Mourning in the Burned House: Margaret Atwood and the Modern Elegy

by Sara Jamieson

On January 5, 1993, Margaret Atwood's father died following a long illness (Cooke 311). Carl Atwood is commemorated by his daughter in a sequence of twelve poems which form section IV of her 1995 collection, *Morning in the Burned House*. The sequence juxtaposes Atwood's loosely chronological account of her father's final paralyzing illness and death with her memories of him as a younger man, and with a series of dreams which make evident her struggle to come to terms with her loss. These moving, spare, deceptively simple poems collectively offer the most extended example to date of the increasingly elegiac nature of Atwood's later work. Numerous critics have commented on the awareness of mortality and loss that pervades the whole collection,[1] an "elegiac mood" (112) which Karen Stein traces back to previous collections such as *Two-Headed Poems* (1978) and *Interlunar* (1984). Similarly, Patricia Merivale speaks of the "strikingly elegiac nature" (256) of a number of the prose-poems in *Good Bones* (1992).[2] These critics tend to use the term "elegiac" in a very general sense, applying it to a diverse group of poems, all of which meditate to some degree on mortality, death, or some more unspecified loss. None examines in any detail the manner in which Atwood engages with a tradition of elegiac poetry, or approaches specific conventions of the genre. Nor do they explore how Atwood's elegies might be read within the context of recent discussions of how contemporary poets reinterpret this highly traditional form, or in light of feminist investigations of how women elegists respond to an overwhelmingly masculine genre which marginalizes and silences the feminine.[3] Indeed, while Merivale discusses Atwood's incorporation of "highly revisionist generic clichés" into her poetic reflections on art and gender (254-55), she excludes the elegiac poems from this classification. Drawing on a familiar conception of death as the site of

our universal humanity, she argues for the "ultimately nongendered focus of Atwood's elegies" (264).

To approach Atwood's elegies for her father in this way would be to underestimate their complexity. Not only do these poems engage with a canonical, predominantly male tradition of pastoral elegy, but they also share affinities with a tradition of domestic elegies often associated particularly with women poets.[4] While the title poem is not part of the sequence, the title itself indicates this mixed heritage: the devastated house signifies a family in mourning, while the breaking of the new day is an image of consolation familiar from pastoral elegy.[5] By blending these varied sources so seamlessly, Atwood calls attention to the boundaries that have existed between them, with women's domestic elegies forming a "subordinate and largely ridiculed [. . .] tradition" that continues to be excluded from groupings of canonical elegies (Zeiger 62). More than any other species of domestic elegy, the daughter's lament for her father foregrounds her ambivalent relation to what has been called the "resolutely patriarchal genre" of pastoral elegy (Schenck 13).

The ambivalence of Atwood's elegies is initially hard to detect, partly because these poems almost entirely lack the bitterness and hostility which characterize the elegies of some of the century's most prominent daughter-poets.[6] In Atwood's elegies, her attitude toward her father is generally loving and recuperative, but it is not without its moments of private conflict. Similarly, she emphasizes the continuities between her poems and the elegiac tradition, but she does not do so unproblematically. I will argue that through her ambivalent inclusion of some of the conventions of pastoral elegy, Atwood addresses the difficulties involved in working in a genre which has traditionally precluded feminine subjectivity, as well as the challenge of writing consoling memorial poetry from within a secular, materialistic society in which death is seldom discussed in public. She confronts the apparent disjunction between her vocation and her cultural surroundings by placing special emphasis on those conventions which foreground the elegist as self-conscious artist. In this way, she amplifies the kinds of questions about the practice and purpose of poetry that are built into the genre, continuing its traditional scrutiny of "the whole nature and value of poetic art" (Smith 11). While Atwood exploits the elegy's preoccupation with the poet's calling in order to assert herself in the genre, this emphasis also communicates her troubled recognition of its oppor-

tunistic, reductive aspects, as she repeatedly exposes the way in which her focus on the production and reception of her poetic voice inevitably effaces the dead man whom she is ostensibly honouring.

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As a daughter's elegies for her father, these poems belong to a distinct tradition within the sub-genre of the domestic elegy. Jahan Ramazani traces the developments in this tradition over the past three and a half centuries, beginning with Anne Bradstreet's encomiastic tribute, "To the Memory of my Dear and Ever Honoured Father Thomas Dudley Esq." (1678). He argues that women's parental elegies continue to exemplify Bradstreet's attitude of "respectful homage, submissive lament, [and] grateful inheritance" (295) with little substantial variation until post World War II poets Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich radically revise the form with searingly direct expressions of anti-patriarchal resentment, bitterness, and rage. Finally, he offers a reading of Amy Clampitt's "Beethoven, Opus 111" in order to argue for a more recent shift toward reclaiming "not only [. . .] the father but also elegiac norms that had earlier been spurned" (299). Atwood's elegies for her father fit into this general outline, as they too avoid earlier extremes of idealization and hostility.[7]

While Ramazani attributes this new note of tolerance in women's parental elegy to a "historical dialectic of negation and counteridentification" (299), I would also emphasize the way in which specific biographical factors contribute to Atwood's generally sympathetic portrayal of her father. The anti-patriarchal angst of a poem like Plath's "Daddy," for example, is in part a response to Otto Plath as a stern, distant, authoritarian presence during Sylvia's childhood (Stevenson 7). By contrast, Carl Atwood is recalled by his daughter in biographies and interviews as an attentive and loving father who encouraged her to think independently and supported her ambition to be a writer. Atwood, born in 1939, points out that her father was a more active participant in his children's upbringing than were most fathers at the time. Coincidentally, he was an entomologist like Otto Plath, but one who involved his daughter in his work, teaching her to "identify the genus and species" of insects rather than recoil from them (Sullivan 31). Since the entire family accompanied him on his research trips to northern Ontario and

Quebec, Atwood suggests that she "probably spent [. . .] more time with [her] father than other children would because he didn't go to an office" ("Defying Distinctions" 100). Atwood's elegies reflect her memories of her father as an instructive and nurturing figure. The sequence opens with a description of a photograph which shows him "by a lake, feeding a picnic fire," a provider of food, warmth, and holiday festivity ("Man in a Glacier" 81). The photo shows, not an imposing patriarch, but rather a "skinny" young man in "baggy trousers, woollen legs tucked into / those lace-up boots of our ancestors" (81). The impressive ancestral boots signify a tradition of paternal authority, and the contrast between them and the unassuming man who has laced himself into them suggests that this is a role with which he is not altogether comfortable, although custom demands that he should at least dress for the part.

