

Singing through: A collection of poems

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the construction of the subject via a relationship of power in two poem sequences, 'The circle game' and 'Two-headed poems', by Margaret Atwood. I argue that Atwood proposes a subject similar to the kind of subject found in psychoanalysis. Like the psychoanalytic subject, Atwood's subject is formed in relation to its other. This relation is essentially a power relation and can become unbalanced, forcing one of the two parties into a subjugated position. Atwood not only exposes these skewed relations of power, but also explores possible solutions for escaping or reconfiguring these relationships. The first chapter briefly discusses theories of the subject by Freud, Lacan and Kristeva. I use Hegel's dialectic between the 'master' and 'bondsmen', and subsequent psychoanalytic and postcolonial applications of it, to examine the construction of the subject in terms of an other in Chapter 2. Postcolonial map theory and Kristeva's ideas on the abject are used to verbalize the divisions, but also the interactions, between the subject and its other as well as possibilities of escape. Chapter 3 demonstrates these power relationships, and their expression in cartographic terms, in 'The circle game'. In Chapter 4, I show how processes analogous to the eruption of poetic language into the symbolic order are described in the poetry. Even though these processes do not provide a clear-cut solution to the position of the subjected, their presence signals the possibility of renegotiating unbalanced relationships of power.

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Introduction

'Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air', writes Margaret Atwood in 'Notes on *Power Politics*' (1973:7). This statement encapsulates how an exploration of power relations permeates most of what Atwood has written up to now in what continues to be a prolific writing career. Power pervades everything 'we are and do' she writes: it constructs the individual and it provides the motivation for his/her actions.

This dissertation explores the construction of a subject via a relationship of power in some of the poetry of Atwood. Atwood proposes a subject similar to the kind of subject found in psychoanalysis. Like the psychoanalytic subject, Atwood's subject is formed in relation to its other. This relation is essentially a power relation and can become unbalanced, forcing one of the two parties into a subjugated position. Atwood not only exposes these skewed relations of power, but also explores possible solutions for escaping or reconfiguring the relationship. The interaction between Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic orders is in some ways analogous to Hegel's dialectic between master and slave, hence the dissertation title: Symbolic masters/Semiotic slaves.

In the first chapter, I use theories of the subject by Freud, Lacan and Kristeva to explain briefly the formation of the subject in psychoanalysis. I use Hegel's dialectic between the 'master' and 'bondsmen', and subsequent psychoanalytic and postcolonial applications of the dialectic, to examine the construction of the subject in terms of an other in Chapter 2. Postcolonial map theory and Kristeva's ideas on the abject not only verbalize the divisions, but also the interactions between the subject and its other. Chapter 2 also examines possibilities of escape suggested by map theory and Kristeva's theory of poetic language. Chapter 3 demonstrates these power

relationships, and their expression in cartographic terms, in the poem sequence 'The circle game' from Atwood's debut collection of poems *The Circle Game* (1966). Lastly, Chapter 4 shows how the sequence 'Two-headed poems', from the collection *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), describes processes analogous to the eruption of poetic language, associated with the semiotic order, into the symbolic order – processes that, according to Kristeva, signal the possibility of escaping unbalanced relationships of power by transcending the Hegelian dialectic; of breaking the vicious circle of the power game.

Chapter 1

The psychoanalytic subject: Freud, Lacan, Kristeva

In this dissertation, psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity provide a useful point of departure for my reading of some of Atwood's poems. Because of the ability of psychoanalysis to present platforms of discursivity,¹ psychoanalysis not only provides useful terms to describe the poetry, but leaves space for Atwood's poems to become interesting analogies for processes described in the theory and thus, in a sense, contribute to the theory itself. This treatment of literature and psychoanalysis is in keeping with Freud and Lacan's own use of literature in their work, of which Bowie (1987:136) writes the following:

for both [Freud and Lacan] literature was too provocatively enviable to be used merely for purposes of corroboration or display. Literature was inside as well as outside the field of science; the experience of literature was an incitement to scientific theorising and a premonition of what a coherent theory might be like; indeed certain literary works seemed not simply to invite but already to *be* theories of mind.

Furthermore, psychoanalysis is a useful theoretical framework when exploring the link between subjectivity and language, for in the past language has always been the tool of psychoanalysis: Anna O's talking cure. Work done by Julia Kristeva on poetic language, a kind of language that reveals the presence of the semiotic, a language order anterior to 'natural' or 'symbolic' language, suggests the transformative potential of language for society (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:94), while Lacan finds 'the whole

¹ Foucault talks about Freud in his influential lecture 'What is an Author?' (1969) as a 'founder of discursivity' ([1969] 1998:217). He suggests that, because of the nature of psychoanalysis, a continuous revisiting of Freud is possible, seeing that Freud's work itself creates gaps which these revisitings fill.

structure of language' ([1977] 2001:163) in the unconscious. On the importance of language to psychoanalysis, Freud writes:

Words and magic were in the beginning one and the same thing, and even to-day words retain much of their magical power. By words one of us can give to another the greatest happiness or bring about utter despair [. . .] Therefore let us not despise the use of words in psychotherapy and let us be content if we may overhear the words which pass between the analyst and the patient. ([1922] 1929:13)

To Sadoff, the root of psychoanalysis in the nineteenth century is an attempt to theorize 'plausible bridges between soma and psyche, physiology and psychology' (1998:6). She places Freud's theory within the hysteria debate of the late 1800s, and writes that, within psychoanalysis, the body becomes the site where 'pathological psychical structures' are represented as physiological symptoms (Sadoff, 1998:7). Introducing Kristeva's work, Oliver explains that, to Kristeva, the goal of the analyst is to reconnect body and mind through the medium of language (in Kristeva, 2002:xxiv). Thus, in psychoanalysis, language is seen as a tool to help navigate the fissure that has been theorized between the subject's body and mind since ancient times.²

I The Freudian subject

Although psychoanalysis may integrate body with mind, Freud has been hailed by writers on modernity as well as on postcoloniality as a decentralising agent helping to break down notions of a unified, rational self.³ In his early lectures on psychoanalysis at the University of Vienna, Freud introduces two of his key psychoanalytic propositions: the presence of the unconscious and what would later become known as

² Porter (2003:31) writes that this split is present even in Plato's *Timaeus*.

³ For example, see Butler (1994:105) and Hall (1992:286–287).

his drive theory. First, he writes that 'mental processes are essentially unconscious, and . . . those which are conscious are merely isolated acts and parts of the whole psychic entity' ([1922] 1929:16). Second, he puts forward that

impulses, which can only be described as sexual in both the narrower and the wider sense, play a peculiarly large part . . . in the causation of nervous and mental disorders. Nay, more, that these sexual impulses have contributed invaluablely to the highest cultural, artistic, and social achievements of the human mind. ([1922] 1929:17)

Freud challenges notions of human beings in control of their mental faculties purported by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant.⁴ In Freud's schema, instead of being able to rely on your own reason, you are at the mercy of unknown, unconscious impulses. The psychology of errors Freud writes about reduces the subject's sense of control to an illusion. Freud writes: 'you have an illusion of psychic freedom within you which you do not want to give up. I regret that on this point I find myself in sharpest opposition to your views' ([1922] 1929:38). Even if the subject does attempt to control tendencies from interfering with intentions, these tendencies assert themselves in other ways, for example in slips of tongue. As for the subject's 'personality', this is made up of different parts, some of which remain unknown to him/her. The 'I' we refer to, is in actual fact only the conscious part of the ego in Freud's topology of id, ego and super-ego and is nothing but the outcome of variations of events that took place during the subject's movement through the different stages in Freud's psycho-sexual theory, the most important being the phallic stage in which Oedipalization occurs (Freud [1905] 1977:149). Concealment of some psychological tendencies by different parts of the subject from other parts establishes a theme of

⁴ To Kant, Enlightenment is 'man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage' – nonage being 'one's inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance' (Kant, [1784] 2004:1). Kant takes as motto for the Enlightenment the following: 'Have the courage to use your own understanding' (Kant, [1784] 2004:1).

self-deception. Freud writes that 'tendencies of which a speaker knows nothing can express themselves through him' ([1922] 1929:51). Finally, the body becomes a site on which the subject's psychology is inscribed in complex ways. Physical symptoms represent psychological processes and problems.

The implications of psychoanalysis for language are visible at the most basic level: Freud claims that we are no longer in control of what we say nor do we say what we mean. Moreover, the mistakes we make are clues to what we actually mean (Freud, [1922] 1929:27, 34). Thus, in psychoanalysis, language becomes revealing; a tool of complex meaning, since errors have their own meaning. The subject's ability to control his/her expression is questioned.

It is clear that the subject Freud implies is vastly different from the Enlightenment self who makes (public) use of his 'reason in all matters' (Kant [1784] 2004:1). It is a subject whose coherence is challenged in language and being.

II Lacan's sense of the subject and how it is formed

Subsequent work done by Lacan continues to question the coherence of the subject. Hall explains that, to Lacan, 'the image of the self as "whole" and unified is something which the infant only gradually, partially, and with great difficulty, *learns*' (1992:287). The subject, therefore, is nothing but a socio-historical *effect* (Grosz, 1990:184).⁵

The subject learns to view itself as a unit in what Lacan terms the mirror stage in identity formation. He writes that the mirror stage 'is a drama . . . which manufactures for the subject . . . the succession of phantasies that extends from a

⁵ Also see Meyer, Moore and Viljoen (1997:246).

fragmented body-image to a form of its totality' ([1977] 2001:5). During the mirror stage, the infant sees or imagines itself reflected, either in a mirror or metaphorically in the image of its primary caregiver. The mirror stage is an identification with an image; a 'transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image' (Lacan, [1977] 2001:1). Thus, initially experiencing its body as fragmented, the infant misrecognizes the mother as a reflection of its own image and so overcomes its sense of being fragmented (Weedon, 1991:121). To Lacan, this primary identification will influence all other secondary identifications ([1977] 2001:2).

The mirror stage takes place in the imaginary, one of Lacan's three orders (the other two orders being the symbolic and the real) (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997:248–252). In the imaginary, identification takes place via an image – the perceived image of the self in the reflection of the Other. Lacan uses the capitalized Other to signify this reflected self in the mirror.

During the mirror stage the infant views its mother as part of itself, she is not an other, but the Other. According to Lacan, recognizing the 'I' in the mirror is the start of the imaginary 'I' (expressed as the French *moi*). To Lacan, the Oedipal phase propels the child from the imaginary into the next order, the symbolic ([1977] 2001:6). He refers to this development from the imaginary through the Oedipal phase to the symbolic as the metaphor of the father. During the Oedipal phase, the child identifies with the mother's object of desire, symbolized by the phallus. The child tries to replace that which the mother lacks. A replacement of this lack would however constitute incest. Lacan refers to the law of the father as the rule against incest (Lacan, [1977] 2001:73). This law is expressed in the father's arrival via the word, the expression of the law. Expressing this law, therefore, is referred to as the name of the father (*le nom du père*) (Lacan, [1977] 2001:74). If the child replaces its

identification with the mother's phallus with the name of the father, it identifies with the rules of culture. This symbolic identification creates the symbolic 'I' (expressed as the French *je*, as opposed to the imaginary 'I', *moi*). Oedipalization revokes the symbiotic unit between mother and child. During the mirror stage, the child recognized the mother as the Other, now the child recognizes the other. The child has moved from identifying with an image in the imaginary to identifying with a word – his/her name. Lacan writes that the subject is the 'slave' of language or a discourse 'in which his place is already inscribed at birth, if only by virtue of his proper name' ([1977] 2001:163). By learning to speak, the child breaches the gap between itself and surrounding objects. Language is used to negotiate these relationships with objects and with the self. The birth of the symbolic I is thus the birth of self-consciousness as well as the unconscious, according to Lacan (Ragland-Sullivan, 1986:xv). Unlike Freud's, Lacan's unconscious is the 'memory space created by human language in compensation for separation from the mother and reinforced at the behest of the father' (Ragland-Sullivan, 1986:57).

The importance that Lacan gives to language can therefore not be overemphasized. To him, language is the only tool available for the subject to attempt a breach of the chasm left by the separation with the mother.⁶ Language is the content of the unconscious. Lacan views the unconscious as a place containing words and sounds, although 'unconscious "meaning" may be assonantal, homophonic, or may combine an image, object, or person' (Ragland-Sullivan, 1986:xvi).

⁶ Lacan 'saw language as the conscious means by which individuals learn to master the early trauma of separation through the process of naming, thereby representing themselves as totalizable (Ragland-Sullivan, 1986:xv).

III Kristeva's subject-in-process

Julia Kristeva continues to explore this relationship between subject and language in works such as *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974), translated as *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). To Kristeva, the work done by modern linguistics removed the subject from language so that it mostly 'lack[ed] a subject' (1984:21). However, Kristeva believes that 'every language theory is predicated upon a conception of the subject that it explicitly posits, implies, or tries to deny' ([1975] 2002:93). Thus, as soon as there is 'consciousness of signification', a 'definite subject' is always present ([1975] 2002:93). In *Desire in Language* (1980), Kristeva sets out to examine and refute two types of subjects implied, posited or denied by waves of linguistic thought. She posits a third type of subject, the subject-in-process/on trial (*le sujet en procès*), which is based on a theory of language she developed to take into account the incidence of 'poetic language'⁷ in French avant-garde literature, which '[had awoken] our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language' ([1975] 2002:103).

Kristeva extends our conception of language as a tool for communication to include poetic language: a 'signifying practice' which is an 'unsettling process – when not an outright destruction – of the identity of meaning and speaking subject' ([1975] 2002:93–94). In his introduction to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Roudiez explains that Kristeva sees poetic language as a kind of language 'that stands for the infinite possibilities of language, and all other language acts are merely partial realizations of the possibilities inherent in "poetic language"' (in Kristeva, 1984:2). Poetic language is, for example, what makes literature something other than knowledge. Literature becomes the site 'where social code is destroyed and renewed' (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:101).

⁷ The term is borrowed from Russian Formalism.

The nature of Kristeva's theorizing of the signifying process explains the reason for her belief that her language theory implies a subject-in-process. The theory proposes that the signifying process comprises two modalities, the semiotic and the symbolic, whose dialectical interaction brings forth signification and constitutes the subject (1984:23–24). Furthermore, the dialectic between these two modes determines the kind of discourse that the signification would bring about, whether it be narrative, theory, poetry or any other discourse. A signifying system that is exclusively semiotic is said to be music (Kristeva, 1984:23–24). Language therefore supports different ways for the semiotic and symbolic to be articulated. Chapter 4 of this study will consequently attempt to examine the dialectic between these two modalities with reference to Atwood's poem sequence "Two-headed poems".

To explain what she means by the semiotic, Kristeva uses Freud's drive theory: she writes that '[d]iscrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body – always already involved in a semiotic process – by family and social structures' (1984:25). The constraints she refers to involve the splitting of the child from its mother during Oedipalization. By the semiotic, therefore, Kristeva means 'the primary organization (in Freudian terms) of drives by rhythms, intonations and primary processes (displacement, slippage, condensation). Genetically, the semiotic is found in the first echolalias of infants' (1985:216). Thus, drives involve 'semiotic functions and energy discharges' that orientate and connect the pre-Oedipal child's body to its mother ([1975] 2002:104).

