Natural Imagery in Margaret Atwood's Recent Poetry

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood's concern for nature, the earth and its species as well as for environmental topics has always populated her fiction and poetry. My aim in the present essay is to explore how Atwood represents nature in a selection of poems from her more recent poetry volumes (*Morning in the Burned House*, 1995; *The Door*, 2007; *Dearly*, 2020). Some poems in these collections attest to her concern for the environment, its degradation and poisoning. Others represent apocalyptic environmental relationships as well as themes of natural renewal as an effort to deal with human mortality and vulnerability. We also find poems where nature is presented as a commodity, as a repository of necessary knowledge or as a mythical resting place. Metamorphosis and change play essential roles both in human life and in the natural world, and figure prominently in the selected poems.
Keywords: Nature, imagery, environment, apocalypse, renewal, metamorphosis

Imágenes de la naturaleza en la poesía reciente de Margaret Atwood

Resumen: El interés de Margaret Atwood por la naturaleza, el planeta, y sus especies ha sido una constante en su ficción y poesía. El objetivo de este ensayo es explorar cómo Atwood representa la naturaleza en una selección de poemas de sus poemarios más recientes (*Morning in the Burned House*, 1995; *The Door*, 2007; *Dearly*, 2020). Algunos poemas en estas colecciones confirman su preocupación por la degradación y contaminación del entorno, mientras que otros abordan relaciones medioambientales apocalípticas además de temas como la renovación natural para afrontar la mortalidad y vulnerabilidad humanas. También hallamos poemas donde la naturaleza se representa como un bien de consumo, un repositorio de conocimiento imprescindible o un lugar mítico donde yacer después de la muerte. La metamorfosis y el cambio desempeñan papeles esenciales tanto en la vida humana como en el mundo natural y figuran de manera prominente en los poemas analizados.
Palabras clave: Naturaleza, imágenes, medio ambiente, apocalipsis, renovación, metamorfosis.

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's obsession with the interconnection between human beings and our natural environment has been pivotal since the publication of her first poetry collections (*Double Persephone* 1962, *The Circle Game*, 1966). In her well-known poem "This is a Photograph of Me" (*TCG*), "the representation of landscape possesses apocalyptic

overtones where the speaker occupies a liminal space -there but not there-" (Waltonen x),

> In the background there is a lake,
> and beyond that, some low hills.
>
> (The photograph was taken
> the day after I drowned.
>
> I am in the lake, in the center
> of the picture, just under the surface. ...) (ll.13-18)

Frank Gorjup argues that "the photograph of 'me' is the photograph of a landscape" (Gorjup 134). As Waltonen notes, the speaker in "After the Flood We" (*TCG*) shares that sense of natural destruction by wondering if someone else has survived a flood (x).

The collection *The Animals in that Country* (1968) includes several poems which relate environmental issues to more comprehensive philosophical concerns. Both the title poem "The Animals in that Country" and "The Festival" focus on the cultural contextualizations of animals, which Lothar Hönnighausen reads "in contrast to the sophisticated rituals of fox hunting in Britain or bull-fighting in Spain, the speaker in those poems describes how the deaths of animals in Canada occur as banal road accidents" (100). "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," an early poem about the Canadian wilderness, represents nature as a fluid and unconfined entity, conveying the white man's fear of being devoured by the vastness of an unknown space (see Gorjup 132). The documents describing borders and walls that endow him with the possession of the wild land become useless when the wilderness surrounds him, and highlight the disconnected relationship he/we have with the natural world (see Maxwell 8). For Charlotte Beyer, this poem "recreates the destructive consequences of human attempts to dominate nature and control what we fear or do not understand" (283).

The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970) and *Procedures for Underground* (1970) both place emphasis on the power of landscape to shape the human mind. In the first volume, Atwood recreates the voice of Canada's most famous woman pioneer, Susanna Moodie. Gorjup claims that the poetic persona, a fictional Susanna Moodie, embodies the tensions between the civilized world she has left and the chaotic and unpredictable Canadian

wilderness she has entered (136). The titles of the opening poems in *Procedures for Underground*, "Dream: Bluejay or Archeopteryx," "The Small Cabin," "Two Gardens," "The Shrunken Forest," "Midwinter, Presolstice" reveal a similar setting to that of Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, a northern Quebec bush. According to Shannon Hengen, speakers in these poems struggle to accept that we all exist between nature and culture, and that we can escape neither (Hengen, "Atwood and Environmentalism" 76).

"Spring Poem" (*You Are Happy*, 1974) articulates the potential for rebirth after personal and environmental disaster, as Lauren Maxwell has pointed out (2). In "Marsh, Hawk" (*Two-Headed Poems*, 1978), the speaker tries to understand the voice of a degraded natural environment. This poem anticipates the inscrutability of the languages of nature developed in "Marsh Languages," written almost twenty years later (*Morning in the Burned House*, 1995). In *True Stories* (1981), Atwood uses the cycles of nature in "Vultures" and "Mushrooms" as metaphors for human behaviour. The poems "Bluejays," "Damside," and "Blue Dwarfs" depict nature as a refuge and consolation for the speaker who is suffering because of her partner's illness. "High Summer" reimagines the natural world in existential terms, as a mysterious other that resists appropriation and domestication (see Jarraway 280). And, according to Hengen, the poems "The Burned House" and "A Blazed Trail", from *Interlunar* (1984), continue with the theme of nature's very slow but very certain power to self-renew ("Atwood and Environmentalism" 77).