When Atwood comments that in the photograph her father is "younger than all / of us now," (81) she endows him with not only the vigor of youth but also its vulnerability, which she links to that of old age. Her father's frailty as an old man is repeatedly emphasized as she witnesses his physical and mental deterioration following a stroke. His paralysis causes her to revisit an initial childhood realization that her father is not in fact invulnerable and god-like but an ordinary human being: "Gone are the days / when you could walk on water. / When you could walk" ("A Visit" 88). These poems deal with the kind of role reversal that frequently occurs as parents age and may become dependent on their children for various kinds of support, and Atwood responds to her father's fragility with feelings of anxiety and helplessness. During a visit to the nursing home, she tries unsuccessfully to salvage his lost memory by showing him familiar implements from his toolbox (88-89). Her alarm at his deterioration is signaled by the forced calm of her admonition to herself, "Let's not panic," and by the casual tone she tries to maintain even when her handshake is met with the desperate grip of his "one hand that still works" (88). At his deathbed, the spectacle of his suffering intensifies her feeling of uselessness and provokes the outburst, "Can't we do anything but feel sorry?" ("Flowers" 94). This emphasis on her inability to help him foregrounds the expectations placed upon daughters in a society where women shoulder most of the day-to-day burden of caring for the elderly (Sharpe 158-59). In "King Lear in Respite Care," a kind of self-fragmentation results from the daughter's apparent failure to assume this respon-

sibility. Her inability to cope with her father's illness causes her to compare herself to the elder daughters of Shakespeare's play who abandon their father in order to "have their parties" (85). Similarly, the Cordelia-like figure who appears at the end of the poem is an idealized vision of herself, a fairy-tale model of filial devotion impossible to emulate in real life (87). While the image of this compassionate daughter patiently holding her father's hand is to some extent an appealing one, it also exposes the pressure exerted on daughters and other women to continue their role as primary caregivers, and to conform to cultural expectations of the nurturing female.

The allusions to *King Lear* also suggest a characterization of the father which is rather darker than the one which emerges from the poems I have so far described. Despite the cultural prestige that attaches to the figure of the tragic hero, comparing one's father to King Lear the tyrannical patriarch is not unambiguously flattering. Later in the sequence, we are given another unfavourable view of him when he appears to his daughter in a dream, an angry and resentful presence to whose return she responds not with gladness but with annoyance ("Two Dreams, 2" 99). Atwood's reflection that it is "those we have loved the most" whose appearances are likely to be the least welcome points to the ambivalence inherent in all close relationships and exacerbated by loss (Freud 250-51).

While she occasionally gives expression to the feelings of impatience and exhaustion which reflect the considerable emotional and physical strain of caring for a sick, elderly parent, Atwood's ambivalence toward her father is muted in comparison to the pronounced antagonism that characterizes so many contemporary parental elegies. Grief following the loss of a parent in adulthood is generally less intense than that which follows other kinds of bereavement, and is perhaps not as likely to produce wildly conflicting feelings of attachment and anger as, say, the loss of a parent in childhood[8] (one thinks again of Plath, whose father died when she was barely eight, and the murderous hostility of "Daddy"). Atwood has reached an age at which awareness of one's own mortality (frequently heightened by the loss of a parent) is often the occasion for a re-evaluation of youthful antagonisms. She elegizes her father in what has been called her crone's voice (Stein 122), sympathetic, clear-sighted and wise; she regards her youthful prejudices with regret, but never lapses into an uncomplicated nostalgia for the world of her child-

hood. Looking back ruefully at her old impatience with life in the wilderness with her father ("I could hardly wait to get / the hell out of there") she realizes that she can only fully appreciate him now that he is no longer there ("Bored" 92). Her emphasis on the seductive distortions of memory shows that there is something more complex at work in her elegies than a simple longing for a lost domestic idyll: "Why do I remember it as sunnier / all the time then, although it more often / rained, and more birdsong?" (92). Despite her apparently straightforward claim that "Now [she] wouldn't be bored" in her father's company, she is well aware that, had she the opportunity to return to those vanished days, things would be no different.

In exploring the conflicting emotions inherent in close family relationships, Atwood addresses a paradox of the parental elegy, a form which is based upon the bond between parent and child, but which also exposes the distance between them. One of the difficulties she faces in memorializing her father is the extent to which he is finally mysterious and inaccessible to her. Bradstreet, in praising her father, confidently asks "Who heard or saw, observed or knew him better?" (14) fending off potential charges of partisanship by boasting of the special knowledge afforded her by her position in the family. Atwood, on the other hand, is repeatedly brought up against the things she does not know about her father's life. "There is always more than you know" she writes in "Dancing," (90) having discovered to her surprise that it was her father who taught her mother how to dance. The shoes and sheet music she finds put away in the cellar seem to be the possessions of a different man from the one who paddles canoes and saws logs in other poems. The parents' "graceful twirling" signifies the daughter's exclusion from certain areas of their lives; they are a formal pairing whose "fancy footwork," like the sheet music the daughter "can't play," is an intricate pattern which denies her admittance to their shared past. The romantic image of the couple dancing to the music of "a green-eyed radio" (90) by suggesting that the daughter's own gaze is tinged with sexual jealousy, raises the spectre of the incest taboo which demands that distance between fathers and daughters be maintained. This is introduced in the previous poem, where, in less idealized circumstances, Atwood apprehends more about her father's private life than she really wants to know, and hastily puts an end to a word-object association game in which "the bed" is the only

thing he is able to name ("A Visit" 89). This offers a clue as to why touch, elsewhere in Atwood's work a valued medium of human connection, is in these poems fraught with difficulties.[9]

Atwood has to be satisfied instead with a connection based on sight, which keeps her father at a distance. His remoteness and inscrutability are emphasized by the way in which he repeatedly appears with his back turned, wearing a hood or hat which partially hides him from view. He is often shown moving away into the distance while his daughter pursues him, trying to get a closer look and struggling to keep him in perspective ("Two Dreams, 2," "The Ottawa River By Night"). The photographic image of him "taped between glass" resembles a microscope slide, and suggests her desire to bring him into minute focus ("Man in a Glacier"); at other times he looms too close, allowing her only the myopic contemplation of the bristles on the back of his neck ("Bored"). Significantly, she gives away his binoculars after his death as though in frustration at her failed attempts to see him completely ("Two Dreams, 2"). Atwood's emphasis on the limitations of the daughter's point of view calls attention to the way in which this memorial to her father is conditioned and shaped by that point of view. Since so many aspects of his life remain unknown to her, she can only memorialize him as she remembers him. In these parental elegies, Atwood's focus on the blind spots in the daughter's perception of her father reflects the way in which the lives of children and parents overlap, and it also points to the necessarily reductive tendency of elegy in general, which attempts to summarize a life and commemorate a death in a relatively small amount of space.