In Kristeva's system, the drives 'articulate' a *chora*, an almost womb-like metaphoric space⁸ anterior to 'normal' language. She writes that the *chora* is a 'nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated' (1984:25). The term comes from the *Timaeus* when Plato invokes 'a state of language anterior to the word, even to the syllable, and calls this the *chora*, the receptacle, the place before the space which is always already named, one, paternal, sign and predication' (Kristeva, 1985:217). The *chora* is the seat of the semiotic, and even though the semiotic forms part of the signifying process, within the *chora* it does not try to create definite meaning or to signify (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:101). Instead it is continuously transformative: it moulds, creates, ebbs and flows with its own internal rhythm.

Kristeva explains that, although the *chora* is without unity, identity or deity in Plato's sense, it is, however, subject to a process of regulation. This regulatory process 'effectuates discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again' (1984:26), giving the *chora* a regenerative, but also annihilatory, quality.

The semiotic does not disappear once the child has experienced Oedipalization but remains anterior to 'natural language' and functions as a 'supplementary register to that of sign and predication' in all adult discourses (Kristeva, 1985:217). Moreover, poetic language exposes the presence of the semiotic which disturbs language and threatens meaning with its 'heterogeneousness'. Kristeva ([1975] 2002:101) writes about this 'heterogeneousness' of poetic language:

⁸ Ward (1994:114) refers to the difficulty in using a concept such as the *chora*, which essentially refers to something that cannot be expressed in language: 'For propositions about such areas to be spoken of, or illustrated, they have to be articulated metaphorically, gestured towards in a quasi-mythic structure, in which a surface of denotation covers a deeper area of inarticulate structures'.

detected . . . as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and sentences; this heterogeneousness, which is later reactivated as rhythms, intonations, glossolalias in psychotic discourse, serving as ultimate support of the speaking subject threatened by the collapse of the signifying function ([1975] 2002:101)⁹

Thus, it is possible to look for instances in language where the semiotic breaks into the symbolic and threatens its signifying structure. Chapter 4, therefore, will also show how ‘Two-headed poems’ express a wish for these instances.

The second modality that comprises the signifying process in Kristeva’s system, the symbolic, is similar to the symbolic of Lacan. Kristeva writes that ‘the symbolic is a matter . . . of language as a system of meaning’ (Kristeva, 1985:217). In order for the future speaker to enter into the symbolic, in other words into signification and meaning, the child must break away from the mother and repress certain instinctual drives (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:104). To the pre-Oedipal child, the mother’s body is a site that ‘mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*’ (Kristeva, 1984:27). The body of the mother was a mediator or go-between, but with the child’s movement to the symbolic (Lacan’s metaphor of the father), language as symbolic function can now only constitute itself by repressing the child’s continuous relation to the mother and to instinctual drives. What is more, a return to the pre-symbolic would constitute incest – incest being prohibited by Lacan’s law of the father. However, to Kristeva, poetic language signals a return to the pre-symbolic, and by implication, to the body of the mother, a return which is the ‘equivalent of incest’ (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:104). This

⁹ In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva sites Mallarmé’s *Le Mystère dans les lettres* in its entirety to focus attention on ‘the semiotic rhythm within language’ (1984:29). She writes that ‘indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax’ (1984:29).

would explain the uncertainty or revulsion with which utterances of poetic language, like glossolalias in psychotic discourse, are met with in society – the disgust is the disgust of incest.

Kristeva writes that '[b]ecause the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both' (1984:24). The presence of poetic language leads her to posit the subject, suggested by her theory of language, as follows:

[i]t is poetic language that awakens our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to hide – and this implies considerable consequences for its subject. [. . .] It is true that there would unavoidably be a speaking *subject* since the signifying set exists, it is nonetheless evident that this subject, in order to tally with its heterogeneity, must be, let us say, a questionable *subject-in-process* ([1975] 2002:103).

It is clear that Kristeva's subject-in-process is a variation on Freud and Lacan's notions of a modern subject who is split or fragmented and very different from the Enlightenment self. Atwood's sometimes graphic depictions of body–mind separations can be said to be symptomatic of this breakdown of a coherent identity. What is more, Atwood's subject often finds herself in a state of subjection. Atwood takes issue with this power imbalance because she wants to assert the relevance of art in both a social and political context (Rigney, 1987:1). Rigney writes that, to Atwood, writers must not only describe the world, but also criticize it. The role of the artist is to 'bear witness to its failures, and . . . to prescribe corrective measures – perhaps even to redeem' (1987:1). Kristeva's theory of poetic language is relevant here: because poetic language is an 'unsettling process', this type of signifying practice 'accompanies crises

within social structures and institutions – the moments of their mutation, evolution, revolution, or disarray' (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:93–94). Poetic language becomes the code for not only a 'mutation within language', but also within 'institutions' (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:94). Kristeva therefore assigns a transformative power to this type of language. Moreover, she views crises in language and society as 'inherent in the signifying function' and in 'sociality'. Similar to Atwood, who advocates a kind of committed literature, Kristeva wants these crises, which she sees at the vanguard of contemporary politics, to be addressed by 'the so-called human sciences' in order for these sciences to remain ethically sound ([1975] 2002:94). This is why she claims that her semiotic–symbolic signifying system searches 'within the signifying phenomenon for the crisis or the unsettling process of meaning and subject rather than for the coherence or identity of either *one* or a *multiplicity* of structures' ([1975] 2002:94). These claims are significant for an author such as Atwood who works to expose and explore the subjection of people. However, in psychoanalysis, subjectivity is intimately related to subjection. The next chapter will explore this link in more detail.

Chapter 2

The subject and subjection

I The subject in relation to an other: Hegel's master-slave dialectic

'No subject comes into being without power', writes Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997:15) in which she explores how the subject is formed by being subjected to the power of another. In the psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity reviewed in the previous chapter, the infant is subjected to its parents, seeing that it is completely dependent on them for its basic needs. Butler argues that this subjection is needed for the infant to become a subject. Psychoanalysis therefore proposes a subject constructed in relation to others. This relation is essentially a power relation.

Implied in this notion of subjectivity is Hegel's ideas on 'lordship' and 'bondage' developed in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Lacan comments on the importance of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. He writes: 'Hegel had provided the ultimate theory of the proper function of aggressivity in human ontology, seeming to prophecy the iron law of our time. From the conflict of Master and Slave, he deduced the entire subjective and objective progress of our history' (Lacan, [1977] 2001:29). Many French thinkers in the 1930s viewed this dialectic as a counter to Kant's rationalism, which based identity on reason (Gikandi, 2004:103). Thus, when Hegel wrote that '[s]elf-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged' ([1807] 1977:111), he displaced the subject to a position in which its subjectivity depended on the dialectic between itself and an other.

Hegel's schema is a double-edged sword: when the subject is faced with its other, it loses itself, for it is in an other being, and has to cancel this other in order to become itself. However, its denying or 'superseding' of the other supersedes itself, 'for this other is itself' (Hegel, [1807] 1977:111).¹⁰ This process is reciprocal in that the other is also a self in relation to its other.

Hegel explains that mere existence, '[just] being' ([1807] 1977:114), is not the essential nature of self-consciousness – every self-consciousness needs to prove itself as independent from every other.¹¹ A struggle between the self and the other ensues where each one seeks to dominate the other. It is a 'trial by death' (Hegel, [1807] 1977:114), and each of these parties struggle against death, the negation of consciousness. Hegel writes that 'they leave each other free only indifferently', if they 'do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously' (Hegel, [1807] 1977:114). In the words of Roth (in Gikandi, 2004:103): 'The loser of the struggle is the one who decides that life is more important than the recognition originally sought. This person abandons the fight and is made a slave who recognizes the sovereignty of the master. In other words, the loser allows the animal desire for self-preservation to take precedence over the human desire for recognition.'¹²

Being present in psychoanalytical theories, Hegel's dialectic has also been espoused in postcolonial and feminist theories, seeing that these discourses are interested in relations of power, be it between the colonized and colonizer or between women and men. Power relations become a common denominator linking feminist and

¹⁰ Baillie's translation uses the term 'sublate' (Hegel, [1807] 1949:229).

¹¹ Hegel writes: 'They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case' ([1807] 1977:114).

¹² According to Hegel: 'one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another' ([1807] 1977:115).

postcolonial discourses,¹³ as for example in work done by Bahri (2004) and Garuba (2002), and a reading of Atwood's poems needs to be informed by both feminist theories and theories on postcoloniality since her work constructs its subjects in relation to others, as psychoanalysis would have it, and explores the subjection of one subject by another, a concern postcolonialism shares with feminism. To Atwood, 'one power game is like another', writes McCombs (1988:146). In my reading of Atwood's poetry in Chapters 3 and 4, I will therefore focus on the unequal distribution of power between the self and the other, be it between men and women or between colonizer and colonized. Since every object is also a subject, for this thesis, the term 'subjects' refers to men or women, to those who colonize and to those who are colonized. Butler's notion of the subject as 'a structure in formation' (1997:10) rather than a person or individual reminds one that a 'subject' can mean many things. This does not negate the fact that women writing from the colonies may be 'othered' twice: firstly, in terms of belonging to a colony, rather than to the empire or Western 'centre' (in African literatures, race would frequently be used as an indicator of this 'otherness'), and secondly, in terms of gender (Bahri, 2004).

¹³ In her book, *The Second Sex* (1953), Simone de Beauvoir alludes to the link between what is now considered postcolonial notions of self and other, and feminist framings of man and woman when she writes about the reciprocity of the self-other relationship. She writes: 'The native travelling abroad is shocked to find himself in turn regarded as a "stranger" by the natives of the neighbouring countries' ([1953] 1983:17) and goes on to ask why this reciprocity has not been recognized between men and women. To Gikandi on the other hand, colonialism became 'the most dramatic modern example' of Hegel's dialectic (2004:103).

II The subject as an organism in space – Lacan

Bahri's point is an important one because it implies a link between subjectivity and geographical (or imagined)¹⁴ space. Your subject position is determined by where you are physically. Although psychoanalysis frames the subject in relation to the other, Lacan also writes about the subject and its relation to space. To Lacan, the subject, as an organism in space, is mapped socially and brought on by the possibility of finding itself mirrored in the other (Lacan, [1977] 2001:30).¹⁵ This is in keeping with the dynamics of Lacan's mirror stage. To move to the symbolic order, the forming subject needs to imagine its body as separate from its mother. In order for the self to locate the other, it would need to know its own borders – the edges where it ends and the other begins. Writing on Hegel's dialectic, Lacan therefore emphasizes the extent to which the two struggling parties express their battle in what he terms 'the vertigo of the domination of space' (Lacan, [1977] 2001:31).

III Kristeva's abject

Kristeva's notion of abjection is in a sense similar to Lacan's ideas on the subject in space, seeing that it examines the necessary separations that need to take place in order for the subject to be construed as such (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:225). In order for the infant to separate from its mother it needs some sort of impetus. For Freud and

¹⁴ Salman Rushdie talks of 'imaginary homelands' – showing that one's idea of one's place of origin is a fiction (Gikandi, 1996:195).

¹⁵ Lacan writes:

the individual's relation to a particular spatial field is . . . mapped socially, in a way that raises it to the category of subjective membership. I would say that it is the subjective possibility of the mirror projection of such a field into the field of the other that gives human space its originally 'geometrical' structure, a structure that I would be happy to call *kaleidoscopic*.

Such, at least, is the space in which the imagery of the ego develops, and which rejoins the objective space of reality. (Lacan, [1977] 2001:30)

Lacan, fear of castration provides this motivation to the infant. However, Kristeva maintains, in contrast to Freud and Lacan, that separation begins prior to the mirror or Oedipal stages and that not only parental threats, but also parental love help the infant wean successfully and so enter the symbolic, the realm of language (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:xxi–xxii). Kristeva views the mother's body as abject before it becomes the infant's first object (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:226). The child's response to its experience of the maternal body as abject results in its separation from it.

Kristeva's ideas on the separations needed to form subjects apply to national or societal identity as well (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:225). Similar to De Beauvoir, who extends Hegel's dialectic to include relations between men and women (De Beauvoir, [1953] 1983:17), Kristeva equates the separation between mother and infant with the separation between a foreigner and his/her mother (Kristeva, [1989] 2002:267), his/her motherland or his/her mother-tongue (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:226).

Abjection is experienced in a complex way. Semetsky writes that it may bring about 'unspeakable horror' and that it is often expressed physically through vomiting (2005:3). In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva explains that 'the abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine . . . [w]hat is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous' (Kristeva, [1980] 2002:230). The abject is also not only that which is unclean or disgusting, an 'image of Death' (Kristeva, [1989] 2002:197) from which to recoil, but that which 'calls into question borders and threatens identity' (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:225). Kristeva writes: 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' ([1980] 2002:232). The abject is that which collapses meaning. It is an

awareness of this uncertain borderline between the maternal body and the infant that leads to its primary experience of abjection.¹⁶ In Semetsky's words: 'When the distinction – it being either between subject and object, or self and other, or life and death, or any habitual opposites for that matter – is destroyed, then the abjection takes its place' (2005:3). To the infant, this experience proves both fascinating (or pleasurable) and terrifying at the same time (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:225).

It is apparent that Kristeva's abject is in a sense opposite to the slave in Hegel's dialectic: instead of supplying some sort of correlative, some mirror image for the subject to be perceived as subject, the abject draws one 'toward the place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva, [1980] 2002:230). Borders supply meaning. Being without borders implies not being and causes fear – 'How can I be without border?' asks Kristeva ([1980] 2002:231) – a point which Mandel (1983:57) echoes when he mentions 'the threat of unstructured or unmapped space' present in Atwood.

IV Borders and maps

Edges or borders between the colonizer and colonized and between men and women feature prominently in Atwood's poetry as Chapters 3 and 4 will point out.

Postcolonial theories on maps as visual representations of the borders between spaces and thus between subjects are useful when exploring these borders.

In map theory, colonial cartography is taken to mean more than a physical plotting of the borders of a colony on paper. Maps implied ownership of the land and of the people inhabiting it and provided structure to a wilderness that had to be 'tamed'. Theorists such as Huggan (1989) pick apart maps to expose the cartographer/colonizer's representation of his own superiority and dominant position. A map,

¹⁶ 'The border has become an object' writes Kristeva ([1980] 2002:231).

therefore, says just as much about subjectivity as it does about space, and cartographic discourse provides useful concepts to apply to the psychic borderlines of which Kristeva speaks when she talks about the abject.

Garuba (2002:105) explains that within colonialist (and patriarchal) discourses the subject's body (as representative of the whole individual – body, mind and emotions) is figured as land and the subject's land as body.¹⁷ Maps classified, enumerated and described the subjected and represented the identities projected onto the colonized, which chained subjects to fixed subject positions. Maps therefore become the thumbprints left behind by the Hegelian dialectic. They are symbols that expose the struggle between master and slave, and cartography becomes a metaphor for the framing of the other as other. To Huggan (1989:117), maps are manifestations of the cartographer/colonialist's desire for control: 'the "reality" represented mimetically by the map not only conforms to a particular version of the world but to a version which is specifically designed to empower its makers' (1989:118). He writes that writers from ex-colonies are fascinated by both the physical and metaphorical map, the physical map as a tool for implementing the colonialist project, the metaphorical map

¹⁷Garuba writes of a colonialist obsession

anchored to the body as the ultimate sign upon which racist and sexist discourses are founded. Since the body "presents itself" as a natural category, complete and united by its own boundaries, it is often made to function within these discourses as the model of a naturalised form of self and identity formation. Transferred thus to the colonialist context, the land is figured as a body and vice versa and they become the "ground" on which identity "grows". (2002:105)

Writing on the colonizer's experience of boundaries set by him in Graham Greene's travel book, *Journey Without Maps* (1936), Garuba writes:

The boundary is distinct because the contesting narrative of local experience has been displaced or suppressed and a new hegemonic narrative signified in the European map has been written over it. (2002:95)

an example or 'framework' for a critique of the discourse of colonialism (Huggan, 1989:115).