My aim in the present essay is to explore and discuss how Atwood approaches and represents nature and the environment in a selection of poems from her last three poetry collections *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), *The Door* (2007) and *Dearly* (2021). To this end, my theoretical background involves Sherrill Grace's concept of "violent duality" in her definition of Atwood's aesthetics, as well as Gorjup's ideas on the presence of oppositional forces in Atwood's poetry, such as civilization and nature, male and female, self and other, subject and object (130-131). Gorjup refers to Atwood's poetic world as protean and fluid, governed by principles of uncertainty and accident as well as cause and effect, where previous dualities can be transcended and the gap that separates the self from the natural world can be closed (132). Hengen also insists on the play of contrasts and contrasting imagery that identifies Atwood's poetry.

According to Hengen, in a number of Atwood's poems, the presence of elements from the natural world such as stones, trees or the moon seem apart from the human field of language, lust, murder, love. Humans appear unable to understand the natural world as both different from and part of themselves, which leads to the destruction of the human and natural worlds ("Strange Visions" 43). Building on previous reflections on Atwood's play of contrasts and opposed imagery, this discussion will demonstrate how a duality between apocalyptic environmental relationships and themes of survival and rebirth operates in nature. Atwood's interest in apocalypse can be traced back to her earliest works, such as *The Circle Game* (1966) and *The Animals in that Country* (1968). Critic Karma Waltonen describes several definitions of apocalypse, which range from an extinction level event to end times (end of a civilization, population, world, time, relationship or individual time). She also mentions that the oldest definition, a religious one, is of revelation, that is, truth revealed in a time of darkness (Waltonen x). This inconvenient truth is evident in Atwood's poems addressing environmental destruction, climate change and the extinction of species. Some of these apocalyptic overtones participate of Atwood's fascination with mortality. In her 2002 essay *Negotiating with the Dead*, she states that "*all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality -by the desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring back something or someone back from the dead." (156, emphasis in original). But, like the title of one of her early poems, "After the Flood We," after her downward journey to extinction, and the death of species, air and trees, Atwood recovers nature's own power and its constant cycles of death and renewal which offer a promise of eternal rebirth. Rebirth is linked to survival, a prevalent topic in Atwood's writing and in Canadian literature more broadly. In fact, *Survival*, published in 1972 is the title of Atwood's foundational work on Canadian literature. A key feature of both rebirth and survival is metamorphosis. Then the apocalyptic scenario gives way to nature presented as refuge for the living and mythical resting place for the dead. The wonders of the natural world offer consolation and may strengthen our sense of environmental belonging positively. Atwood does not romanticise nature as merely a passive refuge; instead she acknowledges its complexities and occasional harshness. This dynamic understanding of nature as both beautiful and indifferent pushes readers to confront their place within the larger ecosystem, ultimately fostering a deeper connection and appreciation for the environment.

2. *Morning in the Burned House* (1995)

Aging, male-female relationships, reflections on death, dramatic monologues spoken by women of myth, legend and popular culture (Ava Gardner, Manet's Olympia, Helen of Troy, Daphne) appear in this poetry collection. We also find elegiac compositions where Atwood evokes the figure of her recently departed father (the entomologist Carl Atwood deceased in 1993), often depicting him outdoors, in a natural landscape. Other poems delve into the deterioration of the natural world and into nature's perpetual cycle of death and life.

In "Marsh Languages", Atwood explores the presence of a pre-patriarchal, pre-colonisation "mother tongue," as well as the possibility of imagining languages which are linked to the feminine and to the natural world. The poem starts with a crisis scenario in which those languages are threatened, possibly by environmental degradation,

> The dark soft languages are being silenced
> Mothertongue Mothertongue Mothertongue
> falling one by one back into the moon (ll. 1-3)

The speaker anthropomorphizes nature by attributing it linguistic abilities, but implies that this linguistic vitality and diversity are at risk of being lost. The cells present in the vegetation of marshes and in the roots of rushes are in a constant process of replication till the "pathways of hidden light in the body fade and wink out" (l. 9). This progression can be interpreted as an anticipation of biological death,

> Languages of marshes,
> language of the roots of rushes tangled
> together in the ooze,
> marrow cells twinning themselves
> inside the warm core of the bone:
> pathways of hidden light in the body fade and wink out.
> (ll. 4-9)

The poetic voice evokes emotive connections between humans and non-human matter by parallelling the materiality of the earth with the materiality of human bodies. The natural, non-human world finds expression in language, and different matters speak different languages: "languages of marshes" (l. 4), "language of the roots" (l. 5), "the cave

languages" (l. 11), "The languages of the dying suns" (l. 19). According to Meredith Minister, by ascribing speech and emotion to non-human entities, the poem constructs a dynamic image of matter that possesses potential beyond human agency (18).

