is distinguished from presence, and Elaine arrives in Vancouver unsatisfied, still "thirsty for silence" (399). A different silence subsequently greets Elaine in Vancouver, in the form of a threatening, aggressive "nothing": "I lie on the floor, washed by nothing and hanging on" (399). Elaine is so thirsty for a silence which admits speech that she visits a psychoanalyst. Elaine's speech to the analyst appears to be linguistic revelation but is actually selective about the words that represent her: "I tell him about the war. I tell him about the Exacto knife and the wrist, but not about the voice. I don't want him to think I'm a loony" (399).

Elaine's confessions to her therapist are only partial confessions; they are autobiographical confessions in which linguistic elements are both present and conspicuously absent. The analyst wants to know all about her childhood, a childhood which Elaine is also trying to communicate to the reader, but Elaine cannot speak such full presence. She can, however, articulate absence. That is, following the previously mentioned litany of "telling," Elaine says, "I tell him about nothing" (399). On one level, then, the presence of her prior speech is immediately qualified, even nullified. On a second level, telling *about* nothing is different from *telling* nothing. The latter translates

to silence, but the former is a discourse generated by and about absence, it is a discourse *of* wordlessness.

In chapter one, I compare Elaine's imaginary discussion of her daughters in the manuscript and the published Cat's Eye. I indicate that Elaine's language about her daughters embodies the presence/absence positions of speech more fully in the drafts than it does in the final version of the novel, and that the passage is especially significant because it occurs in the context of Elaine's illusory conversation with Cordelia. It is worthwhile to look again at Atwood's draft of this meeting, which does not occur in the published novel in conjunction with any interaction with Cordelia, but rather exists merely as her narration to the reader (see published version on p.121). As I have previously quoted more extensively, Elaine's imagined potential speech to Cordelia in the manuscript emphasizes the mutuality and interdependence of the said and the unsaid:

> I would say, oh, and I have two daughters. I would get out the pictures, which I keep in my handbag. We would [in margin, unreadable] together over them. I would say: they amaze me and I adore them. I would not say: they are my saving graces. (99:9).

However, Elaine's narration in the manuscript actually continues even beyond this to employ the word "nothing" specifically as a presence: "When nothing is moving in on me, I reach for them. I try not to let them know this. I don't want to pass anything of mine onto them, anything they would be better off without. Any of my nothing." (99:9) Excluded from the published novel, this passage clearly considers and emphasizes the indelible presence of nothing. Atwood even stresses her own emphasis of the presence of nothing, as well as the importance of this word to Elaine's discourse in general, by underlining it. "Nothing" is thus marked with clearly present but synthetic forms of linguistic emphasis (i.e. underlines, italics, quotations marks, etc.), emphasizing simultaneously the artificiality of linguistic presence (through form) and the absences within language (through content).

In this particular draft, then, we can understand explicitly what Atwood argues more implicitly throughout the published novel; namely, that an approach to understanding the presences and absences within language which insists on their opposition is not a tenable one. Instead, the novel argues, it is important to realize that the unsaid still speaks and conversely, that what we may think is "something" may in fact turn out to be nothing. That is, linguistic communication always revolves around and contains elements of negativity and negation. The language of Cat's Eye is a language of displacement, loss and lack; as such, it depends for its effects on codes of silence as much as it does on codes of speech. The two forms of communication become interdependent, as even linguistic absence exists as the absence *to which* Elaine's thoughts and words are directed.

In this unpublished passage, "nothing" threatens Elaine; it is appropriate to conclude that the threat of nothing is of its own nothingness. The threat of the *un*sayable is indeed the noteworthy threat; it is what Elaine will not say to her daughters for fear of transferring to them the same absences she experiences as a communicating adult. The presence of nothing, of unknowable voids, seems more perilous than any concrete, perceptible or palpable condition could potentially be. In fact, it is precisely *because* nothing is an unknowable void which nonetheless *can* be passed on to others that its existence threatens. In other words, nonparadoxical and tangible presence is not threatening, but conversion, mutability and unpredictabilty--absences that can and do transform themselves into presences--are hazardous, and this, as the inherent state of linguistic communication, is why language is so problematic.

In the published Cat's Eye, rather than address Cordelia directly ("I would say"), Elaine imagines confronting Cordelia with narration such as, "Cordelia, I *think*. You made me believe I was nothing" (213; emphasis added). Of course, the absence/presence paradigm is still operative with language such as this. That is, regardless of the fact that Elaine does not imagine *speaking* these words, she still

imagines that she somehow addresses Cordelia. Therefore, the idea of "nothing" still facilitates a generative and communicative medium for Elaine here. However, it certainly does so to a lesser degree than does speech, which is the creator of absence/presence tension in the manuscript.

C. Wordlessness

It seems that throughout the novel, silence is performative and action-oriented. It is wrought with intention and deliberation; it is something which is *accomplished* . As Fiumara points out, silence "is radically different from an expressive inability or stuporous state of imposed muteness" (99). "Wordlessness," however, refers more to the absence of language from the narrative than to the absence of linguistic communication between characters. In this sense, "wordlessness" is directed more toward communication with readers than toward communication within the narrative proper. "Wordlessness" points within the narration to the absence which is engendered by silence within the narrative. "Wordlessness" is a textual manifestation, we might even say, of extratextual meaning.

Hypothetically, then, silence can function in linguistic communication in at least two fundamental ways. Silence can be an instrument of listening--a direct strategy geared by the subject toward understanding the conversation, in which case it can be *described by* "nothing." Silence can also be a subtext of language which communicates a lack of words, in which case it can be *spoken as* "nothing" and as "wordlessness." If it functions as the later, silence will signify either refusal and rejection or language or affirmation and support of it.

From her first meeting with Cordelia to her later representations of childhood taunting and feminist meetings, Elaine interprets language as controversial, hostile and obstructive. Words of negativity such as "nothing" and "wordlessness" are a way for Elaine to raise arms against this bellicose linguistic state of presence, thereby asserting

her position in the world as one which both affirms and denies language. In this way, Elaine constructs a linguistic environment which admits controversy and contradiction, an environment conducive to the paradoxical presence of silence. As Fiumara puts it, silence may be understood not as absence and passivity, but rather as an active "effort to give space to the inexpressible" (98). Along with versions of "nothing" as a subset of silence, versions of "wordlessness" evoke and embody simultaneous absence and presence and repeatedly signal the novel's negotiating linguistic paradox.