V Rhetorical strategies in cartography analogous to subjection

Huggan (1989:115) names certain rhetorical strategies used in mapmaking that provide an analogue for acquiring, managing and reinforcing power. One of these strategies, which Garuba suggests could refer to the subjugation of bodies as well (Garuba, 2002:105), is enclosure. This concept is useful when describing power relations between two subjectivities and Atwood explores this strategy in 'The circle game' as Chapter 3 will show.

What does it mean when the colonizer encloses the colonized or when the master hems in the slave? The first implication would be that of ownership: the colonized are similar to cattle, owned by a farmer, put into camps on land which the farmer owns as well. Enclosure also keeps you from moving around freely and this denial of 'migrations of the subject' formed a basis for colonial mapping (Garuba, 2002:87). The South African pass book is a case in point.

The enclosure of the colonized not only prevents physical movement, but implies that his/her subjectivity can somehow be captured or represented as the colonizer pleases. Huggan writes that, just as the other is enclosed in spaces on the map, the other is fixed in (fetishized) stereotype and 'discriminatory classification' (1989:117). Writing on Atwood, Mandel (1983:56) identifies a primary movement in Atwood 'through a series of journeys, either inward or downward'. Containing the subject would police these journeys.

Garuba (2002:89) mentions another rhetorical strategy identified by Harley, namely 'silences', which Garuba defines as 'little omissions or significant exclusions of material which may undermine the supposed objectivity of the map'. On many colonial maps, the local villages or peoples were omitted. Garuba writes that this textual 'emptying [of] territories and [creation of] virgin lands waiting for European penetration is a well-worn colonialist strategy' (Garuba, 2002:93). This is the cartographic equivalent of the Hegelian superseding of the other within the dialectic.

Not only does the colonizer empty the land, he repopulates it with preconceived subjects. Writing on Graham Greene's *Journey Without Maps* in which Greene states that '[w]here the English map is content to leave a blank space, the American in large letters fills it with the word "Cannibals"', Garuba explains that the 'projection of fantasies of savagery and cannibalism upon unknown territories' is another colonialist strategy (Garuba, 2002:93). The colonized was seen as dangerous, and regarded with fear and fascination – the colonized collapsed meaning. Here, the colonized is abject and, because of his reaction (which is similar to the infant reacting to the abject of the maternal body), the colonizer is infant.

VI Why subject to the master?

Hegel maintains that the slave succumbs to the master because he/she gets forced to choose between life and recognition and chooses to relinquish recognition. This submission is brought about by fear of death. The slave is 'seized with dread' (Hegel, [1807] 1977:117). In Baillie's translation, Hegel calls death 'the sovereign master' (Hegel, [1807] 1949:237).¹⁸

¹⁸ Butler writes that 'the desire to survive, "to be," is a pervasively exploitable desire . . . "I would rather exist in subordination than not exist" is a formulation of this predicament (where the risk of "death" is also possible)' (1997:7).

Lacan ([1977] 2001:31) proposes that fear of bodily harm, rather than death, is the impetus for taking on the slave position.¹⁹ Thus, this fear of bodily harm could be used to explain the subjection of women and the colonized in feminist and postcolonial theory respectively. The colonizer, with military force, did make slaves of the colonized in a very real sense. Lacan's theory would imply that the threatening presence of the physically stronger male forces the female to subject to him.

Kristeva's notion of abjection provides another possible reason for the subjugation of women. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy* (1989), she explains that it is necessary, both biologically and psychically, for the forming subject to lose its mother in order for it to become autonomous, to be construed as subject ([1989] 2002:197). In other words, the infant needs to experience its mother as abject. It must make of its mother something from which to recoil (Kristeva, [1989] 2002:197). However, if the infant is female, she is unable to abject the maternal body, seeing that she identifies with the mother as a woman: 'how can She be that bloodthirsty Fury, since I am She (sexually and narcissistically), She is I?' asks Kristeva ([1989] 2002:198). Thus, the hatred the girl infant feels towards the mother is internalized – she feels inferior and is therefore prone to take on the lesser role. In *Tales of Love* (1987), Kristeva also suggests 'misplaced abjection' as a possible explanation for the oppression of women (Oliver, 1998:3). In her argument, she explores what some would argue to be the most important image of woman in the West – that of the Virgin Mary, to find her reduced to mother only. In patriarchal cultures, therefore, women have been reduced to the function of procreation only, and Western images of the mother do not allow her to function as a 'speaking social being' (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:297). Because of this reduction, all of Woman settles in the maternal body. When the maternal body is

¹⁹ According to Lacan 'the fear of death, the "absolute Master", presupposed in consciousness by a whole philosophical tradition from Hegel onwards, is psychologically subordinate to the narcissistic fear of damage to one's own body' (Lacan, [1977] 2001:31).

abjected, women, maternity and femininity are abjected along with it (Oliver, 1998:3). Throwing the baby out with the bathwater is a fitting idiom to describe this process. In Atwood, however, there is a constant preoccupation with the redefinition of the mother (Rigney, 1987:4) and she shares Kristeva's reconfiguring of the way in which society sees maternity.

As I have indicated in the opening of this chapter, Butler explains that the subject is complicit in its own subordination. She writes: 'a subject is not only formed in subordination, but . . . this subordination provides the subject's continuing condition of possibility.' (1997:8). One therefore not only requires recognition, but needs to be subordinated to become a subject.

VII What is the subjected's way out?

Butler is clear that 'no historical or logical conclusions' should follow from the subject's primary complicity in its own subjection (1997:17). Needing to be subjected to form into a subject does not mean the vindication of abuses of power.²⁰

Looking at how Atwood constructs subjectivity and explores subjection in her poetry, one finds plans for possible liberation often expressed in cartographic terms. Map theory can therefore be used to describe this revolution in the language of maps and borders. Huggan (1989:120) writes that 'cartographic discourse can be seen to play an exemplary role not only in the demonstration of the empowering strategies of colonialist rhetoric but in the unwitting exposure of the deficiencies of these

²⁰ Butler maintains:

If one is to oppose the abuses of power (which is not the same as opposing power itself), it seems wise to consider in what our vulnerability to the abuse consists. That subjects are constituted in primary vulnerability does not exonerate the abuses they suffer; on the contrary, it makes all the more clear how fundamental the vulnerability can be. (1997:20)

strategies'. As was mentioned before, to many writers, as is the case with Atwood, the map becomes a framework for criticizing the colonialist project (Huggan, 1989:115).

But is it possible to reverse an uneven power relation or even to equalize it?

Returning to the map as metaphor of subjection, Garuba proposes that 'strategies of escape' (Garuba, 2002:88) are indeed possible, seeing that 'the regulatory operations of cartographic discourse and, by analogy, . . . the stabilizing rhetoric of colonial discourse, neither guarantees the effectiveness of colonial rule nor ensures the coherence of the discursive system which underwrites it' (Huggan, 1989:118). Butler echoes this when she writes that the 'social categorizations that establish the vulnerability of the subject to language are themselves vulnerable to both psychic and historical change' (1997:21).

Because the rhetorical strategy of enclosure attempts to stabilize the subject's identity and works on the principle that a definable, stable subject can be understood and therefore controlled, continual mobility on the part of the colonized is an antidote. Mobility is a strategy to escape the essentialism used by the colonizer when defining subjects, which Bahri (2004:209) mentions, and is similar to Kristeva's subject-in-process, which some feminists have found useful as an alternative to that of the traditionally autonomous, unified, masculine subject (Oliver, 1998:3).²¹ Bahri writes that '[e]ssentialist stereotypes can be and have been used to demean and disenfranchise, to create racial hierarchies, and to exploit' (2004:209). Physical and psychic mobility, the cultivation of a subjectivity which is in process and therefore difficult to define or pin down, counter the master's project. Therefore, the numerous journeys in Atwood, which Mandel (1983:56) mentions and which are first seen as metaphors for the development of the subject, can also suggest defiant movement. As

²¹ 'A theory of the subject should take into account the full ambivalence of the conditions of its operation', writes Butler (1997:15), for example, meaning the subject's relation to power is ambivalent because it generates and threatens the subject.

Garuba explains, borders do not physically contain the drifting occupants nor do they metaphorically enclose the fluidity of these occupants' subjectivities: 'it is one thing to draw a map but it is quite another to get people to accept and internalize the map' (Garuba, 2002:95).

Furthermore, the cartographic coherence is threatened with what Rabasa (in Huggan, 1989:118) terms 'blind spots': fissures in the map that make it possible to reread and distort its focus. Thinking of the map as merely a set of rhetorical strategies which can become known to the colonized, it becomes possible to read the map differently. Huggan writes that these blind spots expose the map's 'supposedly "universal" mode of representation as a set of rhetorical strategies which reinforce the prelocated authority of its European makers . . . [they] reveal flaws in the overall presentation of the map which allow it to be read in alternative, "non-European" modes' (1989:118). Using his master's tools, so to speak, the slave may reconfigure himself because the map's believed coherence can be proved a fallacy.²²

Similar to the colonized's rereading of the map to criticize its colonialist project and reconfigure herself, Kristeva's writing the speaking body back into theory (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:xvii) brings about more possibilities for shifts in power. For Kristeva, Oliver writes, 'the body is more than material' (in Kristeva, 2002:xvii). Those who have traditionally been cast as body only do have access to language. The suggestion is to use the master's language to talk back at him.

²² In the words of Huggan:

The "contradictory coherence" implied by the map's systematic inscription on a supposedly "uninscribed" earth reveals it, moreover, as a palimpsest covering over alternative spatial configurations which, once brought to light, indicate both the plurality of possible perspectives on, and the inadequacy of any single model of, the world. (1989:120)

A different kind of linguistic strategy is to try to access the poetic language theorized by Kristeva as a kind of signifying practice present in literature which unsettles and destroys 'the identity of meaning and speaking subject' ([1975] 2002:93–94). Kristeva takes this type of language to be socially transformative, seeing that it gives to literature the power to destroy and renew social code (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:101). Poetic language conjures up the semiotic and functions outside the master–slave discourse. Therefore, the effect of poetic language corresponds to that of the abject, which questions borders and threatens identity. Drawing the subject 'toward the place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva, [1980] 2002:230), the abject pulls the master towards the border. It is here where Atwood's subject wants to stake her claim.

Chapter 3

Self and other: the language of maps and borders in 'The circle game'

Although Atwood's poetic oeuvre technically commences when she self-publishes a collection of poems called *Double Persephone* in 1961, subsequent collections of selected work such as *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–1995* (1998) take *The Circle Game* to be Atwood's debut collection. First published by the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1964, *The Circle Game* was in due course published by Canadian publisher Anansi in 1966. Its 28 poems include the poem sequence 'The circle game' (pp. 35–44) from which the collection takes its name. The cover depicts a simple line of dots forming a helix and Atwood explores many of the associative possibilities of circles in the collection: the earth circling around the sun to create the seasons,²³ the circle of life and death²⁴ and the circle games children play.²⁵ Her words become pebbles²⁶ which she drops into bodies of water such as lakes to form concentric circles. The circle game also predicts the vicious circles of power relations and the learned, gendered discourses they imply.²⁷

'The circle game' sequence is a complex exploration of a relationship between a man and a woman. Atwood presents a subject which is structured in terms of an other. In Lacanian terms, entry into subjectivity is governed by entry into the symbolic via a self–other mode of subject constitution. The relationship between the subject and its other is a relationship of power. Furthermore, 'The circle game' demonstrates Atwood's use of the language of maps and borders to portray her sense of the subject

²³ For example, see 'Spring in the igloo' (p. 48).

²⁴ In the poem 'A sibyl' (p. 49), the immortal Sibyl is 'wrinkled as a pickled / baby' (lines 17–18).

²⁵ See 'The circle game', (pp. 35–44).

²⁶ See poem ii of 'Some objects of wood and stone' (p. 61).

²⁷ The poem 'In my ravines' (pp. 19–20) alludes to the Oedipus story, with young boys' 'ancient rage' (line 34) against 'old men' (line 24) and situated in the 'ravines' of the (woman) speaker's sex.

and its interaction with its other. Borders feature prominently in the whole collection: in the last stanza of 'Evening trainstation before departure' (p. 15), the speaker proclaims: 'I move / and live on the edges / (what edges) / I live / on all the edges there are'; while a couple's house in poem i of 'A place: fragments' (p. 73) sits 'on the rim' (line 1). Water surfaces and the reflective surfaces of mirrors become edges or borders signifying the division between the self and the other, but also imply a wish to step through a kind of membrane between this world and a different reality where the dialectic between self and other might actually be revoked or where the language of the symbolic does not demarcate borders so severely. In poem i of 'Migration: C.P.R.' (p. 52), where 'language is the law' (line 19), for example, the couple flees, 'wanting / a place of absolute / unformed beginning' (lines 21–23). Lacan's symbolic and Kristeva's subsequent theory on the symbolic and semiotic orders resonate here as is the case with the poem 'Pre-amphibian' (p. 63) in which the speaker is happy to descend into a watery dream space which 'release[s]' (line 15) her from a reality where her lover is 'something [she] can / trace a line around' (lines 17–18).

Readings by critics such as Foster ([1977] 1988:153)²⁸ and McCombs (1988:142) show that 'The circle game' enacts not only a gendered interpersonal relationship, but national power scenarios as well: McCombs (1988:142) calls it a 'Canadian-American Sequence' that explores the complex relationship between Canada and America and

²⁸ Foster writes that

Atwood confronts her own sexuality and the contemporary roles laid down by men for her to play. A minority psychology similar to that which informs her identity as a woman informs her national identity, for Atwood is a contemporary Canadian aware of belonging to a minority culture on the North American continent . . . ([1977] 1988:153)

Blakely (1983:50) notes Foster's sexism and comments wryly on his reference to women as a 'minority psychology'.

Ward writes that in the poems Canada exhibits an anxiety over economic and cultural domination by the stronger America (1994:97). Thus, the borders depicted separate actual geographical spaces as well. This thematic double-take points to a complex postcolonial subjectivity in Atwood's work, a subjectivity that 'encode[s] a running parallel between the conditioning of Canada as a nation-state and the positioning of women within it, and then by extension the positioning of women within any governing patriarchy' (Nicholson, 1994:11). Power, therefore, is the common denominator in both of these scenarios. The implication here is that, whether or not this is a sequence about power relationships between men and women, between countries, or between peoples, the author is taking issue with power 'in general' (Rigney, 1987:12). My reading of the poem sequence will therefore focus on general power relations between a self and an other, or 'two consciousnesses' – as Hegel ([1807] 1977) would have it – seeing that Atwood's exploration of power relations within an interpersonal relationship also comments on relationships in other contexts. Atwood's careful avoidance of personal pronouns that would indicate gender (one finds the only clear indication that the speaker is a woman in the last poem of the sequence when the speaker refers to herself as a 'spineless woman' [line 29]) is a further indication that Atwood is attempting to explore a generic power relation that could be applied to more than one scenario.