The vocabulary of stanzas one to four foreshadows an impending apocalypse in which vitality is removed from matter, "silenced" (l.1), "fade," "wink out" (l. 9), "lost syllable" (l. 14), "no longer/heard" (ll. 15-16), "no longer spoken" (l.16), "ceased to exist" (l. 18), "dying" (l. 20).

> Language of marshes,
> language of the roots of rushes tangled
> together in the ooze,
> marrow cells twinning themselves
> inside the warm core of the bone:
> pathways of hidden light in the body fade and wink out.
>
> The sibilants and gutturals,
> the cave language, the half-light
> forming at the back of the throat,
> the mouth's damp velvet moulding
> the lost syllable for 'I' that did not mean separate,
> all are becoming sounds no longer
> heard because no longer spoken,
> and everything that could once be said in them has
> ceased to exist. (ll. 4-18)

Matter must speak in order to mean and, if it ceases to speak, it will cease to exist. Speech is not just a logically and grammatically correct sequence of words but it involves cherishing, farewell and longing,

> The languages of the dying suns
> are themselves dying,
> but even the word for this has been forgotten.
> The mouth against skin, vivid and fading,
> can no longer speak both cherishing and farewell.
> It is now only a mouth, only skin.
> There is no more longing. (ll. 19-25).

Lines 22-24, "The mouth against the skin, vivid and fading,/can no longer speak both cherishing and farewell./It is now only a mouth, only

skin" illustrate the dissociation of language from matter and demonstrate the deadliness of the human agent who has attempted to deny the vitality of matter and has destroyed it in the process (Minister 18). By refusing to recognize the life and value inherent in the natural world, we contribute to its degradation, and ultimately, to our own loss. This dissociation feels familiar in a world where environmental devastation is often a result of human detachment from nature's vitality.

The fifth stanza changes into short, dry and hard lines, as it depicts the devastation derived from the silencing of the languages of biodiversity, of the natural world: the impossibility of translation (Beyer 294), "the one language that has eaten all others." (l. 32), because translation, as Tegan Zimmerman states (348), involves recognising and respecting the other, in this case, the languages of nature. Military terms such as "conquest" (l. 28) and "metal" (l. 30) insinuate violence against nature. Only the human agent and the human language survive. Translation did not exist because it involves equivalence and the speaker mentions "conquest", (ll. 27-28), that is to say, the subjugation of one language to the other,

> Translation was never possible.
> Instead there was only
> conquest, the influx
> of the language of hard nouns,
> the language of metal,
> the language of either/or,
> the one language that has eaten all others. (ll. 26-32)

The "sibilants and gutturals" (l. 10), the "mothertongue" (l. 2) and "the lost syllable for "I" that did not mean separate" (l. 14); these organic images that provided "a sense of fluidity and of the connectedness of all beings," as Beyer notes (294), have dissolved into the unified discourse of the hard nouns, the language of metal and the binary language of either/or. The poem anticipates an apocalypse stemming from human interactions with the natural world. But, according to Minister, attributing agency to matter may stop this future apocalypse. The world can reorganise in unexpected ways. By assigning linguistic agency to matter ("Language of marshes/language of the roots of rushes tangled", ll. 4-5), the poem challenges anthropocentric discourses that either presuppose human control over nature or that humans bear the responsibility of paternalistically caring for nature (Minister 19).

"The Ottawa River by Night" is one of the elegiac poems devoted to Atwood's father included in this volume. The opening line evokes a nocturnal dreamscape, "In the full moon you dream more" (l. 1), and then the poetic persona introduces the father figure within the context of death. She recalls two factual episodes in her life (ll. 4, 11). The first one describes a canoeing accident where children died, which anticipates the father's death,

> In the full moon you dream more.
> I know where I am: the Ottawa River
> far up, where the dam goes across.
> Once, midstorm, in the wide cold water
> upstream, two long canoes full
> of children tipped, and they all held hands
> and sang till the chill reached their hearts. (ll. 4-7)

This canoeing accident contrasts with the speaker's own canoe trip with her father along a lake (ll. 11-19). Images of the father on a canoe accumulate till the final part of the poem when the father rows in a boat towards the sea before disappearing,

> Once, my father
> and I paddled seven miles
> along a lake near here
> at night, with the trees like a pelt of dark
> hackles, and the waves hardly moving.
> In the moonlight the way ahead was clear
> and obscure both. I was twenty
> and impatient to ge there, thinking
> such a thing existed. (ll. 11-19)

The natural landscape appears as threatening, "(…) trees like a pelt of dark/hackles, and the waves hardly moving." (ll.14-15). The lake's dead calm contrasts with the young woman's impatience, "(…) I was twenty/ and impatient to get there, (…)". (ll. 17-18). In the third stanza the speaker returns to the dream vision that foresees her father's death. He is paddling his canoe surrounded by man-made structures and a natural landscape,

> (...) Just the thick square-
> edged shape of the dam, and eastward

> the hills of sawdust from the mill, gleaming as white
> as dunes. To the left, stillness; to the right,
> the swirling foam of rapids
> over sharp rocks and snags; and below that, my father,
> moving away downstream
> in his boat, so skilfully
> although dead, I remember now; but no longer as old. (ll. 21-29)

The sea is the father's final destination, but, according to Janice Fiamengo (159), an unbridgeable gap has opened between the real sea and the "other sea" (l. 34),

> (...) He's heading eventually
> to the sea. Not the real one, with its sick whales
> and oil slicks, but the other sea, where there can still be
> safe arrivals. (...) (ll. 32-35).