Atwood's stress on her own limited knowledge of her father echoes the self-consciousness with which elegists customarily scrutinize the process through which they create their memorials, and thus foregrounds the vocational aspect of the genre.[10] The elegist's reflections on the nature of his art and the progress of his career are of particular importance to critics who seek to differentiate women's elegies from those written by men. Celeste Schenck, for example, regards this "careerism" as one of the defining features of "the masculine elegiac" (14). She contends that the poet's concern for the future of his career is reflected in his willingness to be consoled in the face of loss. This argument focuses on the substitutive economy at the heart of traditional elegiac closure, which requires the acceptance of some consoling memorial object, namely the

poem, in place of the person who has died. This aspect of elegy corresponds to the Freudian model of the successful work of mourning, which involves a transferal of libidinal investment from the lost love-object onto a substitute, a process which repeats the Oedipal resolution in which the child is compensated for the loss of its primary love-object, the mother, through acquiescence to the father's law of substitution (Sacks 8-17). According to Schenck, the elegy's Oedipal drama of substitution inscribes a distinctly masculine "act of identity that depends upon rupture," and is incompatible with female psycho-sexual development "characterized by continuity with the mother and an attenuated separation" (15-16). She regards the elegy as a "vocational poem" (13) with a "subtext of ruthless ambition" (15) in which the (male) poet is compensated for loss through his accession to literary status. She posits a female counter-tradition that is based on the refusal of precisely this kind of consolation in favour of a "continuous mourning" (20) which emphasizes the woman poet's ongoing connection to the dead. In Schenck's estimation, the elegy as traditionally practiced by male poets appears rather callously opportunistic, in contrast to women's elegies which, she suggests, "[refuse] to capitalize on [a] friend's death" (20).

What this argument overlooks is the extent to which a certain amount of opportunism is inevitable in elegy; the only way for a poet not to "capitalize" on someone's death is to refrain from writing about it at all. By differentiating women's elegies from a largely masculine tradition on the basis of an unseemly element of self-promotion located within that tradition, Schenck's argument tends to characterize them as apologetic and reticent, and compromises issues of female authorial self-assertion. By contrast, Melissa Zeiger suggests that women poets revise the elegy not by refusing its conventions, among them traditional forms of consolation and closure, but by using them in a critical and self-conscious manner. To insist that elegiac conventions are inevitably appropriative and reductive, she argues, is "to resist and disable" them to some extent without compromising one's own elegiac voice (81). This proves a helpful approach to Atwood's handling of the genre in her elegies for her father. Rather than rejecting the careerist element of elegy, Atwood exploits precisely those generic conventions which foreground her own role as elegist in order to question the purpose of that role and to evaluate her ability to carry it out. She accepts the poem in place

of the dead man, but not without pointing out what an unsatisfactory substitute it is. She uses familiar elegiac images such as flowers and ships, but not without exposing how artificial and uncommunicative they can often seem. She uses the convention of elegiac address in an attempt to conjure the presence of the dead man, but not without drawing attention to how the gesture effaces him by emphasizing instead the constitution of her own voice.

Atwood's questions concerning the nature and purpose of the poet's vocation draw attention to the difficulties faced by many contemporary elegists, female and male, who write for a secular age in which mourning rituals are impoverished and death has become a forbidden subject.[11] The settings of her poems make these concerns immediately apparent, as she lingers in the principal arenas of modern death: the nursing home, the hospital, and the cemetery. Her depiction of the nursing home bears out her belief that such places are not homes but "the exact opposite," places "where you [are] stuck when nobody want[s] you" ("Approximate Homes" 2). The hospital appears as a place which strips death of any sense of ceremony, and restricts contact between the dying and their families. The process of dying is regulated within a professional sphere which most of us are not qualified to enter, "helpless amateurs" that we are ("Flowers" 94). The pun on the double meaning of "amateurs" exposes the inhumanity of a place in which those who love the dying are barred from assisting them. Atwood's hospital is an uncomfortable "hotel for the ill" which shows its intolerance of ritual observances by providing no vases to hold the gifts of flowers customarily brought to the sick ("Flowers" 93). This incommodiousness also serves the modern attitude of death denial, since a vase may bear a disquieting resemblance to a burial urn, and this "hotel" has no wish to inconvenience its "guests" by reminding them of death.[12] Finally Atwood shows how the modern cemetery, with its bland uniformity and identical, mass-produced memorials, carries on from the nursing home and the hospital in suppressing the ceremoniousness of death, as well as the individuality of the dead ("Oh").

The general attitude of death denial that has prevailed, especially in North America, for most of the twentieth century is partly responsible for the proliferation of elegies written by contemporary poets. Ramazani argues that poetry has increasingly become "an important cultural space for mourning the dead" (1), as the assur-

ances of religious rituals and the "sentimental consolations of the funeral parlor, the condolence card, and the pop song" are, on their own, incapable of addressing the complexities of grief (ix). The consideration of poetry as a last refuge for mourning focuses anxieties about the role of the poet in contemporary society. Atwood's ambivalent use of elegiac conventions conveys her heavy sense of responsibility in taking this role upon herself, as well as her awareness that the consolations of poetry are bound to reach no very large audience. While she preserves and values the conventions of elegy, she has her doubts about their ability to console an audience which perhaps does not recognize them. Her frequent emphasis on the effort involved both in carrying out the relatively few rituals of grief which remain to us, and in labouring to create the poem as memorial adds to her speculation about what often appears to be the uselessness of such activities. While at times both the conventions of poetry and the forms of mourning may seem merely empty ritual, Atwood ultimately insists on their value, suggesting that there is something to be gained by going through these forms, even as we recognize their inadequacies.[13]

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Atwood begins the sequence by exploring the difficulties involved in elegiac closure, as she struggles to relinquish her attachment to her father and construct a suitable memorial to him. She begins the first poem by directing our attention to a remarkable instance of preservation:

> Now see: they've found a man in a glacier,
> two thousand years old, or three,
> with everything intact [. . . .]
>
> (81)

The preserved man provides a point of departure for Atwood's own memorializing project, and the poem continues with an account of her markedly less successful attempt at preserving her father's photographic image:

> Then there's

> the box of slides in the cellar
> my brother found, the kind we used to
> tape between glass. As it turns out
> the wrong thing for mildew.

The comparison of the photograph to the preserved flesh and bone of the glacier man takes a rather macabre turn as the discovery of the slides begins to resemble the exhumation of a body: they are in a box underground, and, to view them, brother and sister must scrape away the mildew in the form of "little / flowers of crystallizing earth," like the flowers and earth covering a grave. The collapsed distinction between the father's picture and his actual body suggests the difficulty involved in the elegiac task of accepting the photograph, and, by extension, the poem, in place of the dead man. Atwood's persistent attachment to the body indicates her initial unwillingness to make this substitution, but it is ultimately enforced by the phallic "wand of light," presumably the beam from a slide projector, which illuminates the photographic image that must now stand in for that body in accordance with elegiac norms.[14] So abrupt is this substitution that the prior attachment still reverberates in the syntactical structures Atwood employs to describe the image on the slide. Her father is "alive *or else* preserved"; he occupies the "clear blue-tinged air of either / a northern summer *or else* a film / of aging gelatin" (emphasis added). In each comparison, the first term is the more desirable, and the repetition of such structures indicates a self-conscious effort at relinquishing it for the second.[15] The photograph as a physical object is conspicuously meagre fare (gelatin "spread thinly / with fading colours") compared to the abundance of the summer picnic sealed within it.