The poem sequence comprises seven parts. A speaker's accounts of children playing games alternate with descriptions of her interacting with a lover. With regard to the game referred to in the title, the collection also includes a game of chess²⁹ and a card game.³⁰ Similar to the circle game, these games suggest complex power struggles that

²⁹ See 'An attempted solution for chess problems' (pp. 17–18).

³⁰ See 'Playing cards' (pp. 24–25).

are gendered and expressed in the terms of empire and the colonization of territories.³¹

'The circle game' begins with a description of a game which sounds similar to the well-known rhyme 'Ring a Ring o' Roses':

The children on the lawn
joined hand to hand
go round and round

each arm going into
the next arm, around
full circle
until it comes
back into each of the single
bodies again

They are singing, but
not to each other:
their feet move
almost in time to the singing (p. 35)

At first, the reader seems to be confronted with something benign: children playing a game on the lawn. Though the reader knows not to expect anything benign in the dangerous landscapes of this collection established by poems such as 'After the flood, we' (p. 12) and 'A decent through the carpet' (pp. 21–23). In 'The circle game', Atwood uses 'Ring a Ring o' Roses' (which refers to thousands of fatalities during the Black Plague according to a well-known urban legend)³² to suggest something more

³¹ In 'An Attempted solution for chess problems' (pp. 17–18) the speaker's sister 'ponders her next move / the arrangement of her empire' (lines 2–3), while the 'white king' (line 30) forces 'her universe to his / geographies' (lines 35–36). In 'Playing cards' (pp. 24–25), the speaker and her lover 'confront each other' (line 44), like the queen who holds 'a golden flower' (line 20) and the king who holds 'a sceptre or a sword' (line 31). The king's weapon is 'something abstract' (line 28), which makes it resemble Lacan's concept of the phallus as a metaphor, rather than a penis.

³² Mikkelson and Mikkelson (1995) dispute this explanation of the origin of the rhyme, however, the game still carries these associations.

sinister than fun and games. Also, according to the speaker, even though this is a game, 'there is no joy in it' (line 22). The onlookers 'can see / the concentration on / [the children's] faces, their eyes / fixed on the empty / moving spaces just in / front of them' (lines 14–19). The children's eyes are 'fixed' (line 17), but they are staring at 'empty / moving spaces' (lines 17–18). Atwood's use of the adjective 'empty' to describe the spaces stared at by the children indicates a concern with obsolete images. The lines 'each arm going into / the next arm' (lines 4–5) suggest the children are similar to paper cut-out dolls, which are flat and lack any individuality, seeing that each individual doll is an exact copy of another. In the collection, movement to deep places often contrasts with flattened-out images, which imply a lack of the deep meaning or understanding the speaker usually finds when she moves beyond surfaces. Other examples of flat images in *The Circle Game* include "This is a photograph of me" (p. 11) in which the speaker describes a photograph, a flat image of herself. She urges the viewer to look closely because the image makes it difficult to see her clearly. In 'Playing cards' (pp. 24–25) the 'flowers and the swords' (line 37), indicating the queen and king, 'stay flat / are cardboard' (lines 38–39). The flat image of a reflection in a mirror also features prominently in the collection and causes Rigney (1987:2) to theorize that Atwood's complex mirror imagery implies a way for the self to lose itself in 'the vision of the self'. Although mirrors often act as 'agents of truth', they also mirror obsolete images of women (Rigney, 1987:2).

Atwood chooses to put the word 'eyes' at the end of line 16, predicting the prominence that eyes and the action of looking, as a way to define the other's subject position, will have in this poem sequence. This is in keeping with Blakely (1983:39), who explains that, because sight 'is governed by the politics of dominance [it] is not free for the mutual constitution of the self and other'. According to Lacan, the self and the other express their interactions in 'the vertigo of the domination of space'

(Lacan, [1977] 2001:31) and Atwood is establishing the subject's gaze and its relation to space at the start of the sequence by focusing the reader's attention on the children staring fixedly at spaces. This is consistent with the dynamics of Lacan's mirror stage. The forming subject needs to imagine its body as separate from its mother. In order for the self to locate the other, it would need to know its own borders – the edges where it ends and the other begins.

During the game, all else is ignored whilst the children are in this trance-like state. Atwood suggests this daze by her use of short lines, repetitions and enjambment to suggest a kind of chant:

We can see (arm in arm)
as we watch them go
round and round
intent, almost
studious (the grass
underfoot ignored, the trees
circling the lawn
ignored, the lake ignored)
that the whole point
for them
of going round and round
is (faster
 slower)
going round and round (pp. 35–36)

This stanza establishes the connection between the lovers and the playing children. One can almost feel the onlookers' heads turning as they watch the turning children. Furthermore, the parenthesis in the stanza's first line '(arm in arm)' is visually functional in its enclosing of the words inside it like arms, and might refer to the children, whose arms are interlinked (lines 4–5), but can also refer to the lovers who may be standing arm in arm. The reader is told that going round and round is not a game – it is the 'whole point' (line 31). The implication is that the subsequent

interaction between the lovers will also be important and essential. In this stanza, the word 'ignored' is repeated three times: the children ignore the tactile sensation of grass beneath their feet; the trees that encircle the lawn on the periphery of their vision; and the lake (lines 27–30). Atwood uses parentheses to suggest a space between brackets, a whole alternative 'world' so to speak, that is ignored. Similar to the paper dolls, the circle game is artificial and shallow and lacks the deep meaning the collection is concerned with.

In the collection there is a close connection between a descent into water or through a surface, and a descent into the unconscious: poem i of 'Migration: C.P.R.' (p. 53) talks of 'inner lakes' (line 27); and in 'Pre-Amphibian' (p. 63), Atwood links a descent into water to falling asleep and dreaming (dreams being Freud's 'royal road to the unconscious' [Sternberg, 1998:202]). The realm her speaker crosses when submerged in water (or at an edge) is a pre-linguistic, semiotic world: a space where language is not rigid, solid and something which forces you into a fixed subject position. Ward (1994:98) writes about a similar 'crossing of a linguistic border' into a 'pre-linguistic state' in Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972).

The children, however, ignore the lake with its connection to the unconscious or the realm of the semiotic. Their learned, artificial, rote quality will be mirrored in the failed attempts at real communication between the speaker and her lover.

In poem ii (pp. 36–37), the speaker addresses her lover. The poem begins with the following stanzas:

Being with you
here, in this room

is like groping through a mirror
whose glass has melted
to the consistency
of gelatin

You refuse to be
(and I)
an exact reflection, yet
will not walk from the glass,
be separate. (p. 36)

McCombs (1988:142) places 'The circle game' at Stage I of a trajectory she suggests for Atwood's poetic development. According to her, Atwood's Stage I comprises, amongst other things, 'the closed world of mirroring'. In poem ii, the two characters in the room find themselves face to face in a situation which mirrors that of the playing children: the children's spinning around and the speaker's looking through melted glass with the 'consistency / of gelatin' (lines 5–6) might be said to produce comparable sensations – both disorientate and throw you off-balance. Preceded by the significant position given to eyes in poem i, poem ii foregrounds the action of looking at a reflection. The room is filled with mirrors, 'even / the back of the door / has one' (line 17–19).

The reader imagines that the interaction between the lovers is somehow essential, similar to the 'whole point' (line 31) of the children's game in poem i – they are in bed (line 29), which makes their interactions intimate and personal. Applying Hegel's master–slave dialectic to the poem, one could argue that this essential interaction is the formation of the subject in relation to an other. These two characters are dependent on the image of the self in the other. According to Lacan's ideas on the role of the mirror stage in subject formation, the 'I' cannot be constituted if there is no 'you' to mirror itself in. Similar to Hegel's dialectic, this mirroring always works both ways: the self is reflected in the other, while the other reflects in the self. Poem ii

establishes this reciprocal relationship – the lover will not turn away from his reflection in the speaker, he ‘will not walk from the glass, / be separate’ (lines 16–17), even though both parties refuse to be an exact copy of the other (lines 7–8). Both parties are establishing their identities, unlike the paper doll children. Words and phrases such as ‘[y]ou refuse’ (line 7), ‘chipped’ (line 15), ‘crooked’ (line 15), ‘arguing’ (line 21), ‘sags’ (line 30) and ‘your face remote’ (lines 33–34) all contribute to a feeling of dissonance within the relationship. The person whom the speaker faces is ignoring her – something which the repetition of the word ‘ignored’ in poem i prefigured – whilst listening to people in the other room:

You look past me, listening
to them, perhaps, or
watching
your own reflection somewhere
behind my head,
over my shoulder (p. 37)

In Hegel’s schema, although the two consciousnesses are dependent on each other, each one needs to negate or supersede its facing consciousness in order for it to exist autonomously. The lover’s ignoring of the speaker suggests this sublation: he ‘look[s] past’ (line 23) the speaker. On the level of national power games, McCombs sees the lover’s ignoring of the speaker in order to listen to the ‘people in the next room’ as enacting Canada’s ‘colonial mentality’, a concept Atwood worked with in her book on Canadian literature entitled *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). The lover looks to the British, the French or the Americans, the ‘people in the next room’ (line 20) instead of looking at Canada. To McCombs, the speaker’s refusal to be separate from the lover suggests ‘gender entrapment’ and also implies the entrapment of French Quebec, which is essentially a colony within a colony (1988:147), on a national level.

Atwood problematizes a simple application of Hegel's dialectic to explain the interaction between the speaker and the lover. This mirroring of the two consciousnesses is a complex act and their relationship is far from straightforward: neither one wants to be an 'exact reflection' (line 9) of the other, but neither one can walk away from the other due to the nature of Hegel's dialectic. This process takes place in a complicated way, suggested by the bizarre image of a melted mirror. Unlike Lacan's mirror, Atwood's is pliable – almost as if one can step through it. In the fourth stanza, the speaker mentions that the mirrors in the room are 'chipped' and hang 'crooked'. These details signify the problematic nature of this self–other mirroring: the discourses these mirrors stand for, obscure and distort. Atwood draws the reader's attention to the fact that these mirrors reflect an image of the subject. Like the photograph in 'This is a photograph of me' (p. 11), this mirror image is flat and devoid of a deeper meaning beneath the surface of the glass. The recognition of the self in the other in Lacan's mirror is also a misrecognition (Grosz, 1990:39). Lacan uses the term '*imago*' (Lacan, [1977] 2001:2) – which in Latin carries the meaning of 'pretence' as well – when he talks about the mirror stage in subject formation. The self you see mirrored in the other is not a 'true' self, but an image. Any attempts at getting to a deeper understanding of the subject reflected in the mirror would mean a reaching beyond the surface of the mirror to a space which is not 'empty' (line 17), but devoid of the rigid structures of regular language and fixed subject positions found in the symbolic.

Poem iii (pp. 37–38) describes the adult onlookers walking on the beach and finding the children's 'fortifications' in the sand: the adults find 'trenches' 'fortified with pointed sticks', 'sand moats' and a 'lake-enclosed island' (lines 27–31). These children's situation is similar to the children in the poem 'A sibyl' (pp. 49–51) who 'play at war' (line 4) and whom the speaker refers to when she thinks that '[t]here are

omens of / rockets among the tricycles' (lines 53–55). Poem iii introduces a further implication to the self–other dynamic: not only does one consciousness ignore the other in order to establish itself, but it also threatens to invade the space of the other. Trenches and moats are ways to keep someone from entering a certain territory or land. If one were to view the subject's body as land, which Atwood does in poem iv where the lover traces the speaker 'like a country's boundary' (line 33), an invasion of land would imply an invasion of body and of identity. Atwood's vocabulary of war points to this threat of bodily and psychological harm. In Chapter 2 I mentioned that, according to Lacan ([1977] 2001:31), fear of bodily harm, rather than fear of death (which Hegel had proposed), causes the other to take on a subjugated role. The children's apparent indifference when listening to stories of legends of 'monstrous battles, and secret / betrayals in the forest / and brutal deaths' (lines 10–12) may suggest that they have been told these stories many times. The implication here is that their behaviour on the beach is learned behaviour: behavioural patterns that get passed on from generation to generation. One could also suggest that the children react this way because they are used to similar (or worse) battles, betrayals and deaths, thus leaving them uninterested in fairy tales told by grown-ups. Atwood is invoking a scene that reminds one of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954). Similar to 'Ring a Ring o' Roses' in the first stanza, the inclusion of this detail undercuts the myth of innocent childhood and implies that no age of innocence or period of peace exists prior to this state of being caught up in a relationship of power. The battle-ready children reflect the power relation between infant and parent always present during the forming of the subject according to psychoanalysis. The onslaught by another consciousness and the relentless forming of your own subjectivity in relation to an other is therefore inevitable, no matter your age. In addition, the ocean's erosion of the children's 'fortifications' seem to suggest that one's

attempts to protect oneself against such an attack are inadequate. The structures are seen as

a last attempt
(however
eroded by the water
in an hour)
to make
maybe, a refuge human
and secure from the reach

of whatever walks along
(sword hearted)
these night beaches. (p. 38)

Although the children ignore the presence of the lake in poem i, another big body of water, the ocean, nevertheless makes its presence felt here, implying that the semiotic contributes to establishing the subject and to signifying processes and can therefore not be ignored. Similar to the other that constitutes the self – an other that contributes to the meaning of the subject – the semiotic functions as the other of symbolic language.

The sword-hearted monster that walks the beaches at night is symbolic of phallic power – the children are afraid of Lacan's law of the father. One could also suggest that the entity's sword heart resembles the children's strongholds 'fortified with pointed sticks': here we perhaps have two different metaphors for the hearts of the lovers who are the two parties in Hegel's dialectic. They face each other, each of them ready to enforce his/her consciousness, but the one's heart is protected by mere pointed sticks; the other's by swords, symbolizing the imbalance of power and the likelihood that the weaker one will be subjected to the position of slave.

Discussing national power games in 'The circle game', McCombs (1988:149) sees poem iii as a re-enactment of a certain 'garrison mentality' which writers such as Northrop Frye thought Canadians possessed. She explains this attitude as the colonists' cordoning themselves off against the perceived dangers of the new territory.³³ However, the sand 'garrisons' may also refer to the protection of beaches by natives against colonial invasion. The carrier of superior technologies (the steel of the swords) is outside the stronghold protected only by the wood of the 'pointed sticks', which may refer to arrows or spikes. The placement of the entity with superior technology outside the garrison suggests that it is the native inhabitants, rather than the colonizers, who are doing the defending in this instance. These two contradictory readings prove McCombs's point when she writes that different power games are interchangeable in Atwood's writing (1988:146). 'The circle game' explores power and how it is used by subjects to construct themselves, and by so doing, subjecting an other or becoming subjected. Poem iii pre-empts Atwood's use of the language of colonialism, the language of borders and maps, to explore this power relation in interpersonal relationships between characters such as the lovers in this poem sequence.³⁴

Poem iv (pp. 39–40) further establishes Atwood's vocabulary of mirrors, maps and borders and its relation to the subject.³⁵ Having been ignored in poem ii, and with the threat of invasion³⁶ and bodily harm implied by poem iii, the speaker now exposes the lover's power game:

³³ Atwood explores this fear in detail in 'Further arrivals' (p. 13) in her second collection, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970).