Two unacceptable losses are alluded to in the previous lines, that of the speaker's father and the human destruction of the natural world. This is represented in the image of a polluted seas with "sick whales" and "oil slicks", as Fiamengo has noted (159). However, the speaker imagines her father as the energetic and skilfull person he once was. He is not old anymore. The father's restored energy and agency identifies him with "the swirling foam of rapids" (l. 25).

> the swirling foam of rapids
> over sharp rocks and snags; and below that, my father,
> moving away downstream
> in his boat, so skilfully
> although dead, I remember now; but no longer as old. (ll. 25-29)

In the face of death, he has overcome passivity and is in control of his final voyage, as Sara Jamieson has pointed out (60). The paradisal "other sea" (l. 34) of "safe arrivals" (l. 35) serves as a resting place for the father, who becomes an integral part of it.

In the final stanza, the speaker wakes up from the dream and can still hear the distant sound of the sea waves on a beach and a figure (her father) striding along the shore,

> Only a dream, I think, waking
> to the sound of nothing.
> Not nothing. I heard: it was a beach, or shore,
> and someone far off, walking (ll. 36-39)

Jamieson (61) affirms that the the sound of the father's footsteps walking on the shore echoes John Milton's lament for the absent body of Lycidas, which "the shores and sounding seas/Wash far away" (ll. 154-155), however, in the present poem, the father is not the passive victim of the water. On the contrary, his agency and dynamism are highlighted. The entire poem is marked by the duality of life and death, the contrast between dreamlike and real landscapes, the dream world and reality, the idealised middle-aged father figure and the absent old, sick father; the reality of a polluted sea and the "other sea" as a mythic resting place where the father figure can rest in peace.

The first lines of "Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona" convey strong images of environmental degradation, "The river's been here, violent, right here where we're standing,/you can tell by the trash caught overhead in the trees" (ll. 1-2). After a flood, a tiny desert river remains, in the middle of a devastated landscape. This place is presented as a locus of death, the speaker standing in trash (l. 2) (see Van Spanckeren 113). The initial picture of desolation, flood and destruction contrasts with the energy of a red flycatcher, highlighted by the juxtaposition of present tense verbs, "A vermilion/flycatcher darts down, flutters up, perches." (ll. 4-5). The bird is indifferent to violence, devastation or death. Its dynamism possesses a magic quality, foregrounded by words such as "tranced" and "conjures" in "He's filled with joy/and the tranced rage of sex. How he conjures," (ll. 7-9).

I agree with Kathryn Van Spanckeren's view that the name "flycatcher" echoes the word "corpses" (113) and that its red color evokes blood, anticipating an upcoming violent death mentioned in the following stanza. The bird has been attracted by the dense weeds and sings despite or because of death. The corpse's "brown/or white skin" contrasts with the vermilion bird and the lack of water reinforces this place as a locus of death. The man's brown or white color symbolises the anonymous deaths of so many South American immigrants who try to cross the Mexico-United States border. The image of "vanished water," like the man's vanished dreams, reinforces this place as a death locus,

(...) Everything bad you can imagine
is happening somewhere else, or happened
here, a hundred years of centuries
ago. He sings, and there's the murder:
you see it, forming under
the shimmering air, a man with brown
or white skin lying reversed
in the vanished water, a spear
or bullet in his back. At the ford, where the deer
come at dusk to cross and drink
and be ambushed. The red bird
is sitting on the same tree, intensely
bright in the sun that gleams on cruelty, on broken
skullbone, arrow, spur. Vultures cluster,
he doesn't care. He and his other-coloured mate
ignore everything but their own rapture.
Birds never dream, being their own. (ll. 10-27)

Like the phoenix, the vermilion flycatcher flutters up over a waste land, completely indifferent to desolation and death, and acting according to his own instincts. The bird suggests rebirth, and the denial of an environmental apocalypsis. It remains enigmatic ("Who knows what they remember? Birds never dream, being their own./Dreams, I mean. ...") (ll. 26-28), like the figure of the dead father in the previous poem, "The Ottawa River by Night". The final lines revisit the image of the river as locus of death and violence, "(...) As for you, the river/ that isn't there is the same one/ you could drown in, face down." (ll. 28-30), where the expression "Face down" functions as a counterpoint image of the dead man in lines 15-17, who lied "reversed". In this poem, the landscape is linked to apocalyptic images of desolation, dryness and death, as well as to images of life and rebirth.

3. *The Door* (2007)

This volume includes poems written between 1997 and 2007. Its poetic language articulates loss and acceptance rather than struggle. Among the most prevalent topics we encounter the author's repeated attention to childhood memories, the figures of her parents, reflections on death, as well as environmental poems.