At the very beginning of the novel, when Elaine imagines meeting Cordelia, she thinks of her in various states of linguistic immobilization. She imagines Cordelia as a bag lady, for instance, who sits in shabby clothing "muttering to herself." Or Cordelia is in an oxygen tent, unconscious, or in an iron lung, "being breathed" and "unable to move or speak." As the culmination of Elaine's fantasized reunion with Cordelia, she wonders if she would speak to Cordelia or ignore her. Further, she wonders, "Or would I go up to her wordlessly, throw my arms around her? Or take her by the shoulders, and shake and shake" (8). It is obvious that if Elaine is to be physically demonstrative to Cordelia and not to speak, then their communication will be "wordless." What, then, is the purpose of this insertion of "wordlessly" into Elaine's narration?

"Wordlessly" points out that regardless of whether Cordelia or Elaine (or both of them, for that matter) is silent, their communication will be both language-ridden and language-deficient. "Wordlessly" stands in this passage as the singular abstract and linguistic reference in a highly concrete and performative sentence. It functions to emphasize the literal absence of language, and thereby to render it a virtual presence in Elaine's communication. It unites Elaine's prediction of a silent Cordelia--who, repeatedly, is not only physically but also specifically linguistically immobilized--with her own conspicuous silence, highlighting the invariable presence of linguistic dynamics regardless of its subject and its subject's intentions.

In the manuscript of this scene, this idea that language is present as a mark of its own elusiveness and unspeakability is even more pronounced, as Elaine narrates, "But really I have no idea what I would do, *what I would say*, if I bumped into her . . ." (99:9; emphasis added). This is clearly opposed to the published abbreviation, "But finally I have no idea what I would *do* if I bumped into her . . ." (8; emphasis added). Furthermore, there are over five drafts of this scene, and in many of them, Elaine speaks directly to Cordelia. In some of these drafts, Elaine asks direct questions of Cordelia ("Do you know what you did?" and "Why did you do it?"), and in some she uses aggressive language against her ("Cordelia! I know you can hear me!").

Such direct address of Cordelia does not exist in the final version of this passage; in the published novel, Cordelia is absolutely unable to speak and to use language in response to Elaine, and Elaine herself speaks in concrete, direct speech and uses language that cannot be problematized, as in "*Cordelia. It's me, it's Elaine* " (9). This is a strong departure from the manuscript, which appends this statement with the abstract question, "Remember?" (99:9). Ultimately foregoing questions allows Elaine to control the language of their meeting, which is to control the silence of the meeting as well. "Wordlessness" can then function as the only linguistic reference in their reunion, and this reunion must therefore negotiate itself primarily around a simultaneous presence and absence.

It is revealing that despite the many revisions of this scene, what does <u>not</u> vary from five drafts of the manuscript to the published novel is the sentence, "Or would I go up to her wordlessly?" From the start, the novel positions "wordlessly" as an important subtext of and paradigm for linguistic communication. The function of "wordlessness" is always to a degree discursive, evoking theoretical positions about language's variability, and the word is also always strategically placed within the narrative. For example, Elaine remarks about mothers of the 1940s, "There's a great deal they don't say. Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It's filled with wordlessness"

(98). Although silence is a form of absence, silence isn't empty--it's full of wordlessness. Neither is "wordless" only a lack; it also subsists as a linguistic presence on its own position as a *word signifying* absence. The sentence quoted above about the gap between "silence" and "wordlessness" is a sentence that links absence and presence. Silence, it seems, does not stand alone, but is communicated by the mothers through what Elaine calls wordlessness. Furthermore, the bohemian painters whom Elaine meets in university are "a transitional form." The painters use sign language--the quintessential "transition" between linguistic and physical communication--to illustrate as much. One of them is "so inarticulate he's practically mute, and this *wordlessness* of his gives him a special status" (299; emphasis added). Elaine says that her adoration for Jon, who is then her husband, is " physical and wordless." However, she elaborates on this supposed wordlessness not with illustrations of physicality (which would describe the physical, what he *is*), but with language (which describes the word*less*, what he lacks): "I would think *Ah* , nothing more. Like a breath breathed out. Or I would think, like a child, *Mine.* Knowing it wasn't true. *Stay that way,* I would think" (361). It seems that there is always an aspect of silence, of unsaid but perceived words, in speech as well as an aspect of wordlessness, a more theoretical linguistic condition saturated with its own state of being a lack, in speech. But by the same token, there is always language and voice in silence and there is always something achieved through wordlessness.

There are thus many instances in the novel where "wordlessness" functions, as a word, to communicate silence in the text. The unsaid, the silent, and the said (the "wordless") are linked, and the gap between them is elusive and evasive. "Wordlessness" signifies the borders and margins between speech and silence, simulating Elaine's experiences of ostracism as a child and her search for the repressed and absent past as an adult. When Elaine breaks from her tormenting girlfriends, she says, "I go for long periods without saying anything at all." Yet the presence of such silence is described

with a particular, self-referential word which functions to communicate specifically what it is *not*, as Elaine' explains her silence with: "I can lapse back into wordlessness" (153).

Perhaps to be wordless is to be free of words, and to be silent is to be full of the unsaid, of wordless*ness*. It may be impossible to locate a precise distinction between the two, but it is certain that Atwood does not consider them interchangeable. Indeed, in drafts of the published chapter twelve, which are eventually excluded from the novel, Atwood seems to be deliberating on the difference between wordlessness and silence. In one draft, Elaine reflects on leaving noisy Toronto for the isolated bush in the summertimes of her childhood: "I was relieved to be free of all those extra words, to lapse back into silence." Later, Atwood amends this sentence to read, "It's a relief to be free of all those extra words, to lapse back into wordlessness" (100:1).[9]

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Thus, as silence courses through the novel's content, it functions also as a discursive comment on the problems and paradoxes *of* linguistic silence. One of the most precise instances of this occurs when Elaine describes the teenage girls in her high school. The girls, seductive and careless, walk through the hallways while "all the time these clouds of silent words surround them, *stunned broad*, *dog*, *bag* and *bitch*, pointing at them, reducing them . . . " (255). The solution which Elaine proposes to being manipulated by these silent words is to "walk in the spaces between them, turn sideways in your head, evade" (255).