Images of fading or dissolving photographs have appeared before in Atwood's work. She often emphasizes the dissolution of the photograph as a dynamic and transformative process exposing the fixed, limited, and deceptive nature of the photograph itself, which offers only an illusion of permanence and stability. In "Man in a Glacier," she revisits this theme, but here her response to the photograph is slightly altered by the generic context. In this poem of mourning for her lost father, she has an obvious emotional investment in the idea of the photograph as an enduring artifact as she clearly states her close connection to the person in it, and describes her attempts to preserve it. In other poems, the fixity and reductiveness of the photograph reflect the danger inherent in fixed

literary forms, and its dissolution suggests the possibility of resisting the kinds of closure which those forms prescribe.[16] In "Man in a Glacier," however, rather than signifying the undesirability of elegiac closure, the disintegrating photograph exemplifies its paradoxical fusion of compensation and loss. In elegy, the substitute for the lost object is necessarily flawed, since it does not replace that object but signifies its loss (Sacks 6-7). While the dissolving photograph of her father indicates Atwood's awareness of this necessity, her ambivalent reaction to the slide also displays the difficulty of acceding to it. The "little flowers" of mildew which erode her father's image can be interpreted as consoling images of fertility and continued life, but she cannot fully condone the process of decay as dynamic and regenerative, since it is threatening to her memorial. She presents herself as an enthusiastic participant if not in creating, then at least in trying to preserve the photographic image, and her pain at its vulnerability is suggested by the aggressive manner in which its colours fade, "the reds pushing towards pink." The photograph is an inheritance for which she is grateful, pleased that her father's image is "there still," but a note of bitterness enters the poem with the realization that her efforts at preservation have accomplished so little:

> This was all we got, [. . .]
>
> in answer to our prayers for everlastingness,
>
> the first time we discovered
> we could not stop, or live backwards;
> when we opened
> our eyes, found we were rocked
> with neither love nor malice in the ruthless
> icy arms of Chemistry and Physics, our
> bad godmothers [. . . .]

The disintegration of the photograph repeats the loss of the father, of childhood illusions, and leads back to "the core of loss," the loss of the mother (Sacks 148-49). While Atwood directs attention to traditional elegy's exclusion of the maternal (Sacks 321), borrowing from fairy tale in order to import powerful maternal figures into her poem, these figures are not part of any alternative system of consolation and closure. Rather, these stern parental substitutes preside

over the separation from the lost love object and enforce the acceptance of the poem in its place. They are Atwood's muses, aligned with the forces of change, loss, and decay about which she writes. Their allegorical names, Chemistry and Physics, represent an understanding of death in strictly scientific terms as a chemical and physical process. While this seems an appropriate approach to take in writing an elegy for a scientist, it leaves out too much to be entirely consoling. Thus by laying particular stress on the flawed nature of the memorial, Atwood registers some resistance to elegiac closure even as she complies with it.

Not only are the photo and the poem in themselves unsatisfactory substitutes for the lost father, but the effort involved in creating and preserving them causes Atwood to ask herself whether or not the results can be said to justify the work. There is a discouraging element of chance which mocks her efforts to preserve her father's image, as the three thousand-year-old glacier man is perfectly preserved by sheer accident, while the slides have, within a single lifetime, begun to fade and decay, despite having been taped carefully between glass. That the slides and the man are both "found" things suggests that they may just as easily not have been found. The thought of the miraculous preserved man going unnoticed, and the damaged slides unseen, leads to the thought of the poem itself as unread and unappreciated, and casts doubt upon poetry's ability to console. This doubt is explored with greater urgency in "Flowers" as Atwood's feelings of uselessness at her father's deathbed cause her to question the value and purpose of her work as a poet. In this pre-mortem elegy, the sixth poem in the sequence, Atwood describes her routine of bringing flowers to her dying father in the hospital, a ritual gesture in which contemporary social custom overlaps with the elegiac convention of honouring the dead with flowers, flowers which often serve as emblems of the poem itself.[17] Atwood's flowers particularly stress the issue of her poetic powers, since she brings them to her father "hoping [she] could still save him" (95). It is as though she regards her task as an elegist literally as one of saving her father's life. That she makes such exaggerated claims for poetry indicates that she is considering what purpose it actually serves and what it can really accomplish.

Atwood provokes these questions about her vocation by bringing into sharper focus one of the themes introduced in "Man in a Glacier," namely, the amount of effort involved both in mourning

the dead and in writing poetry. She begins "Flowers" by listing each separate action that she must perform in order to get the flowers to her father's bedside:

> Right now I am the flower girl.
> I bring fresh flowers,
> dump out the old ones, the greenish water
> that smells like dirty teeth
> into the bathroom sink, snip off the stem ends
> with surgical scissors I borrowed
> from the nursing station,
> put them into a jar
> I brought from home, because they don't have vases
> in this hotel for the ill,
> place them on the table beside my father [. . . .]
>
> (93)

These flowers have been cut and brought indoors, but they behave more like flowers in nature, enacting a seasonal cycle of death and rebirth, new flowers replacing the ones that have withered and died. The evocation of nature's regenerative powers is another ancient elegiac convention, but what is especially significant here is Atwood's emphasis on her role in staging this regeneration. The hospital is sealed off from nature: its "minimal windows" restrict contact with the outside world, and the lack of vases discourages flowers. In this sterile environment, Atwood must take upon herself a role usually performed in elegiac poetry by all of nature; she must single-handedly supply her own seasonal cycle. Whereas Milton commands unseen hands to "bring the rathe primrose" and various other blossoms to deck the imaginary hearse of Lycidas (142), Atwood must grow her own flowers, then bring them, throw out the old ones, cut the stems, bring a jar to put them in, and so on. These small tasks unremittingly follow one another in a single sentence, and this relentlessness indicates the huge task that she sets herself in poetic terms. She confronts her father's dying with a series of active verbs (I bring, dump out, snip off, etc.) as though she might overcome her helplessness against it. In order further to bolster her poetic powers, Atwood literalizes the elegy's consoling identification of the dead with resurgent nature: her use of "surgical scissors" to trim the stem ends of the flowers suggests an operation on the father's body. She thus conflates the roles of poet and sur-

geon, expressing a desire to prolong her father's life by restoring his body to health, rather than a more conventionally elegiac hope that he will continue to exist in some transformed state after death. The flowers are thus another example of Atwood's resistant acquiescence to elegiac closure, since she still emphasizes the difficulty of relinquishing her father's body and accepting a substitute that is consoling, but that also (the flowers are cut and dying) reminds her of her loss. At the end of the stanza, the tide of activity surrounding the flowers comes to an abrupt end, since the father is either unwilling or unable to see them. That there is room for equivocation here indicates the strength of Atwood's desire to believe that her ministrations are having some effect: when she says that "he can't see [the flowers] / because he won't open his eyes" she is attributing an agency where perhaps there is none, as it seems equally possible that he won't see the flowers because he can't open his eyes.