"Reindeer Moss on Granite" celebrates the beauty, and richness of even the humblest natural things, such as reindeer moss. The speaker highlights its quiet potential for expression, revealing nature's ability to communicate in subtle, intricate ways:

> This is a tiny language,
> smaller than Gallic;
> when you have your boots on
> you scarcely see it. (ll. 1-4)

The human agent does not destroy nature, but becomes the patient witness who carefully appreciates the synonyms in the language of nature "A dry scorched dialect/with many words for holding on," (ll. 5-6). This merging of language and bodies is life-giving and opposes the death-dealing dissolution of language and bodies in "Marsh Languages," where the poetic persona referred to the human/nature binary.

Both poems share similar vocabulary (language, words, mouths, syllable), but in "Reindeer Moss on Granite", the speaker links the round syllables "*o*", "*o*" (l. 14) uttered by reindeer moss to the "dumbfounded/ eyes of minnows" (l. 15), thus associating sounds with shapes, and emphasizing the potential of nature to produce visual and sound messages. The poem shows the inadequacy of modes of language that assume either a domineering or paternalistic relation of humans to nature.

> In the final lines,
> Thousands of spores, of rumours
> inflitrating the fissures,
> moving unnoticed into
> the ponderous is of the boulder,
> breaking down rock. (ll. 16-20)

The key to arrest environmental degradation is to remain as respectful witnesses and listeners to "spores" which are presented in form of linguistic agents ("rumours") whose powerful impact on other natural elements is alien to human intervention. The sequence of gerunds ("infiltrating," "moving," "breaking") highlights their independent actions.

"Bear Lament" insists on some of Atwood's environmental worries by referring to the degradation of the living conditions of bears. The

apocalyptic overtones intensify as the poem unfolds, emphasizing the connection between natural disasters and personal loss and crisis. The poem opens with the mythic figure of a bear, and the speaker's fantasy to inhabit its body as a form of refuge and consolation against the burdens of life. The apparently naive speaker projects a benevolent vision of the bear, "(...) Let you enter /into its cold wise ice bear secret / house, as in old stories. (...)" (ll. 8-10), longing for its strength, "(...) its big paw / big paw big paw big paw" (ll. 4-5), which reveals his/her intimate wish to find a safe haven in nature,

> You once believed if you could only
> crawl inside a bear, its fat and fur,
> lick it with its stubby tongue, take on
> its ancient shape, its big paw
> big paw big paw big paw
> heavy-footed plod that keeps
> the worldwide earthwork solid, this would
> save you, in a crisis. Let you enter
> into its cold wise ice bear secret
> house, as in old stories. In a desperate
> pinch. That it would share
> its furry winter dreamtime, insulate
> you anyway from all the sharp and lethal
> shrapnel in the air, and then the other million
> cuts and words and fumes
> and viruses and blades. But no,
> not any more. I saw a bear last year,
> against the sky, a white one,
> rearing up with something of its former
> heft. But it was thin as ribs
> and growing thinner. Snuffing the brand-new
> absences of rightful food
> it tastes as ripped-out barren space
> erased of meaning. So, scant
> comfort there. (ll. 1-25)

The repetition of "paw" echoes "pa," the shortened version of the word "papa," evoking the speaker's desire for the protection symbolised by totem animals, such as the bear in indigenous tales, where they serve as spiritual guides and guardians. Although the speaker desires to be

saved/safe in the bear and with the patriarch of the family, she concludes that bears in those stories no longer exist, and father figures no longer protect, and maybe they never did.

In the first two stanzas, the poetic voice is a "you" which simultaneously includes both the reader and the speaker, as is typical in most poems by Atwood, whereas the third one opens with an "I". The change of pronoun in the poetic voice emphasizes the transition from wishful thinking, dreams and tales in the initial stanzas, to the reality of skinny bears in the third one, "it was thin as ribs/and growing thinner" (ll. 20-21). The bear is placed in a desolate landscape deprived of food or water, without life, "Sniffing the brand-new/absences of rightful food/ it tastes as ripped-out barren space" (ll. 21-23), consequence of human intervention as suggested by the expression "ripped-out" (23). This human desert is different from the natural desertic area mentioned in the poem "Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona," which is a dry place, not a waste land, and where life emerges in the form of a red bird.

The restlessness experienced by the poetic persona concludes with several disturbing questions in the final lines, revealing his/her anxiety,

> Oh bear, what now?
> And will the ground
> still hold? And how
> much longer? (ll. 26-29)

The degradation of the natural world is linked to a feeling of personal alienation and crisis. The poetic voice has evolved from an inclusive "you" to a realistic "I" now witness to a potential environmental disaster; from the fairy tale world where bears offered comfort and wisdom to the possibility of their extinction. These animals represent the otherness of nature whose once-intimate connections with human beings have grown tenuous, thus severing its potential for regeneration and rebirth.