The question to ask regarding these spaces, or gaps, between articulated and unarticulated language is: are these spaces present because they mark *absence*, or are the gaps and absences inevitably created by the *presence* of words? Elaine does compare evading the spaces to "walking through walls," and we may assume that such permeable walls symbolize presence transformed into transparency, or absence. Yet does this

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[9]As I note, these sentences are excluded from the final version of the novel, although the idea behind a phrase such as "to lapse back into wordlessness" survives revisions in the form which I previously delineate ("I can lapse back into wordlessness").

magical "trick" with language cause the disappearance of such silent language for Elaine, or do the words continue to exist as presence, but impotent, evaded and conquered presence at that? At one point, Elaine says of her conversations with teenage boys that "[t]he important parts exist in the silences between words" (254). The novel repeatedly asks, what is silence, and what exists within it? Is it language which lurks within silence? Is it the overt absence of language? And ultimately, how alienated are the two?

V. The Physical

Cat's Eye is persistent about raising such questions, and any attempts to answer them are subtle and intricate; they must be coaxed out of the text, gleaned from interpretation--which by nature reads absence, reads "between the lines." One way to confront these questions, which the text suggests helps to make sense of linguistic paradox, is to highlight linguistic silence as a form of physicality, and even to amalgamate moments of speech and the body. For instance, when the teenage Elaine talks to boys on the telephone, she narrates, "what I hear is their bodies" (257). She pointedly does not visualize their bodies; rather, ensuring survival of the novel's negotiating paradox, she *hears* the bodies. The boys signify for Elaine both the absence of language and the presence of bodies, and her claim to "hear" bodies is more than an attempt to render what is shapeless and evasive in language concrete and physical in communication. That is, the carefully constructed preface to physicality ("What I hear") is also particularly about the displacement of language, about the various levels and realms of silence.

Just in case readers have not realized the fragility of language from Elaine's confluence of speech and the body, Elaine goes so far as to say that she listens not "to the words but to the silences." Silence here is a form of audibility, a presence; further, words are present as their own absence, as a means *through which* Elaine can claim not to hear words. Finally, we learn that "in the silences these bodies re-create themselves" (257).

Of course, bodies can speak, but they speak with "body language," not with words. By Elaine paradoxically not viewing but hearing the boys' "body language," and by the boys' own silences enabling their communicative powers, we see how easily presence and absence collapse as an opposition.

Body language has a similar function when Elaine locates "forgetfulness of nouns" as a symptom for amnesia (281). Her use of "nouns" (as opposed to a word such as "things" or "people") emphasizes that the world is constructed by language. Yet while Elaine attends to the presence of language with "nouns," she simultaneously abolishes its communicative power, much as she does with the aforementioned "what I *hear* is their *bodies*" (257; emphasis added). That is, Elaine explains the signs of amnesia as if they are *manifested* in physical gesture, despite their overtly linguistic *symptoms*: "When someone you've known all your life goes out of the room and then comes back in, you greet them as if they've been gone for twenty years; you weep and weep" (281). Thus, despite the linguistic symptoms of amnesia, verbal language is ultimately absent, and it is body language which converts the loss of memory into recognition and recreation.

Cat's Eye implies that language poses limits and silences on linguistic communication because as a medium it fails. It fails, for one, because we can see it fail, because we can become aware of linguistic limitations. It also fails, though, because it by necessity courts realms of absence, because it can "disappear." We may realize as much through the novel's attention to transformations and translations of linguistic discourse into the physical; when we "see" the physical, we can also realize the absence of linguistic communication. Elaine relates, "In the endless time when Cordelia had such power over me, I peeled the skin off my feet." She releases this anxiety with her *mouth*, biting the skin to create a peelable gash. As well, Elaine "chew[s] the ends of [her] hair . . . gnaw[s] the cuticles off from around [her] fingernails" (120). Elaine speaks, she communicates, by eating her way into silence. The mouth is indeed an integral part of her life, but not for linguistic communication.

VI. Games

Like physicality and the body, games are not *necessarily* or essentially about speech and language.[10] Nor are they fundamentally constructed to serve linguistic communication (although such communication can, of course, be a strategy or goal of a particular game). However, games function in Cat's Eye as a decisively meta-linguistic discourse supported by the absence/presence matrix. The games which Stephen and Elaine play in the bush as children are based on codes of silence and on the effects of silence's presence. They are illogical, founded on imagination more than an external reality, much as language is: "'You're dead,' he says. 'No I'm not.' 'Yes you are. They got you. Lie down'." Elaine is silenced: "There is no arguing with him;" language is vanquished due to the playful (il)logic that " . . . he can see the enemy and I can't" (26).

Indeed, even Elaine and Stephen's arguments are a form of game-playing and are based on hidden language: "We fight in whispers or well out of the way . . . . Because they're secret, these fights have an extra attraction. It's the attraction of dirty words we aren't supposed to say, words like *bum*; the attraction of conspiracy, of collusion" (26). Because "forbidden" language, language which is usually relegated for the children to non-use (or absence), is here made present through secretive argument, language becomes excitingly unpredictable. Elaine's comparison of the whispered (arguments) to the unsaid (dirty words) renders what is fleeting, barely audible and absent in linguistic communication a formidable and attractive linguistic presence.

This is even more explicit in the manuscript of this passage. Later omitted, the following sentence corroborates the theory that silence is a *linguistic* presence. Finding

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[10]The "Game and Nonsense" section of chapter two (VII) considers Cordelia and Elaine's linguistic games. This "Games" section, by contrast, considers in what ways essentially non-linguistic games between Stephen and Elaine become linguistic, and also further considers Cordelia and Elaine's linguistic games in the context of Elaine's play with Stephen.

herself losing her arguments with Stephen, Elaine says that there is power in silence: "I learned instead the weapons of silence, turning away, refusal to answer" (99:9).[11] This linguistic "warfare" is especially interesting in light of theories of game playing, which argue that game is comprised of manipulative configurations which are based on unreferential, often incomprehensible codes. Algirdas Julie Greimas, for example, posits that "in the extreme, a player can be sure of winning only if he 'personalizes' the game to the point where it becomes incommunicable" (34).