³⁴ Atwood's collection *Power Politics* (1971) is an extended example of her use of the language of colonialism to describe a love relationship.

³⁵ McCombs writes that '[a]t "Circle's" centre, section iv, is the couple's climactic map game, in which imperial and horror scenarios underlie the gender domination' (1988:149).

³⁶ In poem ii of the sequence 'Letters, towards and away' in the same collection (pp. 69–72), the speaker also feels invaded: 'How could you invade / me when / I ordered you not / to' (lines 3–6).

Returning to the room:
I notice how
all your word-
plays, calculated ploys
of the body, the witticisms
of touch, are now
attempts to keep me
at a certain distance
and (at length) avoid
admitting I am here (p. 39)

The lover employs his language ('word- / plays'), as well as his physicality ('ploys / of the body' and 'witticisms / of touch') to manipulate the relationship he has with the speaker. Words, as tools used in relations of power are necessary to acquire subjectivity in the symbolic, and are given a position of prominence when Atwood breaks the word 'word-play' over two lines to end the line with 'word-'. One could suggest that the lover's strategies are all attempts to frame the speaker in space: the lover tries to keep the speaker 'at a certain distance' in an action which reminds one of the treatment of lepers (or political prisoners on Robben Island) – space had been manipulated to contain the other physically and therefore had made it easier to ignore her. The lover's refusing to recognize the presence of the speaker is similar to the colonizer's refusal to acknowledge the existence of native inhabitants on the maps of colonized territories.

However, stanza 2 suggests that the lover's attempt at ignoring the speaker is unsuccessful – he now regards her, but 'indifferently':

I watch you
watching my face
indifferently
yet with the same taut curiosity
with which you might regard
a suddenly discovered part
of your own body:
a wart perhaps (p. 39)

The lover's 'discovery' of the speaker is likened to the discovery of a wart – an ugly, parasitic and bothersome growth on his skin. Unable to keep the speaker 'at a distance', the lover now has to deal with an annoying other who is making her presence felt on his body. The invasion foretold by poem iii now moves in the other direction – the other is invading the body of the subject. Atwood's use of the word 'indifferently' resembles a phrase in Hegel: he explains that the two facing consciousnesses 'leave each other free only *indifferently*' (my emphasis), when they 'do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously' ([1807] 1977:114),³⁷ which happens when the power relation between the two consciousnesses is skewed/unbalanced. The lover's indifference suggests that he regards himself as superior in this relationship: Hegel's master sees the 'bondsmen' as inferior (similar to a 'wart') and therefore not an adequate consciousness for his own to be mirrored in. In the next line, however, the lover is not indifferent anymore, but curious and nervous. It is a 'taut curiosity', as if he goes rigid with uncertainty at the idea, which might be said to be similar to the subject's experience of the Kristevan abject: having recognized the other, the lover now stands near the border between self and other. Here, his 'meaning collapses' (Kristeva, [1980] 2002:230): he is being pulled towards a place where his existence ceases and the other's existence begins. Similar to the infant's experience of abjection, the lover is intrigued (he regards her

³⁷ Baillie's translation reads: 'the two do not mutually give and receive one another back from each other through consciousness; they let one another go quite indifferently' (Hegel, [1807] 1949:234).

with 'taut curiosity'), but also unsure or anxious, suggested by the prominent placing of the word 'perhaps' at the end of the stanza in line 18.

Being part of the lover's body implies an intimacy between the two parties, which Atwood immediately undercuts: although the speaker is part of the lover, the lover regards this other as a non-essential piece of himself: something that should not be there and, by being present, blemishes him. This infection ties in with the motif of (bodily) invasion. The lover's reaction suggests that he is re-enacting sexist paradigms in which women are associated with the body, with being unclean or decaying (Oliver, 1998:1). In Hegel's system, the casting of the other as non-essential is a strategy used by the subject to establish his/her own autonomy. However, seeing that the self is constructed from what it sees in the other, this casting of the other as non-essential implies that the self casts itself as non-essential as well, 'for this other is itself' writes Hegel ([1807] 1977:111). Benjamin (1988:53) explains the process as follows: 'If I destroy the other, there is no one to recognize me, for if I allow him no independent consciousness, I become enmeshed with a dead, not-conscious being'.

Atwood links stanza 2 to the third stanza by starting with the lower case 'and', suggesting that the lover's reaction to his noticing the other resembles his engagement with maps during childhood. Atwood's use of cartographic metaphors to explore power relations and subjectivity is most obvious in stanza 3 onwards:

and I remember
you said
in childhood you were
a tracer of maps
(not making but) moving
a pen or a forefinger
over the courses of the rivers,
the different colours
that mark the rise of mountains;
a memorizer
of names (to hold
these places
in their proper places) (p. 39)

Similar to the lover's manipulation of the other's space in stanza 2, where he keeps the speaker 'at a certain distance', the lover now employs language ('names' and the fixed subject positions they imply) 'to hold / these places / in their proper places' (lines 29–31). The use of the word 'proper' is ironic, seeing that it is the lover or master who decides where these 'proper' places should be. He also decides what the names in his language should be. However, the parenthesis in line 5 of stanza 3, '(not making but)' makes it clear that the lover only 'traces' maps. This is an important detail and Atwood uses the brackets to focus the reader's attention on it. McCombs explains that, on a national power level, this could mean that the lover is Canadian: he is 'a staring, passive, frigid imitator of his imperial models' (1988:150). Conversely, Atwood is also showing that the lover is merely enacting an existing gender discourse – he is not creating the map, merely tracing it. This would acknowledge that the man's gender role had been assigned to him by society. Similar to the learned behaviour the children exhibit in their circle game, Atwood exposes the lover's learned, gendered behaviour. A third possibility for this emphasis on the man's tracing, rather than creating, the map might be because Atwood is refusing to cast the man as creator. Although he has access to symbolic language (the 'word- / plays' in lines 3–4), Atwood is emphasizing that he is not the only one. He is not the creator of

language, having stepped into an already established symbolic system as a boy. The possibility is left open for the speaker (she is, after all *the speaker*) to 'trace' maps also. The rhetorical strategies of the map become known to the colonized and therefore can be used against the colonizer (Huggan, 1989:118). Like Kristeva, Atwood is promoting the role of women as speaking subjects. Breaking up the lover's word-plays (lines 3–4) over two lines shows graphically how the woman speaker is able to snap in half the subjugating discourse of her lover by using his language against him.

In stanza 4, the speaker shows how her body is treated as land, exemplifying Garuba's explication that, within colonialist (and patriarchal) discourses, the other's body (as representative of the whole individual – body, mind and emotions) is figured as land and the subject's land as body (2002:105):

So now you trace me
like a country's boundary
or a strange new wrinkle in
your own wellknown skin
and I am fixed, stuck
down on the outspread map
of this room, of your mind's continent
(here and yet not here, like
the wardrobe and the mirrors
the voices through the wall
your body ignored on the bed),

transfixed
by your eyes'
cold blue thumbtacks (pp. 39–40)

The speaker is 'traced' and her subject position is 'fixed'. Similar to the wart in stanza 2, she now resembles a wrinkle on the lover's skin. The woman is once again associated with the body and with decay. The possessive pronoun 'your' in the last line of stanza 4, 'your body ignored on the bed', reduces the speaker to body only –

she belongs to the lover as his 'bondsman' or slave. Furthermore, she is not a consciousness – only a body. However, the wrinkle resembles a border, indicating perhaps the lover's circling nearer and nearer to where he will experience abjection fully. Like the wart which 'invaded' the body of the lover in line 18 of poem iv, the speaker is re-inscribed onto the body of the lover, this time in the form of a wrinkle. Once again the reciprocity between the self and other in Hegel's dialectic is established. Moreover, Benjamin (1988:55) writes that the violation of the boundaries of the other's body becomes a way of representing the struggle to the death for recognition of two consciousnesses in Hegel's schema. Thus, the lover's perception of the speaker's invasion of his body / her crossing the borders of his body may suggest that the indifference, with which he regarded her in line 13 of poem iv, was feigned.

The closing tercet of poem iv circles back to poem i, where the children's eyes were described as being 'fixed on the empty / moving spaces just in / front of them' (p. 35). Fixed by the lover's gaze, the speaker is nothing but an empty, static, pinned-down space open for his advances. The way in which the first poem predicts the treatment of the other in poem iv shows that, structurally, Atwood is using the children poems (poems i, iii, v, and vii) to prefigure the dynamic between the two adults in the other poems.

In poem v (pp. 40–41), the circling is back to the children's sandcastle fortifications (witnessed in poem iii) when the speaker describes a visit to a fort-turned-museum. The reader is told that the children 'like the guns / and the armour' (lines 5–6) 'especially' (line 4) and that these weapons were 'brought from / other times and countries' (lines 6–7). Like the children's structures, the fort is also 'crumbling' (line 19), but this time not because of the water, but because of 'the unceasing attacks of feet and flower roots' (lines 21). The 'archaic' maces and 'broken spears' (lines 11–12),

which the children draw after their visit to the museum, contribute to the view of the colonized's technologies not being able to withstand the superior force of the colonizer's cannons (line 15). Atwood relates the battles that had taken place years ago to battles of a different kind: '[t]he weapons / that were once outside / sharpening themselves on war / are now indoors' (lines 22–25). Being indoors once again suggests that a similar struggle as was the case between the colonized and the colonizer will be re-enacted by the lovers, who find themselves indoors in a room. Likened to tools used to establish relations of power in poem iv, words resemble these weapons and, like the weapons, Atwood implies that language is not 'worth defending' (line 37). This is in keeping with a general sense in the collection that everyday, symbolic language is incapable of describing the speaker's reality accurately. 'Against still life' (p. 65) provides another example. In this poem, the speaker wants 'more to be said to [her] / than just Orange: / [she] want[s] to be told / everything it has to say' (lines 13–16). The parenthesis '(much)' in 'elaborate defences keep / things that are no longer / (much) / worth defending' ('The circle game', poem v, lines 34–37) implies however that even though symbolic language has been shown to be suspect, it remains the only form for expressing such a suspicion.

Poem vi (pp. 41–42) continues to reinforce the reciprocal nature of the relationship between self and other. The lover still negates his dependence on the speaker. Instead, he plays an 'orphan game' (line 2) in which he resembles an urchin standing flat-nosed against a window pane looking at a family having a meal. The game is a 'ragged winter game / that says, I am alone' (lines 3–4). According to the speaker, the lover wants her to play this game also. The speaker reminds the lover that he despises the 'Victorian Christmas-card' quality (line 15) of the family: amongst other things, the 'father and mother / playing father and mother' (lines 23–24). Socialized gender positions suggested by the lover's tracing the map in poem iv are ironically despised

by the lover in poem vi. He prefers to be left alone. After noticing the other as a wart or a wrinkle on his skin, he also wants to be situated outside of Hegel's dialectic:

He's glad
to be left
out by himself
in the cold

(hugging himself).

When I tell you this,
you say (with a smile fake
as a tinsel icicle):

You do it too. (p. 42)

The lover is 'glad' (line 25) to be left out 'in the cold' (line 28). The game he plays on his own is a 'safe game' (line 1). Benjamin explains why separating from the slave may be considered safe. Having been dehumanised/objectified by the master, the subjected's 'unreality becomes too powerful'; the master 'is in danger of becoming the will-less thing he consumes unless he separates himself completely' (1988:65). Furthermore, the lover's wanting to separate suggests the degree to which the speaker has been subjected – she may be nearing the stage of a 'will-less thing'. While the family's 'Victorian Christmas-card' quality (line 15) he so despises implies that stifling Victorian perceptions of women are still rife in the poem (the 'cage of bones' in line 30 of poem vii being an apt description for the corset), the Christmas card also corresponds to a depthless quality that he has been attributing to the woman throughout the poem. He is the one who thinks her subject position can be transfixed with his eyes' 'cold blue thumbtacks' in line 45 of poem iv and who treats her body as a map that can be traced (poem iv, lines 32–34). However, the reciprocal implications of the Hegelian dialectic are highlighted when one considers that the lover might be

looking at his own reflection in the window pane when he stands 'pinched nose pressed / against the glass' (lines 9–10).

The speaker admits that she might also be playing the same games. When the lover tells her 'You do it too' (line 33), she responds: 'Which in some ways / is a lie, but also I suppose / is right, as usual' (lines 34–36). She admits a certain complicity in this power game, a motif always present in Atwood.³⁸ However, there is a difference: she tends 'to pose / in other seasons / outside other windows' (lines 37–39). If one takes the window to be a kind of mirror and the mirror as a metaphor for the subject constructing itself in relation to an other, other windows imply that different subject positions may be available. Whereas the lover refuses to acknowledge the existence of the other, or regards the other as non-essential, Atwood seems to suggest that the speaker opens herself up to be mirrored in additional others. She is taking on different subject positions and therefore rejects her being reduced to body (poem iv, line 42), a reduction which does not allow her to function as a 'speaking social being' (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:297).

In poem vii (pp. 42–44) the children are now inside:

This casual bed
scruffy as dry turf,
the counterpane
rumpled with small burrows, is
their grassy lawn (p. 43)

Atwood consolidates the different spaces of the sequence – the bed becomes the 'grassy lawn' (line 9); the beach in poem iii is now 'the nearby beach' (line 16). Like she did with the menacing 'Ring a Ring o' Roses', Atwood writes a wasp into the

³⁸ See Rigney (1987:3) on the subjected's complicity in Atwood.

poem to maintain that sense of danger she had been adding to something that initially seemed like an innocent children's game:

(a wasp comes,
drawn by the piece of sandwich
left on the nearby beach
 (how carefully you do
 such details);
one of the children flinches
but won't let go) (p. 43)

Her parenthesis within parenthesis (lines 17–18 in stanza 4) adds an interesting dimension to the poem sequence: one might suggest that the strange phrasing of '(how carefully you do / such details)' can be taken to be a comment to the author. The lover has been classified as a mere tracer of maps in poem iv, making his insertion of a carefully selected detail (the wasp) into this scene doubtful, seeing that he does not seem to be a creator. Furthermore, the 'you' is accused of making the children 'turn and turn, according to / the closed rules of your games, / but there is no joy in it' (lines 22–24). It is logical to assume that it was the author, rather than the lover, who made the children turn in the first place. This possible piece of self-reflexive writing could point to writers' complicity in framing the other in a certain way. Who, other than Atwood, was responsible for subjecting the speaker in this poem sequence? Stanza 8 implies that the lover might not be the only source of danger and the last tercet of poem vi, 'although I tend to pose / in other seasons / outside other windows' (lines 37–39) suggests the possibility of multiple masters to subject to. It is therefore understandable that the speaker questions the source of danger in lines 37–39:

(of course there is always
danger but where
would you locate it) (p. 43)

Even so, in poem vii, it is the lover's gaze that turns the speaker to 'a spineless woman in / a cage of bones' (lines 29–30). His gaze traps her in her own body and she

becomes an 'obsolete fort' (line 30), emphasizing that when she had talked about fortresses in the preceding poems she had been saying something about her own position.