4. *Dearly* (2020)

Atwood's more recent poetry collection features a diverse range of poems, both in form and tone, often with the playful language, social commentary, detachment, irony and humour that characterise her poetic

work. Atwood deals with the passing of time, and the painful loss of a loved one, her long-time companion Graeme Gibson, as Montassine argues (109). Other poems continue her exploration of the impact of language on our representation of reality. The relationships between human beings and the environment, the wonders of the natural world, the way other creatures, even the humblest ones, form connections and communicate also appear as relevant topics. By shedding light on darkness around us, this poetry collection insists that loss, both in the human and environmental sense, makes what is most dear more apparent. The effects of what might be lost if we do not cultivate a sense of environmental belonging become prevalent.

The poem "Aflame" starts with the image of a world in flames. Part of the first line alludes to an ecological catastrophe, "The world's burning up." (...), (l. 1), which is immediately discarded by the sharp and colloquial conclusion of that initial line, "(...) It always did." (l. 1). Images of heat and burning, together with black and grey colors populate the rest of the stanza,

> Lightning would strike, the resin
> in the conifers explode, the black peat smoulder,
> greying bones glow slowly, and the fallen leaves
> turn brown and writhe, like paper
> held to candle. It's the scent of autumn, (ll. 2-5)

The speaker describes nature's regular cycles of death and renewal, and uses the pronoun "you" to persuade the reader to side with it, "(...) It's the scent of autumn,/oxidation: you can smell it on your skin,/that sunburn perfume." (ll. 6-8).

The second stanza recreates children's apocalyptic stories, full of fires, matches, smoke, fake volcanoes. There was always something burning in their "ardent stories" (l. 13), even "marshmallows on fire on purpose" (17). Children play with fire and enjoy its promises of adventure and entertainment, as far as it remains a harmless pastime.

The poem ends with the poetic persona regretting that those innocent recreations of a world in flames have come true, "(...) All those yarns/ of charred apocalypse concocted/back when we played with matches-" (ll. 10-12). The apocalyptic stories they sealed in bottles and threw into

the sea as part of a game (ll. 21-22) have broken the "lead seals" (24) and emerged in a monstruous way. But, why complain, if, ironically, the speaker states that their childhood reverie of smoke, fire, burning and volcanoes has materialised. They, we, all of us, are experiencing the apocalyptic scenario we never thought could abandon the symbolic realm of tales, children's games or messages in bottles,

> We had to know
> how such tales really end:
> and why.
> They end in flames. (ll. 28-31)

The painful repetition of line 28, "We had to know" insists on our condition as fake victims of a world in flames. Playing with fire is never innocent, and inevitably, we must confront and cope with its consequences. The use of the pronoun "we" highlights our common responsibility. The dream of flames engenders monsters, the monsters of a devastated environment where the flames, candles and ardent stories of our childhood have become more real than ever.

"Feather" offers a more benign connection between the speaker and the natural world. The poetic voice reflects on the handfuls of feathers that fall on her "quasi-lawn!" (l. 5) and wonders why they are there. We find associations with writing ("calligraphy of wrecked wings", l. 7) and a new reading of the myth of Icarus, "remains of a god that melted/ too near the moon." (ll. 8-9). These "wrecked wings" seem to anticipate what we can read in the fourth and fifth stanzas, that "Every life is a failure//at the last hour,/the hour of dried blood. (ll. 12-14). These lines depict a downfall heading to the ground and to death, no matter how high flyers we once were, birds or persons. However, the speaker is saved by her intimate belief in nature's powers for renewal and rebirth. Instead of indulging herself/himself on the fragments of a bird, instead of hunting birds, he/she "hunted for ink" (l. 18) and decided to use one of the feathers for a creative activity, that of writing a poem,

> (...) I picked up one plume from the slaughter,
> sharpened and split the quill,
> hunted for ink,
> and drew this poem
> with you, dead bird.

With your spent flight,
with your fading panic,
with your eye spiralling down,
with your night. (ll. 16-24)

The use of the anaphora "With your" and the syntactic parallelism in the final four lines accentuate the contrast between the dead bird and the vitality infused by the poet. The remains of the bird do not represent death or decadence anymore, but are endowed with the potential for life, the life of art. As we read in lines 15 and 16, "But nothing, we like to think,// is wasted, (...)", the speaker has been able to resurrect the bird's "spent life" (l. 21). From the ashes of its "fading panic" (l. 22), and its "eye spiralling down" (l. 23), a new phoenix emerges, symbolising the neverending cycle of life and death in nature.

"Short Takes on Wolves" presents four playful vignettes about wild creatures as commodities available to be consumed by twenty-first century men and women. The poem is divided into four "takes", similar to cinematographic sections in a film. In an ironic and didactic tone, the poetic persona explains details about wolves to an ignorant audience, treating them like simpletons, as when he/she says "A wolf in pain/admits nothing" (l. 1), "You can't go far with a ripped foot:/among wolves, no doctors. (ll. 6-7), "A wolf is courteous up to a point." (l. 8)

"Take iii" opens with a string of imperatives the speaker/teacher delivers to a passive crowd who want to see a wolf in its natural habitat, "Sit in the dark. Keep quiet." (l. 12) Ecological and sophisticated people hate zoos as disgusting locations, but wish to observe wolves without taking risks, without all those dead hours nature photographers must spend in hiding to obtain the perfect take. These spectators are in a hurry, and have paid to see a wolf in the wilderness, but / yet the wolf shies away from contact with people, "You want to see the wolf/or demand your money back,/but the wolf doesn't want to see you." (ll. 17-19).