Atwood's doubts about her ability to save or even help her father are exacerbated later in the poem by the bustling entrance of a pair of nurses:

> The women come in, two of them, in blue;
> it's no use being kind, in here,
> if you don't have hands like theirs—
> large and capable, the hands
> of plump muscular angels,
> the ones that blow trumpets and lift swords.
> They shift him carefully, tuck in the corners.
> It hurts, but as little as possible.
> Pain is their lore. The rest of us
> are helpless amateurs.
>
> (94)

In comparison with this capable assistance, the rigmarole with the flowers at the beginning of the poem seems frivolous and beside the point. Atwood refers to the nurses as "the women," but presents herself as merely a "flower girl" (93), a childish, ornamental presence; they are professionals, while she is an amateur, with neither the experience nor the qualification to offer any real help. Her previous attempts to help her father through her poetry are abandoned, as the sight of these women suddenly makes her desire to help him seem incompatible with her role as an elegist. These muscular women are unlike the kinds of female figures—inspiring

muses, inattentive nymphs—usually included in traditional elegy. While they may appear to be potentially empowering figures for a female elegist, Atwood makes it clear that their power is something from which she is resolutely excluded. Instead, they recall the way in which women have traditionally acted as keepers of death, tending to the dying and preparing their bodies for burial (Goodwin and Bronfen 14). This is to some extent an attractive role for Atwood, one that might alleviate the cold professionalism of the hospital and allow her a longed-for closeness with her father. She is also aware, however, that it reinforces the association of death and femininity which, as Zeiger points out, underlies the elegy and threatens female elegists with voicelessness.[18] Atwood reveals the falsity of the notion that women have some kind of affinity with or privileged access to death, since she herself is as ignorant of the nurses' "lore" as anyone else. She also resists waxing nostalgic for a time when death took place within a feminine, domestic sphere by presenting the nurses' behaviour as a parodic version of the familiar image of women as ministering angels. They are brisk and efficient, but detached and loveless, preoccupied with their own self-importance and sense of heroism. While Atwood pokes fun at their efficiency, she is also humbled by it; their professionalism ultimately reminds her of her own helplessness, and her anxiety about what her role ought to be. The spectacle of the nurses' ministrations robs her of her former sense of purpose: after witnessing their display of competence, she just "sit[s] there, watching the flowers / in their pickle jar." The flowers are no longer part of a process of regeneration but are merely pickled. This implies that her expectations of what she can accomplish through her poetry have similarly diminished: rather than restoring her father to life and health, it can only console, like the photo in "Man in a Glacier," by offering a crude preservation of his image.

Atwood further questions the consoling power of poetry by reflecting on the way in which elegy, with its stock of conventional tropes and images, tends to efface the individuality of the dead. As she watches over her father, her mind wanders through a series of idiosyncratic comparisons: "I think: He looks like a turtle. / Or: He looks erased" (95). Her unflattering comparison of her father to a turtle is a subversive response to his own earlier heroic vision of himself on an Arthurian ship of death (93-94).[19] The strangeness of her unexpected comparison exposes the artificial and impersonal

nature of the conventional ship image, already suggested by the father's two-dimensional status as "He lies flattened under the white sheet" (93). His sense that he is on a ship causes Atwood to think of a fixed and static tableau of mourners whose "waving hands [. . .] do not wave" (94). With the turtle image, she counters this artificiality by trying to show with greater accuracy what her father really looks like, but, by following it with the idea of her father's erasure, she reveals the way in which even unconventional comparisons tend to displace the person who is the subject of the poem.

Atwood struggles against what she knows to be the inevitable reductiveness of memorial poetry with a passionate affirmation of her father's individuality, expressing the belief that his authentic essence survives his physical deterioration:

> But somewhere in there, at the far end of the tunnel
> of pain and forgetting he's trapped in
> is the same father I knew before,
> the one who carried the green canoe
> over the portage, the painter trailing,
> myself with the fishing rods, slipping
> on the wet boulders and slapping flies.
> That was the last time we went there.
>
> (95)

The magisterial but impersonal ship of death is translated into the more intimate canoe, an image which restores the father's vitality and agency, as he carries this boat rather than being passively carried by it.[20] While the image is vivid and reassuring, there is nonetheless a mysterious anonymity to these lines: what portage? where? Also significant is Atwood's inclusion of herself in the conspicuously shaky activity of slipping on wet rocks. Her struggle to accompany her father offers a clue to the problems she faces in writing about him. In order to memorialize him in a way that is authentic and unique, but also communicative and enduring, she must negotiate a difficult path between conventional elegiac images and more idiosyncratic and personal ones. The image of the ship may be rather impersonal, but Atwood still finds value in it. It facilitates the only moment of communication between father and daughter in the whole poem, as "he says he is on a ship, / and [she] can see it" (93). While she acknowledges the nautical aspect of the hospital

environment ("the little bells, the rubbery footsteps of strangers / the whispering all around / of the air-conditioner, or else the ocean") she cannot be confident that a contemporary audience will recognize the generic associations that the image conjures up. While the image of the canoe is more intimate and recognizable, there is still something about it which remains inaccessible to the reader; it has an intensely personal significance which cannot be fully communicated. This is emphasized by the way in which Atwood ends the poem by anticipating her own death. While she is now a living repository of her father's identity, she and her memories of him will eventually cease to exist. While the poem will remain as a more lasting memorial, Atwood undermines its endurance by reminding us of everything it does not say.

In "Flowers," Atwood combines traditional elegiac images with more unusual ones in order to express her skepticism that poetry can convey anything like an authentic, suitably complex portrayal of another person's life and death. Her mixing of images appears to set up an opposition between those that are conventional or artificial, and those that are more realistic or authentic, but ultimately exposes this distinction as illusory, suggesting that all of these images are reductive and inaccurate. Atwood's interrogation of the difference between the artificial and the authentic foregrounds yet another paradox of the elegy, a highly structured and formal literary exercise which presents itself as a spontaneous outpouring of grief (Smith 102). The competing claims of grief and poetry are explored more fully in "Oh," the penultimate poem in the sequence. Atwood again evokes conventions which foreground the role of the poet and question the powers of poetry itself, but here she displays greater impatience with the elegy's inevitable reductiveness and solipsism. By now the father has died, and his survivors have come to visit his grave:

> It's Christmas, and the green wreaths,
> festive and prickly, with their bright red
> holly berries, dot the graves,
>
> the shocked mouths grief has made
> and keeps on making:
> round silent Ohs,
> leafy and still alive
> that hurt when you touch them

> Look, they are everywhere: Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh.
> What else can be said?
>
> (101)

At first reading, Atwood appears to be rejecting the structures of elegiac poetry in favour of suggesting a grief that is too intense to be expressed in words. The repeated syllable "oh" could be interpreted as an inarticulate and therefore sincere expression of pain and sorrow; the "Ohs" on the graves are also "silent," as if implying that to utter even this much somehow betokens insincerity. On a closer look, however, the mood of the poem seems too emotionally stable to support this kind of reading. While Christmas is known to be an especially painful time for anyone suffering a bereavement, Atwood's reversal of Santa Claus' festive laughter (ho ho ho ho) is more ironic than anguished. While the prickly leaves of the wreaths inflict pain, it is not excessive pain, and the tone is markedly unexclamatory. Rather than suggest overpowering grief at the expense of poetic form, "Oh" evokes one of the elegy's most prominent conventions, that of apostrophe or elegiac address, introduced by the vocative "O".[21] Whether addressing a mythological figure, an inanimate object, or the absent dead, the mourner makes use of the vocative to compensate for loss by "making up or evoking a presence where there is none" (Sacks 96). While the device consoles by allowing mourners to "convert their relation to the dead from 'I-it' to 'I-Thou'" (Ramazani 280-81), such acts of address finally call attention not to the presence of the dead, but to that of the poet. Jonathan Culler states that in apostrophe, the "addressee" "becomes a *thou* only in relation to a poetic act, only in the moment when poetic voice constitutes itself" (142-43). Thus, as in "Flowers," Atwood again draws attention to the way in which the conventions of elegy tend to efface the dead, but with more stress on the poet's opportunities for self-promotion.