The 'glass cage' the children 'spin' with their 'thread-thin / insect voices' (lines 40–44) circles back to the weapons exhibited in glass cases in the museum in poem v. The suggestion here is that symbolic language, which can 'stick down' people into fixed subject positions as in poem iv, also protects the archaic weapons of subjection – the word-plays of poem iv, lines 3–4. The poem sequence ends dramatically when the speaker declares her desire to free herself from the circle game:

I want to break
these bones, your prisoning rhythms
 (winter,
 summer)
all the glass cases,

erase all maps,
crack the protecting
eggshell of your turning
singing children:

I want the circle
broken. (p. 44)

The speaker wants to 'erase' the maps or existing discourses and wants to break the vicious cycle of gender roles being instilled during childhood. Alarming, the poem suggests that, for the subjected, a possible way to break this circle of subjection is to turn against their own bodies. A way to escape the 'cage of bones' (line 30), is to break 'these bones' (line 51). Thus, 'The circle game' hints at embracing death, Hegel's 'sovereign master' ([1807] 1949:237), as a way of breaking this circle of perpetual power imbalances.

In later collections, Atwood will continue to explore ways of navigating the power politics involved in the self–other dialectic and the framing of the subject in terms of an other. She also persists in expressing a deep mistrust in symbolic language. Ward writes that, to Atwood, language ‘becomes an instrument of control, of confinement, of deformation, and yet, paradoxically neither limitation nor liberation can be expressed except in language’ (1994:99). In a way, this is the circle game the poet finds herself in. However, numerous references to bridges in *The Circle Game* suggest a wish to cross over to a reality devoid of the restrictions of symbolic language. In ‘After the flood, we’ (p. 12), the speaker ‘walk[s] across the bridge / towards the safety of high ground’ (lines 5–6) and in the poem ‘In my ravines’ (pp. 19–20), old men and young boys sleep ‘under the bridges / of the city in [the speaker’s] (still) / ravines’ (lines 21–23). In this realm, similar to Kristeva’s semiotic, words ‘are as pointless / as calling in a vacant / wilderness’ (‘Journey to the interior’ [pp. 57–58], lines 38–40). It is a dangerous wish: submerging yourself into this space anterior to ordinary language brings with it the realization that ‘many have been here, but only / some have returned safely’ (‘Journey to the interior’, lines 32–33). Being on the bridge also implies facing the abject. The next chapter will further explore the subjected’s use of language tools, symbolic and poetic, to reconfigure his position in the power game.

Chapter 4

Crossing the border: the subjected's way out in 'Two-headed poems'

In Chapter 3, I read 'The circle game' as an example of a work where Atwood presents a subject that is constructed by means of a power relationship with an other. This chapter will consider possible ways of rising above the borders of subjection and the constricting fixed subject positions explored by Atwood by referring to her seventh collection, *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), a collection that is thematically comparable to *The Circle Game*.

Rigney (1987:3) shows that Atwood's characters are usually complicit in their own oppression. Cooley (1994), however, argues that Atwood's speakers are far from powerless as my reading of 'The circle game' in Chapter 3 suggests. Because of their access to symbolic language, which gives them 'verbal power' (Cooley, 1994:68), othered characters construct themselves and their (male) partners in a narrative space. They 'supervis[e] their own narratives' (Cooley, 1994:69). Because of language access, the distinction between Hegel's master and bondsman becomes blurred in Atwood's work. However, the threat of subjugation remains present. For this reason, one may expect to find tactics for overthrowing unequal power systems. Atwood sometimes expresses these strategies of escape in terms of maps and borders. Themes of continuous transformation³⁹ suggest physical and psychic mobility – strategies that problematize fixed subject positions. In poem 6 of the sequence 'Daybooks I' (pp. 27–33) in *Two-Headed Poems*, an 'old queen' (line 1) first needs to be transformed, by having her head chopped off, before she is given voice: 'After this transformation / she can sing' (lines 6–7). Part I of this chapter therefore briefly mentions that Atwood

³⁹ Nicholson (1994:24) writes that Atwood's worlds always suggest change. He writes of Atwood's 'mapping of the self in a world of words which will always privilege transformation'.

uses cartographic rhetorical strategies to navigate power relations. These strategies include writing the speaking body back into poetry in ways which correspond to Kristeva's writing the body back into psychoanalytic theory (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:xvii). Here the subjected fights with the master's weapons. However, as Part II of this chapter shows, Atwood mainly explores strategies that draw on what Nicholson terms 'alternative systems of signification' (1994:22) in *Two-Headed Poems*. Moreover, Atwood shows an interest in a kind of language that resembles Kristeva's poetic language and describes processes similar to the dialectic between her semiotic and symbolic orders. Here, the hope is to transcend the Hegelian dialectic.

I Strategies of escape: keep on moving

As was shown in Chapter 2, seeing that the rhetorical strategy of enclosure attempts to stabilize the subject's identity and works on the principle that a definable, stable subject can be understood and therefore controlled, continual mobility on the part of the subjected can be seen as a strategy of escape. In poem 5 of the sequence 'Daybooks I', the speaker proclaims 'I know // where I live and it is not / in this box' (lines 12–14). These lines allude to Atwood's fascination with the Sibyl,⁴⁰ but they also describe a subjectivity similar to Kristeva's subject-in-process and provide an alternative model to that of the traditionally autonomous masculine subject (Oliver, 1998:3). The cultivation of a subjectivity that is in process, and therefore difficult to define or pin down, keeps the subject psychologically mobile and counters the master's project.

The numerous journeys in Atwood mentioned by Mandel (1983:56), that can be seen as metaphors for the development of the subject, might therefore also suggest purposeful psychological movements similar to the processes suggested by Kristeva's

⁴⁰ Examples include 'A Sibyl' (in *The Circle Game*, p. 49), 'The Elysium Lifestyle Mansions' (in *Ovid Metamorphosed*, pp. 206–213), 'Bottle' (in *The Tent*, pp. 9–12) and 'Bottle II' (in *The Tent*, pp. 37–40).

subject-in-process. Borders do not physically contain occupants nor do they metaphorically enclose the fluidity of these occupants' subjectivities (Garuba, 2002:95). In the poem 'The woman makes peace with her faulty heart' (pp. 85–86), the speaker's heart is a vulture, a 'sly featherless bird' that 'would not be captured' (lines 15–16). She had been violently 'shoved' by her heart 'this far' (line 40). The cage of bones in 'The circle game' is found in this poem as well:

How many times have I told you:
The civilized world is a zoo,
not a jungle, stay in your cage.
And then the shouts
of blood, the rage as you threw yourself
against my ribs. (p. 85)

Attempting to break out of this cage is painful and violent. It is also the woman who inhibits her heart from breaking out: she tells it to stay in its cage (line 24). As always with Atwood, this fight against rigid subject positions has a flip side because the positions, like borders, supply meanings. If they were to betray each other, both the woman and the heart will perish: 'it's me for the urn, you for the jar' (line 47).

II A different language, a different subject

With the above cartographic strategies in *Two-Headed Poems*, Atwood is also interested in strategies that involve a language that Kristeva would call 'poetic'. In the title sequence as well as the poem 'The right hand fights the left' (pp. 57–58), Atwood conceives of a language that mirrors Kristeva's poetic language – a language that challenges notions of fixed subject positions and proposes a subject similar to Kristeva's subject-in-process. Furthermore, processes in 'The right hand fights the left' resemble the dialectic between the semiotic and symbolic orders, an interaction that brings forth signification and constitutes the subject (Kristeva, 1984:23–24).

'The right hand fights the left' describes a battle between a person's two hands. The left hand is 'soft and smaller' (line 18) than the right hand and my subsequent reading will associate this hand with the semiotic, while the right hand is stronger and made of metal (line 7) and will be taken to resemble the symbolic. In the first four stanzas, both hands enact language or signifying practices: the left hand sings (line 3); it has a voice that calls at sunset (lines 21–22); the right hand answers (line 4); kills and arranges nouns (line 8); makes lists (line 13); and moans in its sleep (line 37). The reader is told that the war between the hands has not been there from the start. The first two lines of the poem asks: 'Why should there be war? / Once there was none'. This information corresponds to a pre-symbolic state, a state before language, which Kristeva proposes prior to Oedipalization, in which the semiotic left hand set the pace. Stanza 2 reads: 'The left hand sang the rituals, / the right hand answered', suggesting the left hand led. It is significant that it is the feminine hand that used to set the pace because this detail corresponds to the focus being on the body of the mother before the child's leap towards the symbolic.

In the third stanza, the first word '[n]ow' indicates that a change in this relationship had taken place:

Now, the right hand dips down
into the chemicals of its own blood
and comes up metal. (p. 57)

The right hand's dipping down 'into the chemicals of its own blood' (line 6) suggests that this separation between the right and the left is intimately connected to the body and even present in the 'blood' of a pre-symbolic state. In contrast with Freud and Lacan, Kristeva argues that separation begins prior to the mirror or Oedipal stage and that parental threats, but also parental love help the infant enter the symbolic (Oliver, in Kristeva, 2002:xxi–xxii). A split between the symbolic and the semiotic would be

present in the 'blood' of the pre-symbolic state, however, the blood imagery would be nearer to the violent Oedipalization or entrance into the symbolic.

Stanza 4 develops the speaker's conception of the right hand. The stanza reads:

It arranges the nouns it has killed
in plaza windows,
it is odorless and dry,
it squeezes and apple plasma
drips from its fist.
It oils itself and makes lists
of its enemies, it swivels
on the wrist like a spy, a radar,
a tentacled silver eye. (p. 57)

The right hand has killed 'nouns' and now arranges these in the shop windows of plazas. Nouns name things and these window displays suggest that the right hand presents its victims of war as a kind of trophy or possibly a deterrent to those still alive. It is possible that Atwood uses 'plaza windows' to focus attention on the plaza – the place where executions usually took place. Nouns are also usually thought of as 'things' or objects. This detail points to the objectification that the right hand is responsible for, similar to the objectification of the other in the self–other dialectic. This hand is a violent, aggressive warrior. Its lack of odour and moisture signals its remove from the body – it is a 'metal' hand (line 7) – an image suggesting an iron fist. One associates this ruler with the law of the father. The right hand's killing of 'nouns' could suggest the symbolic order superimposing itself on the semiotic in order to enforce the law of the father. The right hand is patriarchal. It crushes an apple, signifying perhaps the obliteration of the organic, fruitful semiotic order. Atwood may also be alluding to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden where they had been 'one with God' before being banished from the garden for eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The right hand possesses the piercing eye of the father, the male gaze

of a phallic 'tentacled silver eye' (line 16). The act of seeing and power is reflected here in Atwood's use of a periscope-like 'silver eye' (line 16) to describe the stronger right hand that would pin down the left hand like the lover's gaze did to the speaker in poem iv of 'The circle game'. The father's gaze pins down the child in a gendered subject position. Also, the swivelling eye is a powerful image for the law of the father 'seeing to it' that the mother's body is renounced when the child enters the symbolic order.

However, the position in which Atwood casts the left hand is not that of a defenceless victim. The sixth and seventh stanza read:

It sleeps during the day
when the right hand is marching,
but that voice you heard at sunset
was the left hand calling:

Arise, O fingers
of the left hand, and outside, in a tangle
of liquid roots and the quick sprawl
of tendrils over the earth,
the forces of the left hand wake
to savage life. (pp. 57–58)

The left hand sleeps during the day, only to awake at dusk, an image which suggests an affinity with the darker forces of night and with the unconscious. The left hand has a voice and an army: its 'forces' 'wake / to savage life' (lines 27–28) when night falls. Unlike the 'dry' (line 10) right hand, these forces of the left wake 'in a tangle / of liquid roots' (lines 24–25), all images that tally with the womb-like *chora*. In contrast with the law of the father governing the right hand, the savagery of the left hand is similar to the *chora* not trying to create definite meanings or to signify (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:101), Stanza 10 gives a sense of the *chora's* regenerative, but also

annihilatory, regulation process (Kristeva, 1984:26): 'there is no winner, only joy / and no joy' (lines 41–42).

Although the hands are at war, there exist similarities between them: the 'tendrils' (line 26) of the left echo the tentacles of the right (line 16). Similar to the reciprocity established between the self and its other in Hegel's dialectic, there exists a reciprocity between the two different orders of Kristeva's model: the signifying process is indebted to both (Kristeva, 1984:24). This indebtedness is suggested in the last two lines of the poem: when the left hand's ritual requires slaughter, it is the right hand that carries the knife: 'The right hand holds the knife, / the left hand dances' (lines 45–46). Stanza 8 holds a further image of reciprocity: an owl hunts a mouse and in the process the mouse's blood becomes integrated with the owl's – the prey becomes part of the predator:

An owl strikes, and mouseblood becomes owl
blood, each fur stomach
extrudes a mouth, snails
rasp against leaves, in the hearts
of purple flowers moth-
eggs multiply, the feral darkness
flickers with cactus teeth. (p. 58)

The forces of the left hand, here represented by the nocturnal owl, with the multiplying moth-eggs as an image of fruitfulness, signify continuous regeneration that corresponds with that of the semiotic *chora* (Kristeva, 1984:16). The owl will eventually vomit out the pellet of hair and bone that grew 'mouths' in its stomach. The stomach is near the womb, which is a metaphor for the *chora*, the place in which the semiotic metaphorically sits (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:101). This vomiting is a strong image of the semiotic being given a voice – it has a mouth and 'cactus teeth' (line 35). The semiotic therefore spills over or erupts into the symbolic, threatening its signifying structures. It also signals the presence of the abject. This return to the pre-

symbolic, and by implication, to the body of the mother (which turned into the abject in order to force the infant to enter the symbolic) means facing the abject. The revulsion caused by coming into contact with the abject is typically expressed through vomiting (Semetsky, 2005:3).

In stanza 9, the right hand sleeps while the left hand gathers its forces. Still, it seems to be troubled unconsciously by the movements of the left: 'The right hand turns / in its sleep, moans / like a train, like a wrong turn, like a chain' (lines 36–38). The suggestion here is that the ghost of times past, when there was no war between the right and the left hand, is shaking its chains, reminding the right hand of the 'wrong turn' (line 38) it took when it 'chained' the left hand into slavery.

In stanza 11, day breaks, the left hand and its forces recede. The semiotic, which had overflowed the symbolic, is repressed: 'Dawn comes, and the right hand blasts / another tree from its burrow' (lines 43–44). The Tree of Knowledge is destroyed, and with it the knowledge of the power of the semiotic.

The poem sequence 'Two-headed poems' (pp. 59–74) further develops this idea of two modes whose dialectic is similar to the dialectic between the semiotic and symbolic. In these poems, Atwood describes a conversation between Siamese twins. The subject matter of the poem sequence is a literal extension of the self and its other found in 'The circle game'. The sequence comprises 11 poems. Even in the number of poems in the sequence one finds a twin: 1 and 1. Atwood opens with a 1954 advertisement for Siamese twins on display. Unlike identical twins, Siamese twins share the same body; often the same essential organs. The epigraph reads: 'Joined Head to Head, and still alive'. The dependence of the one twin on the other is therefore rooted much more closely to the realm of the body than the speaker and her lover in 'The circle game'

who were physically separate albeit emotionally intertwined. Atwood's choosing of Siamese twins rather than identical twins adds an element of the grotesque to the sequence and comments on the vulgarity of the power relationship between these two entities. The tension in the twins' shared body, as well as within the body of the poem sequence, suggests an imbalance in the distribution of power as well as a split subject. Atwood is interested in this split and the power play between the two sides such a split implies: in an afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) she writes that her reason for writing about Mrs Moodie is that she 'is divided down the middle'; Canada is also split: 'This country is something that must be chosen . . . and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality' (p. 62).