Many of the games which Stephen and Elaine play are even more explicit in their reference to the interdependent and oscillating absences and presences of linguistic communication. For instance, "we put our mouths against the insides of our arms and blow to make farting noises, or we fill our mouths with water and see how far we can spit" (72). Their games involve sound and the mouth, but in a pointedly non-linguistic manner; the games are not oral for a communicative sake, but for play and performance. Furthermore, when their games do involve linguistic communication, that communication at first *appears* to be decipherable and oral language, but is actually, upon further consideration, physical language. Consider a particular game of Stephen's: "Sometimes he writes in pee, on the thin edge of sand or on the surface of the water. He does this methodically, as if it's important to do it well . . . . he writes: MARS. Or, if he's feeling up to it, something longer: JUPITER" (72). It is no coincidence that these games of oral silence and physical speech, both of which occur when Elaine and Stephen are young children living in the bush, are sequentially narrated. Their juxtaposition allows the realization that words can be at once both absent and present, both playfully illegible and meaningfully decipherable.

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[11] Elaine uses such "weapons of silence" in the published novel later in life with Jon. She willingly loses their arguments and attempts instead to "master different arts." These are the arts of silence. She provokes "sullen fury" in Jon by facilitating and establishing the presence of silence: "I shrug, tighten my mouth in silent rebuke, turn my back in bed, leave questions unanswered" (361).

Indeed, it may even be that play *requires* this movement between silence and displaced speech which Atwood highlights. It may also be, conversely, that linguistic communication, which in this instance is approached through game, needs the oscillation engendered by the fact that these games are alternately of linguistic absence and presence and are almost *but not quite* simultaneous. That is to say that the novel suggests, with its portrayal of games, that language is a form of play which by necessity includes mystery--includes vacillating, "unwritten" spaces between presence and absence. As Greimas points out, "Every normative system composed of injunctions, i.e., of prohibitions and prescriptions, carries with it 'empty' positions which are neither forbidden nor prescribed . . . . It is in this sense that one speaks of 'play' [*jeu*] in a structure" (34); the play of games and the play of language are strikingly similar structures.

When Cordelia and Elaine play games as teenagers, the games have the attraction of nonsensical and forbidden language much as Elaine's and Stephen's games do in childhood. Cordelia asks Elaine if she remembers Grace Smeath. Although Elaine cannot recall the Smeath family vividly, there are numerous hints that she cannot remember because she has repressed the misery and alienation that she felt as a child and not in the least because the Smeaths have been unimportant to Elaine.[12] Cordelia and Elaine create a fictitious family based on the Smeaths of their past, and they give this "new" family a nonsensical, playful name: "The Lump-lump Family" (247). They ridicule the Lump-lumps endlessly, and "Anything can be said about them, invented about them" (246).

Most important is that while this game has only indirect, linguistic reference to an external reality, its language has a direct impact on Elaine. She even narrates as much, with an overt equation of game and language : "We speak of them in the present tense,

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[12]For example, Cordelia asks Elaine if she knows that the Smeaths rationed their toilet paper. Elaine replies "No" but narrates, "But it seems to me that I did know that, once" (246).

as if we still know them. This for me is a deeply satisfying game" (247). Furthermore, the game of rendering the absent Smeaths present through nonsensical, playful language has power not only to create present-day reality, but to alter the past as well. Elaine recalls that Grace "was adored, by all of us." Through their game-playing, however, Elaine realizes the creative powers of language: "she is not [adored] any more. And in Cordelia's version, now, she never was" (247). Thus, Cat's Eye maintains that language not only creates linguistic reality, but it determines empirical reality as well. That is, when an event is communicated through language, it is also constructed by that language.[13] Games become determined by the language that they use; perceived reality, in turn, becomes determined by the mutability and transience of words, for which the game is only one paradigm.

VII. Coda

Explicitly through its language as well as its implicitly through its discourse about language, Cat's Eye draws a powerful distinction between text and story. Very often, particular words seem to be present in the *text* only to draw attention to their own absence from the linguistic communication in the *story*. Consider just one of many

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[13]This is not to make the sweeping claim that language definitively creates the world and determines reality. However, it is to say that this text understands language as the only way which human beings have of *reaching* the world, of *reaching* external realities. Thus, as far as we can perceive and negotiate our way through the "real world," we also create that world with the codes, biases and structures of language. For instance, the entranceways to Elaine's school are described: "At the back there are two grandiose entranceways with carvings around them and ornate insets above the doors, inscribed in curvy, solemn lettering: GIRLS and BOYS" (48-49). The mere words "GIRLS" and "BOYS" are so dynamic and powerful that they create mystery and alienation for Elaine that would otherwise not exist. "How is going through a door different if you're a boy? What's in there that merits the strap just for seeing it? " Elaine wonders (49). The signs, the words, thus create a reality in which boys and girls are estranged. Elaine is "baffled" by the divided entranceway (49), and her bewilderment as well as the children's gender-oriented behavior (as determined and dictated by the door signs) are examples of the illogical but nonetheless potent "reality-based" creations of language. Actually, the fascinating idea here is that words can determine reality chiefly *because* language is so arbitrary. And for that matter, it is not only important that language determines reality (and not vice versa) but also that language always determines more than one reality--the signs mean different things for girls and boys, for children and adults, etc.

instances, when Elaine and her brother Stephen lie in bed as children, and they "kick each other *silently* under the covers" (emphasis added; 31). "Silently" accomplishes nothing here as a word, a presence, other than the establishment of its own exile, its absence from communication.

Elaine's account of one of her feminist gatherings suggests further attention to a relationship between text and story . She notes about these meetings, "Things are being said that I have never consciously thought about before." Soon thereafter, we learn that "Many things are said about men." Finally, near the end of Elaine's description of the meeting, she announces a litany of particular things which are "said": "I am on shaky ground, in this testifying against men, because I live with one . . . . Pronatalist is suddenly a bad word . . . . It seems to be worthier to be a woman with a child but no man." Immediately following this report of speech, though, Elaine undermines the language we have perceived as present and potent with a language of absence: "None of this is actually said" (363-64).

This last sentence seems intended to negate and therefore to subvert Elaine's account of the spoken language at the meetings. But exactly what does it undo? Does it invalidate only the preceding litany? Or does it invalidate the many linguistic claims which have preceded? Does it mean that Elaine reads the context and subtext of the feminist discussion and thus arrives at what is virtually although not actually "said?" Or does "None of this is actually said" possess an even greater effect than that?