While Schenck suggests that such careerism is something which women poets unhesitatingly reject, Atwood's approach is ambivalent: she does not completely reject the self-centeredness of elegiac address, but neither does she use it unproblematically to assert herself.[22] Her ambivalence is conveyed most clearly by the repeated "ohs," which suggest the beginning of an address that is never actually directed to anyone. Despite the implications of her being "pricked" by the wreaths as emblems of a traditionally masculine definition of poethood, her failure to carry out an address is not an

admission of defeat by a genre which denies her subjectivity, but rather it is the point at which she engages most closely with the conventions of that genre. The halting repetitiveness of her would-be vocative "oh" amplifies the kinds of "withdrawals and questions" (Culler 143) that are already latent in all apostrophic poetry including the elegy. The impossible elegiac task of conjuring an unseen presence by addressing it serves as the occasion for Atwood, as for other elegists before her, to reflect not merely on her own abilities as a poet, but on the power of poetry itself to "make something happen" (Culler 140). Atwood's Christmas wreaths signify her vocation by their resemblance not only to grieving mouths, but also to the laurel wreath that traditionally encircles the brow of the poet. Furthermore, the "prickly" "leafy" wreaths with their "bright red holly berries" recall the "berries harsh and crude" and shattered leaves addressed by Milton in the opening lines of *Lycidas* (3-5). Sacks points out that while the vocative address to the laurels asserts Milton's poetic presence, his plucking of the leaves and berries, "ancient tokens of poethood," reflects an insecurity about his abilities, a fear that, at this relatively early stage in his development, "he himself and his career may be as mortally vulnerable as [Edward] King" (95). Although Atwood is a writer at the height of her powers, *Morning in the Burned House* is her first published poetry collection in some years and her response to the wreaths as emblems of poethood reduplicates and intensifies the kind of self-doubt which Milton displays, and which is built into the elegiac address. Unlike Milton, Atwood reaches out not to shatter the leaves but to be hurt by them, and there is much to suggest that her greater vulnerability stems from her sense of the incompatibility of her vocation with her environment. The uniformity and banality of the modern cemetery restrict her ability to evoke her father as an individual presence; she begins her address, but can only repeat its first syllable as she searches for him among identical graves, and her vocative O is reduced to a zero, a constant reminder of his absence. This failure of poetic power is reinforced by the fact that Atwood's laurels are in fact Christmas wreaths. Hardly auspicious as emblems of poetry, these mass-produced trappings of an increasingly commercial festival convey Atwood's uncertainty as to the place of poetry in an age of mass-culture. Her focus on the decorative aspect of the wreaths ("these ribbons, for instance") threatens to dismiss the poem itself as frivolous and ornamental, while the

"small hard teardrops of blood" suggest maudlin sentimentality. The association of the wreaths with her poetry thus raises fears concerning the reception of her elegies by an audience accustomed to the limited emotional range of funeral parlour condolences.

This uncertainty about the nature of her audience, or whether she has one at all is then directly expressed when she asks, "Who are they [the wreaths, the poems] for? / Do we think the dead care?" (101). The wreaths, the repeated "oh"s, are also likened to a series of "dot[s]," an ellipsis indicating an absence. In the absence of an audience, if the poem can be said to be for anyone, it is for herself. In trying to conjure her father's presence, she finds only herself; the wreaths that ought to memorialize him instead reflect her own status as a poet. Rather than trying to avoid the opportunistic aspect of elegy, she stresses its inevitability. Atwood's pain in touching the wreath, her soundless "oh," is partly an expression of guilt, and to acknowledge this guilt is to resist the form's opportunism to some extent. Ultimately, however, her resistance is conveyed, not through an inarticulate expression of guilt or grief, but through her parody of the rhetorical structures through which emotion in elegy is conventionally expressed. Her repeated "oh"s constitute an elegiac address directed not toward the dead but toward itself (O oh, O oh)[23] and thus expose the solipsism of "the apostrophic gesture, which [. . .] when it seeks something other than itself [. . .] finds only itself" (Culler 144). Atwood is not simply mourning, but drawing attention to herself in the act of mourning. The "oh" that might at first seem like a straightforward expression of an emotion that is beyond words actually foregrounds itself as a literary trope; thus, when the poem appears to be at its most "natural" or "sincere," it is in fact emphasizing its artifice.

Having suggested the conventional structures which underlie the most seemingly artless expressions of grief, Atwood abandons all pretense of spontaneity and alludes to several familiar elegiac images in ways which exaggerate their artificiality. The flying birds which often signify the continued life of the soul here "freeze in the air" as if arrested in a painting or photograph. "The bare trees crack overhead" as the mourners approach the grave bearing flowers that are "stiff with ice" (102). The noisy trees are a melodramatic version of the whispering pine that opens Theocritus' first idyll; they supply a crack of doom that accompanies the mourners' actions like a soundtrack, emphasizing the artificial aspect of their staged, ritual

performance. With the stark contrast between this melodramatic emotional excess and the glacial calm of the poem as a whole, Atwood implies that the available conventions cannot register the complexity of feeling that she wishes to convey. Her growing impatience with these conventions culminates in the parodic version of seasonal regeneration presented in the final stanza:

> In the spring the flowers will melt,
> also the berries,
> and something will come to eat them.
> We will go around
> in these circles for a time,
> winter summer winter,
> and, after more time, not.
>
> This is a good thought.
>
> (102)

The dead man is effaced yet again as these seasonal cycles are invoked, not in the hope of his continued life, but rather in the hope that the survivors will get over their grief. While Atwood appears to have scaled down her expectations of this traditional image of consolation, the result is not very consoling. Rather than regenerating, the flowers and berries will simply disappear along with the snow; their being unceremoniously eaten by an unnamed "something" suggests, not a symbolic act of ingestion and transformation, but an anonymous, furtive act of scavenging. While the experience of grief is sometimes described as a cyclical process,[24] "go[ing] around in [. . .] circles" suggests not a period of psychic adjustment but one of frenetic, rather aimless activity that suddenly and simply stops, seemingly forgotten rather than deliberately relinquished. In contrast with the painstaking, hopeful depiction of seasonal cycles in "Flowers," this one moves at an almost comically rushed pace. The poem hurries toward the abrupt final rhyme, which, along with the tepid "good thought" that ends the poem, implies a state of emotional numbness rather than recovery. Atwood cannot find much comfort in graveside rituals or the consolations of traditional elegy, and the best that she can say for them here is that to go through the motions of such observances has some therapeutic value, imparting structure to a disoriented psyche. She derives no

hope from the mourning process beyond looking forward to the time when the whole troublesome business will be over.