As is the case with 'The circle game', 'Two-headed poems' is an example of the playing out of power scenarios on different levels. The repetition of the word 'sometimes' in the opening tercet indicates that the poems will approach the twins' relationship from multiple angles. In the last stanza of poem iii, in which the different members of a family 'quarrel' (line 19) among themselves and discuss 'genealogies and the mortgage' (line 21) provides another example. Quarrelling about genealogies indicates that this is not a family, seeing that families generally know their family tree, but a group of people or a country. It is clear that the poems comment on relationships in different contexts: inter- as well as intrapersonal; those between nation-states; and those between the colonizer and the colonized. Similar to the lovers in 'The circle game', and to all other power relationships, the twins are trapped in a Hegelian relationship of master and bondsman that mirrors the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic orders as well as political relationships between territories: the self-other dialectic is present in its broadest sense, which leads McCombs (1988) to read the poem sequence as a commentary on the Canadian-

English versus Canadian–French language wars.⁴¹ She therefore extends the power scenario in the poems to include political relationships between groups.

Interestingly, although Atwood chooses twins as subject matter for the poems, the title reads ‘two-headed poems’, not ‘two-headed twins’. The title therefore implies that the disparate voices of the twins echo processes taking place in poetry. According to the tercet, the heads are speaking in *a* poem. Atwood’s use of the indefinite article signals perhaps that she finds these two voices in her other poems as well, or maybe even in all poems. Similar to the two hands in ‘The right hand fights the left’ (pp. 57–58), the two twins in ‘Two-headed poems’ correspond to Kristeva’s two sides of signification: the semiotic and the symbolic. In both instances both sides are needed to signify adequately and bring about subjectivity.

The tercet further prepares the reader for a complex speaker or speakers speaking in two voices: ‘The heads speak sometimes singly, sometimes / together, sometimes alternately within a poem’. The voices are locked in an uncomfortable relationship, and ‘[l]ike all Siamese twins, they dream of separation’. But separation will bring about death, seeing that the twins are joined ‘[h]ead to [h]ead’.

As was the case in ‘The right hand fights the left’, poem i of ‘Two-headed poems’ refers to a time prior to the strife between the ‘we’ and the ‘you’. Poem i begins:

⁴¹ McCombs identifies various references to these wars in the sequence and notes, for example: attempts to enforce bilingualism made by the federal Commissioner of Official Languages; attempts to purify Canada’s French made by the French; attempts to purge English from Quebec made by the Parti québécois; and attempts to rid the skies over Quebec of French by the English-speaking pilots and air traffic controllers (1988:155).

Well, we felt
we were almost getting somewhere
though how that place would differ
from where we've always been, we
couldn't tell you (p. 59)

The poem's landscape is typically post-disaster, brought about by a 'joke or major quake' (line 7), the 'joke' indicating a deeply ironic turn of events. *Two-Headed Poems* shares the dangerous, post-disaster landscapes⁴² of *The Circle Game* and these landscapes are once again linked to subjects' bodies. In 'Marsh, hawk' (pp. 87–88), for example, a mass grave 'spreads on the / land like a bruise' (lines 7–8).

After the disaster, 'everything' is 'falling south' into a 'dark pit' left after Cincinnati 'crumbled' (lines 8–11). During the American Civil War, Cincinnati was a border town between those states that allowed slavery and those that did not. Mentioning Cincinnati literally includes Hegel's master and bondsman in the poem sequence. The south–north positioning also has particular resonance for the America–Canada relationship. Atwood uses the term 'Southern Ontario Gothic', which she says is similar to Southern Gothic, in an interview (in Brans, [1982] 2006:82). The presence of the grotesque, which is a characteristic of Southern Gothic, in the form of the two-headed twins further complicates the pinpointing of the two 'sides', seeing that the poems ironically use a style of writing associated with the South to critique slavery.

The poem communicates the collapse of civil society that had been constructed by symbolic language as well as by skewed relationships of power. In the aftermath of the disaster, one finds 'pieces of bureaucrats, used / bumper stickers, public names / returnable as bottles' (lines 13–15). The disintegration leads to economic

⁴² In the first poem, 'Burned space' (p. 9), a forest fire 'twists the green / eternal into singed grey' (lines 11–12).

disempowerment in the collapse of family businesses: 'So much for the family business. / It was too small anyway / to be, as they say, viable' (lines 24–25), a viewpoint that echoes in poem xi when the larger entity smugly remarks that 'no one can sing' in this other language, while he stands with 'one hand / in [his] small-change pocket' (lines 1–3), withholding his small change from those whom he addresses.⁴³

The collapse is of an identity that was constituted via language: after words were 'stockpil[ed]' in a 'cellar', people could be referred to this repository of identity: 'Anyone asked us who we were, we said / just look down there' (lines 22–23). The loss or destruction of this language dissolves the subject into 'thin air' (line 33). Atwood's framing of the situation implies that language is cast as the other in a Hegelian dialectic. If the mirror of the other is made empty, the self is lost. The poem continues:

But we weren't expecting this,
the death of shoes, fingers
dissolving from our hands,
atrophy of the tongue,
the empty mirror,
the sudden change
from ice to thin air. (p. 60)

In the last stanza the speakers realize the cost of the loss of language, of the words they have been 'stockpiling' (line 19). It is functional that these words have been stored in a cellar, a dark enclosure similar to Kristeva's *chora*, indicating that there is an order anterior to symbolic language containing language that contributes to the forming of the subject. Without the reciprocal relationship between the secret language of the semiotic and the societal language of the symbolic, signification or

⁴³ McCombs's reading takes the crumbling of the family business in lines 24–26 to suggest the hitherto-privileged English Canadians of Montreal (1988:154).

meaning is impossible – identity disappears into ‘thin air’ (line 33). Atwood’s use of the empty mirror reminds one of the Lacanian mirror stage necessary for identity formation or self-representation, impossible for the symbolic self without the semiotic which, because of its role in subject formation, functions as the other of symbolic language.

In poem ii (p. 61), the north and its use of language is contrasted with the south:

‘Those south of us are lavish / with their syllables. They scatter, we / hoard’ begins the poem. This hoarding mentality comes from the realization in poem i that the identity of the north is constituted by these collected shards of meaning. In poem i, the reader was told that ‘[o]ur fragments made us’ (line 16). The poem suggests a fissure between entities, between a ‘we’ and a ‘they’, possibly between Canada and the United States whilst equating words with people: ‘words, hearts, what’s / the difference?’ (lines 5–6).⁴⁴ Here, as in poem iii (p. 62), Canada is shown to be the common and disgruntled neighbour of the USA, trying to be polite and proper (lines 7–10), although it finds itself in an economically weaker position, similar to the speakers in poem i. Atwood uses wordplay on the words ‘free market’ in lines 11–13: ‘Sneering is good for you / when someone else has cornered / the tree market’. This reference to trees picks up a line from ‘The right hand fights the left’ that tells how the stronger right hand ‘blasts / another tree from its burrow’ (lines 43–44). In this poem, as in ‘The right hand fights the left’, the tree as symbol of knowledge of semiotic processes, has been taken from the subjected. The poem ends with a veiled threat, presumably coming from the south: ‘those who take risks / have accidents’ (lines 16–17), in other words, do not risk

⁴⁴ McCombs reads ‘Two-headed poems’ as showing the development of a Canadian nationalist consciousness and points to the Canadas’ defining themselves by first defining Americans in the first three lines of poem ii (1988:154).

questioning the status quo of the current power relation nor try to gain access to the semiotic.

The 'you' of poem iii is described in the same terms as the family around the dinner table one finds in poem iv of 'The circle game' (*The Circle Game*, pp. 41–42). At first, 'you' seem like 'one / big happy family' (lines 1–2):

We think of you as one
big happy family, sitting around
an old pine table, trading
in-jokes, hospitable to strangers
who come from far enough away. (p. 62)

The prominent placing of the words 'one' at the end of line 1 and the image of the 'happy family' (line 2) sitting around a table strengthen the apparent cohesiveness of this family, although this stanza already hints at cracks within this unit: the 'trading' of 'in-jokes' (lines 3–4), which suggests multiple parties bartering as if at a market, strengthens the economic implications of the sequence. Language is a form of currency: in-jokes are traded. These private jokes also imply the ability of language to exclude those who are not familiar with its codes or contexts. The family is friendly towards strangers 'who come from far enough away' (line 5), but ironically view their neighbours with contempt: 'As for us, we're the neighbours, / we're the folks whose taste / in fences and pink iron lawn flamingoes / you don't admire' (lines 6–9).

In poem iv (p. 63) an investigator, who 'proclaim[s] his own necessity' (line 2), 'has come to clean your heart' (line 3). In the parenthetical stanza 4, the speaker suggests the violent purging that his investigations will bring about: '(Expurgation: purge. / To purge is to clean, / also to kill.)'. It seems as if the investigator would be examining 'hearts' to see whether they are 'pure white' (line 4) or have been 'dirtied' or 'infected' by blood. Hearts filled with blood are likened to the use of words, presumably

employed to tell of a history that has been 'written in bones only' (line 13) up to now. These hearts break the silence that had been 'mistaken for no flag' and 'peace' (lines 15–16) according to the last stanza. The bloodied hearts is a different kind of narrator or commentator on history than there had been in the past, and the investigator wants to censor their commentary. In staccato lines, as if the investigator is barking orders, he instructs in stanza 3: 'Stop this heart! / Cut this word from this mouth. / Cut this mouth'.

In poem v (pp. 63–64), processes analogous to Kristeva's two modalities are most obvious. The power relationship between two nations is transferred to the realm of signification. Stanza 3 expresses the speakers' desire to revert back to a pre-symbolic 'language':

We wanted to describe the snow,
the snow here, at the corner
of the house and orchard
in a language so precise
and secret it was not even
a code, it was snow,
there could be no translation. (p. 64)

McCombs takes this reference to a secret language to mean 'the newly articulate, noisily politicized québécois intelligentsia' (1988:155). However, the language Atwood writes about is 'not even / a code' (lines 16–17). It is therefore difficult to believe the Quebecois intelligentsia would choose to 'speak' in a mode that fights against signification: for without a code of shared meaning, signification is not possible. In stanza 2, the speakers mention 'a certain loss' (line 11) which they mentioned when talking about a 'certain light' (line 6) – this is the loss of signification as well. What the speakers desire here is the reactivation of the semiotic, its 'meanings' not translatable into language, by the 'heterogeneousness' of poetic

language (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:101). What they are looking for is the (Tree of) knowledge of the semiotic.

This 'secret language' (line 16) is similar to a 'native language' which, Atwood is quoted as saying, 'does not separate things into fixed objects, but lets them flow within their matrix', a concept that, Atwood says, is 'not even translatable in English' (McCombs, 1988:159). I take this secret language to mean the language of the semiotic, where linguistic energies are not governed by the law of the symbolic. This language becomes visible when the semiotic overflows into the symbolic during activities such as the writing of poetry. The process in stanza 4 is similar to the poet attempting to invoke the semiotic:

To save this language
we needed echoes,
we needed to push back
the other words, the coarse ones
spreading themselves everywhere
like thighs or starlings. (p. 64)

In the first stanza, the speakers had questioned their desire for a politicized dialectic ('Is this what we wanted, / this politics' [lines 1–2]) which had turned out to be an oversimplification suggested by the 'flattened' (line 3) hearts, hearts having been likened to words in poem iv. As in *The Circle Game*, Atwood used flat images to signal the loss of any deep understanding. In this stanza, however, the 'want' for a dialectic as well as for a secret language in stanza 3 ('We *wanted* to describe the snow' [line 12, my stress]) is subtly turned into a need by repeating the phrase 'we needed' (line 20) in line 21. In order to activate poetic language, the 'coarse' (line 22) words from the language of the symbolic (which corresponds to the symbolic metal hand in 'The right hand fights the left' [pp. 57–58] that spread itself like 'radar' [line 15] or the gaze of a 'tentacled silver eye' [line 16]) must be 'push[ed] back' (line 21).

However, in stanza 5 there is once again a move away from poetic language. As in poem iv (which tells of the investigator's violent response to the hearts' outspoken retelling of their history and asserting their own consciousness) the speakers in poem iv do not want to settle for 'discarded / crusts and torn underwear' (lines 25–26). In the semiotic–symbolic model, 'discarded crusts' would mean the language of the semiotic which had been moved to the periphery and is kept there by the symbolic order perceiving it as worthless. The torn underwear might imply a violent sexual encounter, but can also be an image of poetic language, which is seated in the womb-like *chora*, tearing through the defences of the symbolic and bubbling over into the language of the symbolic.

Kristeva suggests that this overflow, this poetic language, has the ability to bring about societal change (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:94). Gorjup calls it a 'language capable of metamorphosis, of fostering social change and growth' (2006:141). The last two stanzas of poem v show that a complete suppression of the semiotic in favour of the symbolic disempowers language:

Our hearts are flags now,
they wave at the end of each
machine we can stick them on.
Anyone can understand them. (p. 64)

Similar to the pop-out flag of a toy gun that says 'Boom!', the speakers' hearts, likened to words, cannot change anything precisely because '[a]nyone can understand them' (line 31). Here, language is code and differs from the 'secret language' in stanza 3. Like all languages, these words are useful only for the following:

They inspire pride,
they inspire slogans and tunes
you can dance to, they are redder than ever. (p. 64)

A seemingly patriotic statement is undermined by the frivolous 'tunes / you can dance to' (lines 33–34). These are not the rituals sang by the semiotic left hand in 'The right hand fights the left', but the purposelessness of dancing to the same tune. The 'hearts' or words that are now 'redder than ever' do not only suggest that language indoctrinates with 'slogans' (line 33) that are dangerous (the colour red signals bloodshed), but can also mean that the words are red with shame because they could not change anything.

Poem vi (pp. 65–66) demonstrates the heterogeneity of poetic language: the speakers ask whether 'the sun // burns itself slowly out no matter / what you say' (lines 2–4). '[I]s that / so?' (lines 4–5) they ask and then give a scenario where a man is buried up to his neck in a desert. In an indented stanza mimicking the burial visually, the speakers use a technique similar to free word association to transform the sun from 'whitehot' (line 6) to having ice on it (line 9). The churning out of the words matches up yet again with the regulatory processes of the *chora* (Kristeva, 1984:26):

Close your eyes now, see:
red sun, black sun, ordinary
sun, sunshine, sun-
king, sunlight soap, the sun
is an egg, a lemon, a pale eye,
a lion, sun
on the beach, ice on the sun. (p. 65)

The paradox of the semiotic order meaning everything and nothing is found in the first line, where the 'you' is asked to close his/her eyes in order to see. McCombs reads the poem as a call for a 'Jaynesian return to the oracular right hemisphere of the mind' (1988:156).⁴⁵ She explains that the truths of the oracular right hemisphere are able to transcend the antagonistic nationalisms of the two Canadas. Furthermore,

⁴⁵ By 'Jaynesian', McCombs refers to Julian Jaynes's *Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976).