That is, it seems that this sentence, especially considering that it is separate and indented from the preceding feminist "speech," exists as an ambiguous testimony to many kinds of silence. Likely, it means more than Elaine's reading of implicit language, and suggests that all of the claims of audible speech, regardless of how Elaine has interpreted them, may well have been wholly absent. Thus, there is the possibility that none of the preceding conversation has even occurred. The unsaid and the said are confused and intertwined here on levels of form as well as content, and Elaine's language,

like all language, is not simply and uniformly referential. Clearly, Cat's Eye consistently invalidates interpretations of language--whether they are contained within the text or are exegetical--that rely on binary oppositions and stable classifications to understand linguistic communication.

A language of absence and an absence of language not only enable us to realize that "presence" is a mutable and flexible concept, but also that forms of linguistic absence can actually facilitate an articulation of the past. Elaine recounts that she and her ex-husband Jon one day "snuck out to lunch, alone, and got plastered." Elaine understands their excursion through language, but this language verges on absence: "That word, *plastered*, on the brink of obsolescence, indicates to me what sort of event that was. It was a retrospective" (17). Words about to enter silent and obsolete realms nonetheless remain present--in the text and in Elaine's life--as words which inform Elaine's experiences and enable her to articulate them. Just as when Elaine suggests walking in the spaces between silent words for "safety," here the language and meanings of the text continue to direct themselves toward the gaps between silence and speech.

The steadfast focus on silence as presence and on presence as a form of linguistic absence does at times fail to maintain its paradoxical status. But when it does so, other reversals suggest that the collapse or abandonment of the paradox is exceptional. For example, at one point Josef says to Elaine, "You are very silent . . . . Mysterious," and Elaine narrates, "I do not feel mysterious, but vacant" (324). According to Elaine, silence is not a mystery, not a playful or enigmatic element of communication; rather, silence is emptiness, vacancy, absence. This is an overt inversion of the usual, paradoxical role of silence in the novel.

The passage continues to suggest reversal when Elaine answers Josef's "Would you do anything for me?" not with the "yes" he wants to hear, but with "no," and she even admits that "This is a surprise to me. I don't know where it has come from, this unexpected and stubborn truthfulness. It sounds rude" (324-325). Indeed, it is unusual

for Elaine to notice and to comment, as she does here with her self-judgment of rudeness, on the effect of her words as language and linguistic communication. Further, she expects herself to say what the other wants to hear, just as she consistently did as a child with her tormenting girlfriends. However, here Elaine avoids the silence which has always manipulated and disabled her in the past. The result of such straightforward silence--the result of Elaine's realization that her silence is akin to vacancy and not to presence--is that Elaine shocks herself with her own subsequent linguistic responses, and responds to her own voice with speech that is highly unusual for her.

The reader cannot help but associate this passage with and note its deviance from countless earlier passages where Elaine was afraid to say "no" to her female playmates, sometimes was even afraid to say "yes" or "no," and instead said nothing (see pp. 147, 199 for examples). Even more precisely, the passage echoes and inverts several other points where Elaine is accused by the girls of rudeness. For example, when Elaine does not reply to her father's query, "Enjoying the parade, girls?" her supposed girlfriend Cordelia (later opposed to her supposed boyfriend Josef) scolds, "How could you be so impolite?" (124). Ultimately, this exchange with Josef emphasizes its own abandonment of the paradox, and points to such abandonment as anomalous and exceptional.

By reading linguistic communication as a structure and concept that is important in itself, rather than reading linguistic communication for what it can confer upon and reflect about an external reality, we encounter states of absence and presence which are simultaneously polarized and collapsed. On one level, we can think of absence and presence as a dialectic, that is, as a structure which through continuous exchange between contradictory principles holds together a continuous argument. Indeed, Cat's Eye's absence and presence play forms a dialectic, but it is one that moves beyond its own schematic version of opposition and sameness.

In other words, it also functions to suggest that language itself, marked by the constant play of absence and presence in linguistic communication and by the gaps in

linguistic meanings thereby created, must be seen not as natural but as a self-reflexive paradigm. As such, Cat's Eye demonstrates that to feel that we understand language and that we communicate effectively through it, we need to understand that the evasions, disappearances, positions and revelations of daily experience are irrevocably created by our *articulations* of them.

Conclusion

On the very first page of Cat's Eye, we learn that in space-time, a concept about which Stephen informs Elaine, "Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away." The novel henceforth sets out to discover, as I have explored throughout this thesis, what exactly it is that "comes to the surface," as well as just what this "nothing," which surfaces as it retreats, may be. In the novel, the topic is ultimately explored and re-explored, but an omnipotent "discovery" is never made, nor is a full recovery from the paradoxes of language achieved. In order to understand how such a lack of resolution is not a failure, but rather, is a fundamental sign of the contradictory dynamics of absence and presence, it is beneficial to focus one final time on the paradoxes of Elaine's language.

We see from this sentence of Stephen's that from the outset of Cat's Eye, there is absence/presence both within "nothing" as well as between Elaine's two uses of "nothing." The first "nothing" establishes nothing as an absence. But the second "nothing" apprehends that absence, turning "nothing" into *something* which both disappears and cannot disappear. The entire concept of spatial time as offered by Elaine here depends on this double meaning of nothing, on the alternatives and exclusions which the very word offers. From the start, then, the novel (the metaphoric "totality") is *founded* on the idea that nothing is still something. We cannot help but note the affinity such a notion has with Derrida's approach to reading and writing through "différance," a concept which demonstrates that "every totality . . . can be totally shaken, that is, can be shown to be founded on that which it excludes" (Writing and Difference; xvi).

As a matter of fact, Cat's Eye's language-centered philosophies often correspond with Derrida's regard for the inevitable and inherent evasions and silences of linguistic communication. In his reading of Plato's the Phaedrus, Derrida maintains that "It is what the Phaedrus cannot know (or explicitly acknowledge) in its own textual make-up that furnishes the materials of a deconstructive reading" (Derrida; 36). In a similar vein,

by writing a novel which attends to the gaps and absences within language but, at the same time, not attributing these gaps to her narrator's intentions or knowledge, Atwood enables Cat's Eye to deconstruct itself. That is, she highlights that it is the novel, the text, the word, which engender, mark and exist around simultaneous presence and absence, and not the willfulness of a speaker which does so. Indeed, Atwood's position in Cat's Eye that language itself is composed of both the presence and the absence of words is not far from where the project of deconstruction begins, summed up by Christopher Norris as "locating the stress-points where writing resists any attempt to reduce it to an order or univocal (*single-voiced*) truth" (Derrida; 86).