"Oh" is the emotional nadir of the entire sequence, the point at which the tensions that have been evident throughout are most pronounced and aggravated. Frustrated by the elegy's inevitable self-centeredness, haunted by the suspicion that she has no audience except herself, Atwood is unable to reconcile the public voice of elegy with the privacy of her own grief. In the final poem, "The Ottawa River By Night," she attempts to resolve her uncertainty about her public role by retreating into the intense privacy of a nocturnal dream world. While this gesture indicates her dissatisfaction with the conventions of traditional elegy, it does not constitute a repudiation of them. Atwood uses the inwardness of dreams to exaggerate the egotism of elegy, but instead of feeling guilty about it, she welcomes this much-needed opportunity to sort out her conflicting feelings. In accordance with elegiac closure, she stresses the need for an end to grief, and sets out to achieve this resolution through a most traditional form of consolation, that of the apotheosis of the dead.[25]

In the dream, Atwood receives a vision of her father paddling his canoe through a familiar landscape, and she watches him until he disappears from sight:

> There now,
> he's around the corner. 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.
>
> (104)

The consoling power of this vision lies in the father's restored skill and agency. Not only has he regained his memory, his sight and his movement, but he has overcome his passivity in the face of death, as he is clearly in control of this final voyage. The paradisal "other sea" suggests that he is headed toward some form of rewarding and perhaps immortal afterlife. In an elegy for a man of science whose interests lie clearly with the phenomena of this world and not the next, the consolation of such an ending is open to question.[26] The phrase "there now" which introduces the image of the sea of safe arrivals adds to the sense of incongruity, suggesting a consolation of a rather superficial sort. While the idea of this other sea is appeal-

ing, Atwood uses it to stress once again how the kinds of consolation afforded by traditional elegy threaten to overshadow her father as an individual. The concept of life after death, or at least the presumed quality of that life, is undercut by the fact that her father has not been restored to youth, but is simply "no longer as old" as he was at his death (104). After death he embarks upon a transformed existence, but one which involves assuming the physical aspect that his daughter best remembers. Thus, a conventional elegiac resolution is invested with personal significance.

Whereas in "Oh" Atwood is unable to locate her father's presence in the anonymous graveyard, here he has become a part of a northern landscape that she associates especially with him. The "thick square- / edged shape of the dam" that is the dream's dominant image recalls the "square finger" with which he once pointed out the features of similar landscapes on other canoe trips ("Bored" 92). Significantly, he is found not only in the landscape, but in its man-made structures, making the poem an appropriate memorial to the father as builder. The "swirling foam of rapids" (104) represents a thawing of all the persistent images of frozenness that appear throughout the sequence, and associates the father with the risen vegetation god of traditional elegy,[27] but he is linked to a particular landscape in a way that humanizes the convention. On waking from the dream, Atwood continues to characterize her father as a kind of spirit of place:

> 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.
>
> (104)

The sound of the father's footsteps walking on the shore faintly echoes Milton's lament for the absent body of Lycidas, which "the shores and sounding seas / Wash far away" (154-55). To compensate for the loss of this body, Lycidas is transformed into the "genius of the shore" (183), a protective deity associated with a particular place. Atwood preserves this consolatory strategy, but revises it in order to suit a more secular age, and to accommodate her father as an individual. He is not the passive victim of the water, but walks decisively along the shore; while Atwood thus emphasizes his agency, she does not make of him a divine, protective spirit, and the

landscape he occupies remains mysterious and threatening. While walking along the shore may seem an anticlimactic form of apotheosis, it has personal significance for Atwood, since before her father's death he had lost the ability to do so.

Atwood stresses the continuity between her elegies and the canonical tradition, and seems to anticipate readers' attempts to pit them against that tradition. The full moon that influences dreams and presides over the landscape in the final poem is the opposite of the more conventionally elegiac and masculine image of the rising sun, and so seems to signal some alternative (feminine?) system of consolation. On the other hand, it also recalls the moonlight that illuminates the grave of Arthur Hallam at the end of *In Memoriam*, surely one of the most canonical of elegies. Atwood's moon mocks any interpretation that seeks to understand her elegies in terms of such clearly differentiated categories. It glimmers on the water, making "the way ahead [. . .] clear / and obscure both;" in its light, "the hills of sawdust from the mill" gleam "as white / as dunes," and distinctions between natural and man-made, lake and desert are blurred. Mourners occupy just such a liminal realm, suspended as they are between the worlds of the living and the dead (Bronfen 106). Atwood looks forward to the time when she can leave this realm behind and carry on with the business of living, but she is frustrated by a society that does not allow her sufficient time to do this, urging that the boundaries be redrawn as quickly as possible. While Atwood accepts the necessity of relinquishing the dead, she insists that this is something she must accomplish in her own time, overcoming not only societal pressures, but also her own restless desire for quick, definitive resolutions. At the end of a series of poems in which impatience is one of the dominant emotions, she arrives at the conclusion that "it always takes a long time / to decipher where you are" (104). Her father is gone, but Atwood lingers on the shore, hovering ambiguously between sleeping and waking, suspended in a liminal state that she seems in no hurry to quit.

Notes

I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for its support of this research. I also thank Professor Tracy Ware and Professor Patricia Rae for reading early drafts of this paper, and offering their advice and encouragement.

1 Nicholas von Maltzahn views Atwood's elegies for her father as "the defining sequence" of a collection preoccupied with "questions of death" (8). Rosemary Sullivan comments that the whole book is "pervaded by an elegiac sense of loss" as a result of Atwood's father's death (328). Nathalie Cooke's discussion of *Morning in the Burned House* focuses exclusively on the poems of section IV as reflections of Atwood's personal sense of loss (311-12).

2 Stein singles out "Five Poems for Grandmothers" and "Four Small Elegies" as the most substantial contributions to the elegiac tone of *Two-Headed Poems*. In addition to "Four Small Paragraphs," an elegy for Albert Camus, Merivale notices "elegiac elements" in such poems as "My Life as a Bat," "An Angel," "Poppies: Three Variations," and "Death Scenes" to name a few. Perhaps owing to the number of poems her discussion includes, she does not always sufficiently explain how they might be read as elegiac. George Woodcock, Lorraine Weir, and Linda Wagner-Martin comment on the predominance of an elegiac mood in Atwood's later poetry, especially in *Two-Headed Poems, True Stories*, and *Good Bones*.

3 For discussions of how contemporary poets both preserve and revise the conventions of elegy, see Sacks and Ramazani; for more detailed feminist readings of women's elegies, see Schenck and Zeiger.