"Take iv" establishes a duality between wolves' nightmares and dreams. The former are populated by hard metal elements that prefigure violence and death ("cars," "long needles," and "iron muzzles"). Wolves are prisoners in "cramped cages with hard bars" (l. 23) where the smell of humans repels their nostrils. The last stanza, that of wolves' dreams, relates to open spaces ("endless taiga," l. 25), freedom, dens

instead of man-made cages as well as the tender bones of caribous. The commodification of nature and wild creatures produces monstruous situations and limits humans' respect for the natural world.

The long poem "Plasticene Suite" is composed of nine sections dealing with environmental degradation derived from the abuse of plastic materials. We are going to discuss sections 1 and 7, "Rock-like Object on Beach" and "Whales." The noun "plasticene" has been invented after some geological eras such as Paleocene, Eocene, Miocene and Pleistocene. Which name would suit our age best but "the Plasticene"? (l. 3)? Ours is the age of plastic. The first stanza presents a littany of the earth's geological eras, "The Paleocene the Eocene/the Miocene the Pleistocene"/and now we're here: the Plasticene." (ll. 1-3). The poetic voice evolves from neutrality to a colloquial and ironic tone everybody can share, "and now we're here: the Plasticene." (l. 3).

The speaker is walking along a beach and paying attention to all the stones on the sand. She seems to be talking to herself and to anybody, in a persistent colloquial tone. Among the natural remains, she detects something she cannot identify at first sight. It does not belong to the rocks he/she has enumerated so far, "It's black and striped and slippery,/ not exactly rock/and not not." (ll. 7-9). It is described in the following stanza as "Petrified oil, with a vein of scarlet,/part of a bucket maybe." (ll.11-12). The last two stanzas imagine a future where humans have become extinct and a new race of aliens colonize the earth. Again, the poetic persona ironizes over plastic objects being fossils of our transit in this world. In the final stanza, some rhetorical questions condense the lights and shadows of the human condition: our intelligence, wit and vanity can lead us to a premature death. The word "puzzle" (l. 14) evokes what an external observer may feel when reflecting on human relationships with the environment,

> When we are gone and the aliens come
> to puzzle out our fossils:
> will this be evidence?
>
> Of us: of our too-brief history,
> our cleverness, our thoughtlessness,
> our sudden death? (ll. 16-18)

Section 7, "Whales," shares the self-questioning attitude and colloquial tone of the previous section. The speaker, a collective "we" describes a scene in a TV documentary where a mother whale carries a dead baby whale for several days, its death caused by "toxic plastic." The key lines in the poem are "how did we do this by just living/in the normal way" (ll. 10-11). The normal person who is a good citizen and just leads a normal life, "cutting our way to our food/through the layer by layer that/keeps it fresher" (16-18). The poetic persona even defends this way of life, considering how plastic has contributed to human survival, "What happened before?/How did we ever survive/with only paper and glass and tin" (ll. 18-20). However, those layers of normality and plastic film prove lethal for the environment.

A sense of guilt is voiced in the sixth stanza, but with the hypocrisy of the TV witness. The lines that opened the poem, "Everyone cried when they saw it/in the square blue sea of the TV:/so big and sad" (ll. 1-3) are evoked again, "But now there's a dead whale/right there on the screen:/so big and sad (ll. 22-24). This ecological disaster leads to an apparently firm statement about action, "something must be done" (l. 25). However, the final stanza exemplifies the contradictions and the fake promises we use to deceive ourselves, "It will be! Will it be?/Will we decide to, finally?" (ll. 26-27). The use of the future tense reveals that we have already seen this movie and that we tend to underestimate our participation in ecological disaster. The collective speaker seems to involve everybody but maybe what is necessary is a strong individual action. When everybody is guilty, nobody really is.

In "Oh Children," the poetic persona builds an apocalyptic poem by posing questions to an audience of children. The repetition of the phrase "Oh children, will you grow up in a world without...?" (ll. 1, 13, 21), and the anaphoric lines "Will there be (..)? convey the speakers' fears and restlessness about the disappearance of the natural world he/she has been familiar with. The questions and the answers are simple but terrifying in their simplicity. A world without birds, crickets, pines or mosses, ice, mice or lichens. A world with waves, stones and dust. This vanishing open world of nature gives way to an apocalyptic scenario of "a sealed cave with an oxygen line," (l. 16), as the setting for these children's future lives, "Will your eyes blank out like the eggwhite eyes/of sunless fish?/In there, what will you wish for? (ll. 18-20). The words "blank,"

"eggwhite," and "sunless" echo the "world without" previously mentioned in the poem. In this context, the answer to "what will you wish for?" (l. 20) would be "nothing" and nothing is linked to the idea of blankness.

The growing suspense and crescendo articulated in the poem through the juxtaposition of unanswered questions is left unresolved in the final line/question, "Oh children, will you grow up?" (l. 23). We experience the uneasiness concerning the real threat of life's extinction and the faint hope of a future generation of responsible people who are more sensitive towards the environment.