Why is it advantageous to note that Cat's Eye participates in deconstructive self-readings and applies deconstructive philosophies to its (re)presentations of language? It is advantageous because we need to understand how disorder--disorder between oppositions and within each unit itself of an opposition, disorder of and within conventional patterns of speaking and listening, etc.--is actually form of order. In other words, the ultimate paradox of Cat's Eye, the ultimate self-contradiction of the text, is that through the paradoxical interplay where we realize that absence is within presence and presence is within absence, a new paradox is created: the paradox of orderly disorder.

For the intents and purposes of this study, it is thereby instructive to realize that Atwood plays on a structuralist notion of how "difference" determines linguistic communication and on a poststructuralist notion that "difference" is not only a matter of deviation, but also of the paradoxes engendered when we support this structuralist creed, when we understand that language is comprised of differentiation and not sameness or essence. Specifically (and in brief), much of structural linguistics focuses on an idea of "difference." Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of difference argues that there is always an element of the unsaid in the said, the unheard in the heard, etc., and that these blank spaces of negativity define the present and visible aspects of speech. Signs'

relationships to their referents are not inherent but arbitrary. As Terry Eagleton explains,

> Each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from the others. "Cat" has meaning not "in itself," but because it is not "cap" or "cad" or bat." It does not matter how the signifier alters, as long as it preserves its difference from all the other signifiers . . . " (97).

Derrida takes this idea of difference one step further, as does Atwood, and revises it into an economy of differance.[1] As I detailed briefly in chapter two, the sense behind differance is that in any linguistic communication, whether it is written or spoken, "Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent" (Positions; 26). For deconstruction, a principle is defined not only by the structuralist belief in meaning through exclusion (thus, structuralism's advocacy of systems of binary opposition), but also by what each principle, in itself, *is not*. Thus, even the present, defined by its differentiation from the absent, is never itself wholly present. Deconstruction shows, as Eagleton puts it, how oppositions "in order to hold themselves in place, are sometimes betrayed into inverting or collapsing themselves" (133), and Cat's Eye "shows" us the same. Further, just as the deconstructive reading operates by looking at the governing oppositions of a text and locating their *aporias*, or impasses of meaning where contradictions rest, so does Atwood draw attention in her own text to the "blind spots" in both linguistic communication as well as within absence/presence, to the places where language fails and absence and presence collapses as an opposition.

Christopher Norris puts it well when he writes that differance is "the product of a restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of a conceptual definition" (Derrida; 15). In order to even further understand Atwood's

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[1]My argument is not that Atwood legislates or enacts differance per se, but that her writing reflects a conceptual awareness of the discourse of differance. As Derrida would have it, language and the text, not intentions and the subject, are the catalysts for differance: subjectivity is "an effect of differance, an effect inscribed in a system of differance" (Positions; 28).

position in relation to differance, it is necessary to elaborate on the working definition of differance which I initiated in chapter two. Put bluntly, differance is a concept composed of two words: difference and deferral. "Difference" means that signs only have meaning in so far as they are differentiated from other signs: "absence" is only a meaningful and understandable word and concept, thus, when we know the word and concept "presence." This aspect of differance indeed corresponds with the Saussurian notion that the basic composition of language consists of oppositional structures of meaning.

The second implicit word in differance, "deferral," is where deconstruction more fully departs from structural linguistics. "Deferral" stipulates that meaning is not only present through differentiation, but is also always deferring to another word for its meaning. This renders linguistic expression and communication amorphous, slippery and elliptical, primarily due to the deferring "restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposed of a conceptual definition" (Derrida; 15).

The self-contradictions inherent in absence and presence comprise a discourse about the possibilities and probabilities for deciphering language, communicating successfully through it, and determining selfhood through it. It is differance which is at the heart of this discourse. Working through a concept of differance, the novel can argue that linguistic communication (and even the philosophical principles that inform it *such as* differance) is about such restlessness as Norris locates above, about the shapelessness of shapes, the evasions of meanings, the meanings of evasions. Language, for poststructuralist theory as well as for Cat's Eye, is not about compliance and agreement as much as it is about whether a speaker's and writer's language can be heard, read and understood without transformation of presence (words) into absence (unintelligibility, indecipherability, etc.).

Ultimately, the answer to such an inquiry is "no." That is to say, Cat's Eye conveys that words cannot be entirely present or entirely absent in linguistic communication, but are always both. As we have seen, the absence/presence interplay demonstrates as

much through Elaine's attention to the evasions and manipulations within phenomena, other characters and linguistic communication. However, once we realize this much, once we establish that oppositions are important not only because structures within them oppose one another, but also because they often fail to oppose one another, where are we? In other words, why are the creations and destructions of oppositions so important to recognize in language, and why "absence/presence" as the negotiating opposition?

We can approach such questions by re-focusing for a moment on Cordelia's position within the novel. From Elaine's relationships with Cordelia and her reactions to Cordelia as an emblem of linguistic evasion, indecipherability and disappearance, we understand that, finally, the text's concern is not with "locating" Cordelia as much as it is with understanding why Cordelia *cannot be* located. This is evident from Cordelia's various "acts": at times she disappears, at times she is present but her language disappears, at times her presence on stage is unrecognizable, at times her words on stage are indecipherable, etc. Ultimately, as we have seen, Cordelia forgets her "lines," and is trapped, slurring her speech and pleading for rescue, in a rest home. And Elaine's final confrontation of (the literal) Cordelia greets Elaine, as I noted in chapter two, in the form of a letter returned "address unknown" (382).

The letter which cannot be received, yet must be sent. The presence of words which may not arrive, or which may arrive but may not be heard, but nonetheless must be written and uttered anyway. What is this impetus for speech and language, insisted upon by subjects despite the fact that it is endlessly caught within the absence/presence conditions of linguistic communication? Cat's Eye brings to light the falseness of binary oppositions, the mutability of all polarizations, and indicates that what comprises this falseness and mutability in life and verbal communication is the fact that nothing is ever in itself entirely present or absent, that life and language are strictly a matter of perception, and that even the essential is a construct.