McCombs sees the 'sun-spelling' of stanza 3 as a kind of invocation, what Jaynes would call an 'induced possession' (McCombs, 1988:156). She explains that Jaynes theorized that 'under rationalism, the right-brain god-voices are no longer heard spontaneously; the oracles are vestigial and must be induced'. Thus, in the middle poem, this sun-spelling invokes the right-brain oracle. If the delirious man 'up to his neck in whitehot desert / sand' (line 6) were to invoke the oracular god-voices of the right hemisphere with his sun-spelling or incantation, the language he would bring forth would be a 'wet & living' language (line 12). This is the overflowing of the semiotic into the symbolic that takes place during delirium.

The language that 'hangs around your neck' in stanza 6, is the language mentioned in the two last stanzas of poem v – the restricting rhetoric of the symbolic:

Your language hangs around your neck,
a noose, a heavy necklace;
each word is empire,
each word is vampire and mother. (p. 66)

The image of the vampire that sucks out blood corresponds to the investigator in poem iv who cleans hearts or words 'dirtied' by blood, in other words, linked to the body and to the semiotic order. Stanza 6 establishes the duplicity of language: although each word is vampire, it is mother as well. Thus, although this ungoverned language of the semiotic could supply moisture and life to the man buried in the desert, it is destructive as well.

The sequence progresses to poem vii (pp. 67–68), which gives further evidence that Atwood is using the contrasting voices of the twins to explore a semiotic–symbolic dialectic taking place in poetry. In this poem, the speakers tell of their 'leader', the two-headed poem that operates like a 'Siamese twin' (line 27): 'Our leader / is a man of water / with a tinfoil skin' (lines 1–3). Whilst being a comment on spineless

political leaders, this is also a powerful image for the semiotic nature of poetry that nevertheless needs to be expressed in the words of the symbolic. The leader's body made up of water is a strong reference to the unconscious semiotic processes that must be harnessed and contained in poetic form for poetry to be written. The symbolic is once again likened to metal – it is the metallic right hand of 'The right hand fights the left', but here the symbolic is thin tinfoil, implying that it may rupture and bring forth poetic language at any moment.

The two-headed poem speaks with two voices. Interestingly, it is the voices causing it to have two heads, not the other way around: 'He has two voices, / therefore two heads' (lines 4–5), which highlights Kristeva's theory that a theory of language implies a theory of subjectivity. It is the duplicity of semiotic–symbolic signification that transforms or splits the poem creature and gives rise to the split subject Atwood writes about in her book on writing and being a writer, *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002).

Atwood uses the image of a spider that 'traps words' (lines 9–10). Spiders have proved successful images to describe poetry and the spinning of stories for other writers.⁴⁶ Unlike the 'wet & living' mouths in poem vi, line 12, the leader's mouth devours the words: 'They shrivel in his mouth, / he leaves the skins' (lines 11–12). Like a corrupt politician, the poem hopes to satisfy his own wishes: 'Most leaders speak / for themselves, then / for the other people' (lines 13–15). Similar to the paper charm the speaker makes for her grandmother in poem iv of the sequence 'Five poems for grandmothers' (pp. 34–41) 'which is good / for exactly nothing' (lines 37–38), the speech of the leader in poem vii is shown to be useless for bringing about change.

⁴⁶ Walt Whitman's 'A noiseless patient spider' and Emily Dickinson's 'A spider sewed at night' are other examples.

Line 16 asks: 'Who does our leader speak for?' What follows is the core of the poem's dilemma: 'How can you use two languages / and mean what you say in both?' (lines 17–18). This is the paradox of poetry: how does a poem express the poetic language of the semiotic in symbolic form?

The semiotic and symbolic are held responsible for the dialectic in poetry and for the split in the subject who is constructed by language. Stanza 6 reads:

No wonder our leader scuttles
sideways, melts in hot weather,
corrodes in the sea, reflects
light like a mirror,
splits our faces, our wishes,
is bitter. (p. 68)

Included in this stanza, is the reoccurring images and ideas of the mirror of the subject in the other but also of the flat surface without deep meaning that has been present since *The Circle Game*. The empty mirror in the first poem now shows a split of the speakers' faces. Language as other is absent in the first poem and therefore no subjectivity is possible. Here, however, language is shown to be split, leading to a split in the speakers' 'faces' (line 23) underscoring Kristeva's suggestion that a language theory is essentially a theory about the subject. Crab-like movements, here demonstrated by the leader, is shown to be a 'sound routine / for staying alive on edges', lines 16–17 of 'Landcrab I' (p. 12) in Atwood's next collection, *True Stories* (1981). The edge is the Kristevan abject and approaching it would be incestuous (Kristeva, [1975] 2002:104): a breaking of Lacan's law of the father. The suggestion here is that poetry moves towards the edge, towards the abjectival 'place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva, [1980] 2002:230), and then, crab-like, withdraws again.

Poem vii further admits that the two-headed monster was created by the speakers. Like a Frankensteinian creature, it was 'sewn from dead soldiers' (line 26). The words used to create the poem are loaded, these same words have been used by corrupt politicians to indoctrinate with the slogans in poem v, to subjugate and to make war: 'each word is empire' states line 20 in poem vi. 'Why should we complain?' begins the last stanza of poem vii: 'He is ours and us, / we made him'. Similar to the complicity implied in the Hegelian bondsman's subjection, the speakers admit that the two-headed poem is their creation.

Poem viii (p. 69) is the first poem in the sequence where a singular 'I' speaks. The split in subjectivity, visible in the mirror of poem vii, now makes it possible for one twin to address its other. Like in 'The circle game', it seems that the more intimate the two parties' relationship, the harsher the power game: 'If I were a foreigner, as you say, / instead of your second head, / you would be more polite' (lines 1–3). Like the seemingly petty politics between neighbours in poem iii, poem viii shows that these two parties are not foreigners, instead they are 'the pressure / on the inside of the skull' (lines 10–11). They share a way of thinking, a consciousness, as they share a skull. The 'grudging love' (line 13) and 'old hatreds' (line 14) in poem viii echo the 'ancient rage' (line 34) in the poem 'In my ravines' (*The Circle Game*, pp. 19–20) that alludes to the Oedipus story. The constituting of a subjectivity via a power relation is yet again underscored. The speaker asks in the last lines of the poem: 'Why fear the knife / that could sever us, unless / it would cut not skin but brain?' The twins are caught up in a power relation that would kill them if they were to break it.

Similar to the leader of poem vii being a self-made creation, poem ix (pp. 69–70) makes it clear that you cannot use language without being complicit in its historic uses. The second-last stanza reads:

These words are yours,
though you never said them,
you never heard them, history
breeds death but if you kill
it you kill yourself. (p. 70)

The poem personifies words and recites their deaths in a way similar to the naming rhyme 'This little piggy went to market'. Language, hanging like a noose or 'heavy necklace' around a neck in poem vi, lines 18–19, 'choked' (line 7) a word in the second stanza of poem ix. Other words were deported (line 9), buried (line 11) and dropped into a lake (line 14). However, according to the speaker, '[n]othing stays under / forever' (lines 21–22). Buried history and the suppressed consciousness it implies cannot be buried forever, seeing that they form a subjectivity – killing it off would be to kill off the self.

The battle for power reaches its climax in poem x (pp. 71–72). Like the likening of words to hearts in poem iv, the hearts offered to the 'you' in the first stanza make the speakers' hands 'sticky with adjectives' (line 4). The hearts on both sides 'hold snipers' (line 11). The strife which lies at the core of language is ignored: 'we refuse / to believe the secrets of our hearts' (lines 24–25), while language is still seen to be 'virtuous' and 'plump with goodwill' (lines 28–30). Atwood uses the past tense to show that the language wars had already taken place and the landscape of the sequence is post-war:

(Smoke and broken leaves, up close
what a mess, wet red glass
in the zinnia border,
Don't let it come to this, we said
before it did.) (p. 72)

The natural disaster in poem i is now a manmade disaster and the situation the speakers find themselves in, is generic. The reader is told that on the evening news the speakers 'listen to the war, the wars, / any old war' (lines 34–35).

The last poem of the sequence, poem xi (pp. 73–74), offers a double language, similar to the poem 'The right hand fights the left'. A hard language, force-fed down the speakers' throats in stanza 3, is contrasted with a language which 'rises liquid' (line 27) in song. In the first stanza, the speakers report a man's reaction to their language: 'Surely in your language / no one can sing, he said, one hand / in the small-change pocket' (lines 1–3). The man seems to equate economical power with cultural superiority. He argues that the speakers' language is only good 'for ordering / the slaughter and gutting of hogs, / for counting stacks of cans' (lines 4–6). 'Leave / the soul to us', he remarks in line 7–8.

The image of cages in stanza 3 calls up the 'cage of bones' in poem vii of 'The circle game' (pp. 42–44), a fixed subject position in which the woman speaker is entrapped by her lover's gaze. It also reminds the reader of the glass cage spun by the children in the same poem which suggested the ability of symbolic language to embody archaic tools of subjection, itself being such a tool. Poem ix of 'Two-headed poems' interrogates the accountability of contemporary speakers of a language to its historical misuses. In stanza 3 of poem xi, the speakers compare themselves to geese being force-fed, their 'feet nailed to the floor' (line 10). The metallic language from 'The right hand fights the left' is present here in the nails keeping the geese from moving,⁴⁷ fixing them in a similar place than that of the woman in 'The circle game', who was fixed into a subject position by the 'cold blue thumbtacks' (line 45) of her lover's gaze

⁴⁷ In *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002:30–31) Atwood uses a similar image to talk about a split in the psyche of the author.

in poem iv (*The Circle Game*, pp. 39–40). The speakers 'are forced with nouns, nouns, / till our tongues are sullen and rubbery' (lines 12–13). In poem iv of 'The circle game', the lover memorizes proper nouns to keep 'places / in their proper places' (lines 30–31). These words however, fix subjectivities: they 'slow us, stumble / in us, numb us' (poem xi of 'Two-headed poems', lines 19–20). In sharp contrast to these nouns and the fixed subjectivities the act of naming imply, is the speakers' desire for 'verbs' (line 26), which suggests process and movement and by implication a subject-in-process: 'Our dreams though / are of freedom, a hunger / for verbs, a song / which rises liquid and effortless' (lines 24–27). A reconciliation with the semiotic, whose 'liquid roots' ('The right hand fights the left', pp. 57–58, line 25) lie metaphorically in the amniotic fluid of the *chora*, is embedded in poem xi in the speakers' wish for '[their] double, gliding beside [them]' (line 28). The speakers seem to believe this reunion between the two languages will enable them to glide 'over all these rivers, borders, / over ice or clouds' (lines 29–30). Atwood will not reduce their complex power relation to a simple opposition: in stanza 3, language is said to be the disease as well as the cure: 'We see this language always / and merely as a disease / of the mouth. Also / as the hospital that will cure us, / distasteful but necessary' (lines 14–18). The poem offers another 'dream' or possibility to transcend this war: that of being 'mute' (line 31), with its implication of death, the termination of the subject also present in 'The circle game'.

Atwood brings the sequence to a cynical close: dreams of a reconciliation between these two forces 'are not bargains, / they settle nothing' (lines 32–33). The two parties remain trapped in the power relation of the circle game singing a different kind of song than they had wished for in line 26:

This is not a debate
but a duet
with two deaf singers. (p. 74)

The last lines make the power play that much more tragic: both the master and the bondsman operate within a system that created them and which is bigger than the sum of its parts. Instead of offering a language similar to poetic language as a solution for the subjected, 'Two-headed poems' suggests an intriguing possibility: there are two voices here, and both can sing. The melody will be off-key, seeing that the two parties cannot hear each other. However, the jarring nature of the song disturbs the perceived harmony, the 'laws' of the music. This disturbance or flux undermines the status quo and holds the promise of change. In his overview of Atwood's poetry, Gorjup (2006:142) suggests that any sense of wholeness in Atwood only comes in later collections. He writes that the poem 'After Heraclitus' in the collection *Interlunar* (1978) 'draws on that Greek philosopher's view of the universe as a place of ceaseless change, where opposites are harmonized through the creative energy symbolized by fire'. He calls the title poem from *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) 'a great metamorphic gesture through which Atwood dissolves barriers, synthesizes contradictions, resolves paradoxes, and collapses time and space' (Gorjup, 2006:143). Atwood's two-headed poems might find this pop-psychology 'closure' too clean-cut. What one does find in 'Two-headed poems' rather, is the subjected's uneasy use of symbolic language to negotiate relationships of power and her wish for poetic language to transcend these relationships.

Conclusion

On the cover of *Power Politics* (1971), Atwood's fifth collection of poems, a woman dangles upside down, her one ankle tied to the wrist of a knight in full armour. The woman is wrapped in ribbon, like a mummy, with hair, like roots, touching the ground. The ribbon might be bandages – is she hurt? The obvious battle of the sexes aside, this cover can be read as a graphic depiction of the two languages in 'The right hand fights the left' from *Two-Headed Poems*. The knight is completely covered in armour while the woman seems rather



defenceless. The cover resembles a tarot card, a conflation between the Hanged Man from the major arcana and one of the Knight cards from the minor arcana. However, Atwood knows that reversals, tarot cards that fall upside down, change the meaning of the cards. Although in lines 13–16 of 'My beautiful wooden leader' (in *Power Politics*, p. 7) the speaker says: 'you hold me by the left ankle / so that my head brushes the ground, / my eyes are blinded, my hair fills with white ribbons', the woman on the cover sees while the knight is blinded by his visor. The knight might also be in a considerable amount of discomfort. Somacarrera (2006:46) points to the pain the dangling woman is causing the knight's wrist and interprets her upside down posture as *sirshasana*, a yoga posture that focuses the mind.

The cover reinforces what Atwood's poems have been suggesting all along. Despite her simple slogan – 'Politics . . . is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom' (quoted by Brans [1982] 2006:87) – subjectivity and subjection are complex, unstable concepts. In the poetry, Atwood's subjects renounce fixed subject positions in favour of a subjectivity similar to Kristeva's subject-in-process – a woman can switch places with the Hanged Man as on the cover. Although subjects are constituted 'in primary vulnerability' (Butler, 1997:20), Atwood maintains that this does not redeem the subjugation of individuals and peoples, indeed, in the words of Butler, 'it makes all the more clear how fundamental the vulnerability can be' (Butler, 1997:20).

The chosen poems in Chapters 3 and 4 expose the nature of the power relationships that shape the subject and govern his/her relationship with the other. The relationships are complicated – it is never a black-and-white affair only and people get hurt – but the cards may turn at any point. Many subjects, who appear to be subjugated, have access to means which could, in turn, be used to subjugate. The presence of a mode in language, referred to in the poems, which is similar to Kristeva's semiotic order, and the possibility of poetic language to rupture into the symbolic and bring about societal change, indicate that what is needed to fight the abuses of power may be available to all speaking subjects. While both parties in the Hegelian dialectic dream of freedom, the breaking of the circle game seems possible by the saying of an unknown word. The possibility of using the knowledge of poetic language to step out of the borders of the cards that were dealt you is Atwood's preoccupation.

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