"Blackberries," the last poem in this collection, possesses an intimate and hopeful tone. The poetic persona introduces an old woman who "is picking blackberries in the shade" (ll.2). This activity connects the woman, the speaker and the addressees with the wonders of the natural world. Nature is generous, because, as mentioned in the second stanza, a diversity of living creatures benefit from berries, squirrels and bears among them. But we humans can also taste them without remorse, with the pleasure of ephemeral things,

> Some go into the metal bowl.
> Those are for you, so you may taste them
> just for a moment.
> That's good times: one little sweetness
> after another, then quickly gone (ll. 7-11)

In the third and fourth stanzas, the poetic persona reveals that the old woman of the beginning is herself. The memory of her grandmother and mother establishes a genealogy of women repeating this action of picking blackberries. This reinforces their sense of environmental belonging and strengthens their family links as members of different generations of the same family. But, who will continue with this activity?

The speaker addresses a "you" who is enigmatic and ambiguous, her son/daughter, any of us? We are all invited to participate but the poetic voice is not sure whether this privilege of picking blackberries will be preserved maybe because of a premature death or because of the degradation of nature,

> Once, this old woman
> I'm conjuring up for you

would have been my grandmother.
Today it's me.
Years from now it might be you,
if you're quite lucky. (ll. 12-17)

The speaker insists on the generosity of nature, and the fascination for the wonders of the natural world in the last two stanzas. Now the metal bowl is full of berries which resemble the glass ornaments of Christmas trees. The simile "The blackberries gleam like glass" (l. 27), and the alliteration of the sound "gl" evoke an image of blackberries as precious stones. If glass ornaments hang on Christmas trees as a sign of gratitude for snow, berries are a natural treasure we should thank nature for.

In the last two lines, an old person shares her knowledge about nature's hidden treasures with the new generations, "It's as I always told you:/ the best ones grow in shadow" (ll. 33-34).

5. Conclusions

Despite the political dimension of Margaret Atwood's concerns on environmentalism and the degradation of the natural world (Hengen, "Atwood and Environmentalism" 84), she remains a conscientious poet, never neglectful with language. The author displays a wide range of poetic tones, spanning from intimacy to detachment, from irony to humor and parody. Atwood's literary personae are troubled by doubt more than by tragedy, and do not indulge in victimisation (Hengen "Strange Visions"; Gorjup 139; Perrakis 351-353). Also, her poetic voice frequently addresses a "you," which may speak directly to the reader or include both the speaker and the reader.

The discussion and analysis of the previous poems confirm my initial hypothesis about the duality in Atwood's nature poems between pessimistic environmental relationships and survival and renewal. "Marsh Languages", "The Ottawa River by Night," "Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona" (*Morning in the Burned House*, 1995), combine apocalyptic overtones about the disappearance of biodiversity and the languages of nature with oneiric visions of the author's father in a natural landscape after his death, which appears as a mythical resting place, offering consolation against human pain. In

contrast to this, some creatures, particularly birds, symbolise nature's potential for rebirth after an ecological disaster.

"Reindeer Moss on Granite" and "Bear Lament" (*The Door*, 2007) also exemplify Atwood's dual perception of nature. The first poem celebrates the languages of nature which human beings should respect in order to strengthen their connection with the natural world, whereas the second, in a pessimistic tone, establishes a link between the extinction of species and personal crisis in order to portray a gloomy picture of our planet's future.

The duality of nature poems in *Dearly* (2020), Atwood's latest poetry collection to date, reveals both a sense of urgency and desperation in the face of the loss of natural landscapes and animals and a belief in human potential to counter that ominous scenario. A sarcastic poetic voice announces impending ecological catastrophes ("Aflame," "Plasticene Suite," "Oh Children"), and poses many unanswered questions about the future of human beings and the earth. However, pessimism does not prevail and poems like "Feathers" and "Blackberries" confirm a positive connection between the speaker and the natural world, and highlight the neverending cycle of life and death in nature. The poetic persona's faith in nature's regenerative powers is reinforced by a sense of awe at the wonders of the natural world, no matter how modest those are.

In sum, Atwood's nature poetry reflects a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between human existence and the environment. While her warnings of environmental degradation and species extinction may seem bleak, they are always tempered by hope -an acknowledgement of nature's capacity for rebirth, even in the face of destruction. This tension between despair and optimism is what makes Atwood's nature poetry so compelling, inviting readers to not only reflect on the state of the world but to also consider their place within it. By blending political urgency with poetic intimacy, Atwood offers a nuanced perspective that resonates far beyond environmental activism, reminding us of the enduring power of both nature and the written word to inspire change and renewal.

Notes

[1] According to Charlotte Beyer, "the poem explores the possibility of imagining languages and modes of being which precede patriarchy and western civilisation" (2000, 294). In that sense, the languages the poem mentions are linked to the feminine and to the natural world.

[2] In most of her novels, Atwood challenges numerous discourses that perpetuate the oppression of women, while, with irony and humour, also addressing women's self-victimisation. This theme is explored in *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* (1981) and *The Robber Bride* (1993).

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