Yet the text's de(con)struction of polarities never suggests a supposedly more clever or important system of ordering and communicating through language. It seems that there is no solution, and there is no trenchant resolution. As a matter of fact, the text's reliance on oppositions specifically to deconstruct them, to indicate their artificiality and flexibility, suggests that what is most important is our realization that elements in linguistic communication are ones which, as Derrida maintains,

> can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term [or without constituting, in my words, a resolution].(Positions; 43)

Thus, the idea is not to overcome binary oppositions, but to address them. Reading Cat's Eye, one senses a conviction that oppositions are not inherently antagonistic and threatening units which must be annihilated. Rather, it seems that oppositions, as Claudette Roberts puts it, "set up the possibility of thesis and antithesis, of affirmation and contradiction" (168). And as a result of these possibilities, as a product of the spaces *between* "either" and "or," there lurks potential understanding of language and linguistic communication. Within this premise about the necessity of manipulating oppositions being a necessity in itself, and not a project geared toward privilege or assimilation in themselves, the idea of the *textual* address (to Cordelia, to the reader, to words and oppositions themselves) remains the crucial one.

That is, to facilitate understanding of the oppositions within language and engendered by language, components of an opposition must remain flexible, playful, and even reversible signifiers. And as such, the point is not in itself to reverse oppositions or to invert power structures, but rather to explore and reveal the continual state of flux and movement within oppositions, the revers*ability* of them. For certain, without such concentration on the transformations and amalgamations of absence and presence, the absence/presence opposition would "become mutually exclusive, and constraint and servitude [would] follow" (Roberts; 168).

Yet if we are to continue searching for a paradigm, indeed, if the text itself is to search for a paradigm, for these interminable linguistic oppositions, the paradigm is going to have to remain that of the address. I define the address as the speech which is spoken whether or not it will be heard, the basic necessity of words and language, interminably distanced from their referents and destinations but nonetheless crucial components of all communication and perception.[2] Consistently, Cat's Eye is concerned with the problem of the address. Namely, how can one speak the unspoken? How does the unspoken speak? And is it possible to at once speak and remain dumb--completely speechless?

Perhaps we can better understand these concerns by appealing to Derrida's similar treatment of linguistic communication in his *Envois* section of The Post Card.[3] In *Envois*, Derrida's manipulations of genre and of the reader's generic expectations lead to a "postcard lover's" voice which is saturated with simultaneous absence and presence. *Envois* parallels Cat's Eye in its deconstruction of full presence and its absence/presence phraseology. *Envois*'s speaker's diction teams with phrases, as does Elaine's, that are unquestionably vehicles for the absence/presence paradox: "unsworn faith;" "absence of

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[2]It is worthwhile for me to note here that the novel indeed raises questions of authorial and narratorial intentions (on Atwood's and Elaine's behalves respectively) through its attention to the rhetoric of speech and the paradoxes of language. However, such issues of intention regarding such authorial and narratorial addresses do not fall within the premises and assumptions of this project. Rather, I have explored throughout this thesis the ways in which language functions and is received at the textual level, and a reading of my forthcoming discussion of the "address" should keep this distinction in mind. Ultimately, the question of "whose language in Cat's Eye" takes a back seat in this study to the question "How does any language operate in Cat's Eye?"

[3]In his glossary to The Post Card, translator Alan Bass explains that the meanings of *envois* are intricate and multiple. He writes, "The noun *envoi* can mean the action of sending (*envoi de lettres*: the sending of letters) . . . something that is sent (especially in the senses of message, missive or dispatch), the concluding stanza of a ballad that typically serves as a dedication, the lines handwritten by the author of a book as part of a dedication, and, in the legal sense, (*envoi en possession*), the right to enter into possession of an inheritance." Bass notes that the English "invoice" is derived from *envoi*, "linking the senses of sending, message and debt" (xx-xxi). The numerous meanings and connotations of *envois* befit the multiplicity of absence and presence in Cat's Eye, echoing the many ways in which words are produced and received, mistaken and preempted, claimed and disclaimed, etc.

memory" etc. (26). Furthermore, as in Cat's Eye, the articulation of absence and of silence is important not only for the narrator of Envois, who seems to be a self-fictionalized Derrida, but also for the authorial voice.

In other words, hidden within the cryptic messages of the book are the "writer's" codes, silences, and troubles with decipherability. "Derrida" instructs his fictionalized postcard recipient,

> If you're not there, leave them a message. Leave, for example, so that they won't understand a thing, as in the Renaissance, a sentence with 'sunflower' to signify that you prefer that I come, without sunflower for the opposite. (42)

When he stipulates this, does Derrida address the reader of his postcard here, the reader of the text at large, or both? We don't know, and this is because such random signifiers, from "sunflower" to the addressee, work only in context precisely because of their randomness. Elaine's narratorial deconstruction of linguistic presence, from the "girls" and "boys" doors of the schoolyard to her puns, similarly revises notions of referentiality, indicating that linguistic communication is on all levels biased and subjective. In both texts, secured by the existence of free, mutable and arbitrary linguistic signs, is the premise that meaning is also always mutable, reversible and unpredictable. It is this recognition, more than anything else, that precludes a decision as to whether the absence/presence interplay is primarily a product of Atwood's language, Elaine's language, the reader's interpretation, etc. That the interplay is within and a result of language itself is what possesses the most significance.

For this reason, it is informative to recognize that, like *Envois*, Cat's Eye attends to randomness within and failures of linguistic communication through postcards. Postcards, "made to circulate like an open but illegible letter," are an understandably attractive vehicle for the novel (*Envois* ; 12); in the postcard, language becomes both "ciphered" and indecipherable (*Envois*; 13) . Elaine's mother, who has retired with her father and returned to the bush, is the first to send Elaine random postcards and "the occasional short letter" from random places (350). Elaine feels out of touch with her

mother and replies "with news" but omits the important details of her life, such as her relationship with Jon. She says, "I don't mention Jon, because there is no news. News would be something definite and respectable, such as an engagement" (350). Their linguistic communication, although written and decipherable, is obviously also cryptic and incomplete.

Even further, Stephen as well "now communicates by postcard." With our knowledge of these postcards, we also learn that "[h]e has become more taciturn" (350). Stephen sends abridged autobiographical announcements such as "Got married" and "Got divorced" on postcards marked by random geographical landmarks and tourist attractions. Elaine thinks of him "as walking into marriage as into a park, in a foreign country, at night, unaware of the possibilities for damage" (351). Not only does Elaine fail to truly learn about Stephen's life from his postcard language, but her response to them implies that he, as well, has entered a "foreign country," a land with strange and inaccessible language.

This aspect of Stephen's postcard communication with Elaine is especially noteworthy. That is, although Elaine is the recipient of these puzzling and virtually silent linguistic correspondences, Stephen, as sender, seems just as baffled by his own representations of his life. In particular, Elaine assumes from his "Got married" and "Got divorced" slogans that "he has been puzzled by both events, as if they're not something he's done himself" (351). Obvious in its brevity and private in its publicity, the postcard is an apt manifestation of the absence/presence paradox; it signifies a linguistic message as well as an obliteration.

The cryptic natures of language and identity are appropriately yoked in the postcard. Likely in a response to his similar realization of as much, Derrida goes so far as to turn his signature, his linguistic identity, into a receptacle: "*I accept* [*j'accepte*], this will be my signature henceforth" (*Envois* ; 26). This sort of linguistic self-destruction points also to Cat's Eye and to the absence/presence paradox. What is it that Derrida

accepts? What is it that Stephen says? What precisely *is* Elaine's frequent utterance of "nothing?" Consistently, what is "accepted" in this novel is also rendered absent; it is converted into a void within which different things may exist, but which nonetheless remains its own "signature" of absence and lack.

The theoretical value of the postcard, for both Atwood and Derrida, is that we cannot know for certain what is "accepted" in linguistic communication. Once we understand this problem, we can also understand that it is specifically *because* language is so often absent and unreadable that it cannot be a complete presence. As a matter of fact, because it is never fully actualized and because reliability is never guaranteed, language is always in a sense completely absent and unreadable. As Derrida puts it, the reader of his postcards becomes "the proof, the living proof precisely, that a letter can always not arrive at its destination, and that therefore it never arrives" (33). Indeed, it is critical that Elaine details writing only one letter in the novel, and that this is, appropriately, to Cordelia. Cordelia represents, much like the "postcard lover," an interminable absence at the receiving end of linguistic communication. It is therefore no surprise that Elaine's letter is untruthful and artificial, written "with such false cheerfulness I can barely stand to lick the envelope" (382). She writes an inauthentic letter to a site which is itself a paradoxical construct --a site which is both person and ghost, both language and silence, etc.

Furthermore, when we consider the impossibility throughout the novel of fully reaching Cordelia either *though* language or *as* language, coupled with the Derridean problematic that because a correspondence can potentially fail to arrive, it may as well never arrive, it is highly significant that, as I have previously noted, the letter "comes back in the mail, with *address unknown* scrawled across it" (382). Even further, this scrawled "Address Unknown" is a fragmentary linguistic presence that communicates the impossibility, thus the absence, of any fully present linguistic communication with Cordelia. The unpredictability of legibility in linguistic communication defeats the idea

that an identity can be communicated fully and truthfully through language. The same unpredictability thereby renders problematic any clear cut opposition between speaker and listener, speech and silence and absence and presence.

These deterrents to viewing language as inherently logical, directly referential and effectively legible bring Cat's Eye to suggest that linguistic absence can be just as informative as linguistic presence. The problems with logic in language are unsolvable, it seems, but may at least be confronted by foregoing the idea that what is *heard* is all that is *said*. When in church one nday, Elaine does not say the Lord's Prayer; instead, she narrates, "I stand in silence, moving my lips only" (194). Grace subsequently accuses Elaine of not praying: "You weren't. I heard you" (195). Grace apparently either hears Elaine's silence or cannot use language to logically represent her own thoughts. Whichever interpretation the reader chooses, the text posits that language is not always audible or logical, as well as that it can speak *through* its inaudibility.

The linguistic conditions of Cat's Eye represent for both characters and readers the absence of completely whole, truthful and originary experiences with life and language. Language in the novel is indeed expressive, but what it expresses is exchange and antagonism, not correspondence and sameness. It expresses an ultimately unfillable lack between presence and absence, a void at the center of all linguistic communication around which positions and oppositions may circulate but which nothing can ultimately alleviate. It expresses, as a presence, its own absence. Albert Gelphi puts it well when he writes, "In the absence of the Absolute, language becomes its own quasi-absolute presence" (48).

The sustained presence of paradox ultimately annihilates any diametrical oppositions within language, because paradox exists as a constant state of doubleness. For Cat's Eye, paradox opens up a space or margin in which the possibility of thinking about language can begin. It allows a self-conscious lack of philosophical closure, a state where language depends for its meaning on the relentless mutability of meaning.

Paradox fosters the realization that all communicative language relies on the presence of paradox (and on paradoxical presence) and, even more specifically, on a paradox which communicates that presence is easily and consistently transformed into absence.[4]

This persistent attention to the degrees of absence in presence and the degrees of presence in absence indicates that unity in language is itself a fiction. The mutability of absence and presence is not something to be overcome, but something to be understood as a construct which represents the conditions of linguistic communication. Absence is not the underside of a supposedly present language, nor vice versa, because language is always both presence and absence.

Furthermore, what a subject perceives to happen*within* language--utterances fail, utterances succeed, silence is a form of speech, speech indicates "wordlessness"--does not happen to a discourse *about* language. Rather, that discourse remains indestructibly extant; the mutable valences of *speech*, Cat's Eye indicates, do not eliminate the potency and prevalence of linguistic *discourse*. As Roland Barthes puts it, "destruction of discourse" is a mere "semantic term"--it can never actually occur (54). Such a term actually "docilely takes its place within the great semiological 'versus' myth" of binary oppositions" (Barthes; 54), as it subscribes to the very "either/or" dichotomy which Cat's Eye insists on rethinking and revitalizing. It is this novel's greatest achievement that, in destroying the boundaries within language and linguistic discourse, it renders language a mighty and influential discourse of its own.

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[4]In note one of chapter one, I indicate that presence is what is declarative, understandable, recognizable and self-evident. While presence indeed is defined by these attributes, it is also important to recognize that we have seen presence embody them in different forms and discrepant states. That is, presence is at times figurative and at times literal, at times linguistic and at times visual, at times a matter of degree, at times a matter of appearance and disappearance, etc.

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