4 Of course, male poets write family elegies as well. Ramazani mentions elegies for children by Jonson, Beaumont, Lamb, and Emerson (297) and discusses in detail the family elegies of Lowell, Berryman, Ginsberg, and Michael Harper. The association between family elegy and women poets, however, is especially significant because it foregrounds the pressure exerted on women poets by cultural expectations concerning normative gender roles. In family elegy, the woman poet's public voice paradoxically reaffirms her containment within a private, domestic sphere: her role as a poet is inextricable from her role as a daughter, a wife, a mother, and so on. Melissa Zeiger quotes Germaine Greer in pointing out that the family elegy (especially the mother's lament for her child) was one of the few sanctioned forms available to seventeenth-century women writers (62); Ramazani states that by the nineteenth century, the form had become virtually synonymous with women poets. See his brief overview of this phenomenon, 295-99.

   Atwood has already demonstrated her interest in this traditional association. In "Death of a Young Son By Drowning" (30-31) and "The Deaths of the Other Children" (41) from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, she evokes Moodie's use of the form to mourn the death of a child in "To The Early Lost," which appeared in *The Literary Garland* in February, 1847 (76), and was included in slightly altered form in *Life in the Clearings* (27-8). Stein notices that the elegiac note sounded in *Two-Headed Poems* is accompanied by a new focus on the family and domestic matters (112). The connection between these concurrent developments needs to be explored in relation to the tradition of women's domestic elegy.

5 On the sun as an ancient emblem of consolation most often associated with male fertility figures, see Sacks 34.

6 Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich have all written angry elegies for their fathers. See Ramazani 262-83, 299-322.

7 Ramazani's discussion of daughters' elegies for fathers focuses exclusively on American poets. Indeed, he posits a certain type of melancholic parental elegy as a quintessentially American form (221). In this he echoes Sacks' theory that a cultural "lack of inherited, hieratic figures" leads American elegists to redefine "the elegy's traditionally totemic figure of rule [. . .] as a remarkably parental presence" (314). I am grateful to Professor L. R. Early for bringing to my attention Dorothy Livesay's elegy for her father, "Lament" (1953) as an example of a Canadian precursor to Atwood's poems. Other examples of elegies for fathers by Canadian women poets include P.K. Page's "Voyager" (1981) and Lorna Crozier's "Visit" (1999). Since all of these poems differ from one another in their responses to elegiac tradition and in their representation of father/daughter relationships, I would hesitate to define them collectively in terms of national characteristics.

8 For an account of the conditions affecting bereavement following the loss of a parent, see Archer 207-15.

9 Images of hands and touching recur throughout the sequence, and daughters' attempts to touch their father tend to be stiffly formal (the handshake in "A Visit") or painful "the father winces as his daughter holds his hand in 'The Time'"). Ramazani cites *In Memoriam* (95.34, 95.36-7) in pointing out that touch in elegy can be a consoling affirmation of the continued presence of the dead (300). Atwood's use of touch, however, registers her sense of dislocation from such traditional consolations. For discussions of the implications of hands and touching elsewhere in Atwood's work, see Bowering and Rooke.

10 Thomas Harrison traces the development of this vocational or "autobiographical element" (260) of elegy, beginning with Theocritus' seventh idyll, 39-41, in which Theocritus himself appears as the shepherd Simichidas and explicitly refers to his status as a poet. The convention is continued and elaborated by Moschus ("Lament for Bion," 93-7) and Virgil (Eclogue V, 49). In *Lycidas* (64-84) Milton's sense of himself and Edward King as fellow poets serves as a point of departure for an inquiry into his dedication to his craft and his poetic aspirations (Harrison 291).

11 On the suppression of death in twentieth-century Western culture see Ariès. For discussions of how the contemporary elegy reflects social attitudes toward death, see Sacks 299-328, and Ramazani 10-23.

12 The clinical, inhospitable atmosphere of Atwood's hospital reflects the fact that little has changed in society's treatment of the dying since Ariès made his observations in 1974. In Canada, the need for change has been recognized but actual progress has been slow. A recent update to a Senate Subcommittee report issued in 1995 finds that quality palliative care aimed at alleviating suffering for both the dying and their families is still in many places a low priority in a health-care system concerned primarily with curing disease. The report warns that Canadians today may face in the near future a "possible crisis in end of life care" (Canada 7). On the present state of palliative care in Canada see also the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 158.13 (1998).

13 Cooke also notices this paradox, and observes that these poems express a "need for ritual, myth, and dream" along with a "realization that they are somehow just not enough" (312).

14 In its phallic nature, the "wand of light" resembles compensatory objects familiar from mythological representations of loss, for example, the reed pipe which Pan must accept in place of the nymph who is the unattainable object of his primary desire (Sacks 3-8). Atwood's albeit reluctant acceptance of this overtly male symbol of consolation demonstrates her sense of the continuity between her poem and a predominantly masculine elegiac tradition. Sacks argues that

the work of mourning is applicable to both genders, even though its symbols of consolation are masculine (12-15).

15 Atwood echoes *Lycidas* here (lines 154-64) where Milton considers a series of possible resting places for Lycidas' body. As Sacks points out, the series of alternatives signaled by the words "whether" and "or" prepare the mourner for the necessity of transferring his love to a substitute. Significantly, Atwood repeats this construction in "Flowers" and includes it in slightly varied form in "King Lear in Respite Care."

16 Linda Hutcheon mentions Atwood's images of photographs in her discussion of art as product versus art as process (139). Stein links Atwood's emphasis on the fixity of the photograph to her search for literary forms that "resist closure and offer multiple possibilities" (17-18). Frank Davey discusses the significance of dissolving photographs in the context of Atwood's representations of "male and female space" (19-21).

17 On the traditional association of flowers with poetry in elegy, see Smith 11 and Sacks 19-20.

18 Zeiger's study focuses on the story of Orhpeus and Eurydice as a "template [. . .] for elegiac production" (2). She argues that the figure of Orpheus "crystallizes [male] poets' anxieties about their gendered identity" (11) by performing the "women's work" (12) of mourning and by visiting a feminine realm of death to which Eurydice is permanently banished. Zeiger questions Schenck's view that women elegists celebrate their "connectedness" (Schenck 15) to the dead by pointing out that it "dangerously reinstate[s] the old Orphean associations of women with death, silence, darkness, and [. . .] loss of the body" (64)

19 The father's sense of being on a ship recalls the barge that carries the dying King Arthur to Avalon in "The Passing of Arthur" from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (lines 361-469). Smith notes that the ship is a traditional image of the body journeying through the sea of life (36) and traces its appearances in such elegies as Henry King's "The Exequy," Milton's *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais*.

20 Atwood's substitution of a simpler craft in place of a great ship echoes an earlier poem, "Another Elegy," in which she describes death as "only a boat, / plain and wooden / and ordinary, without eyes / painted on it, / sightless and hidden / in fog and going somewhere else." (*Selected Poems II* 140).

21 For Jonathan Culler in his influential essay on apostrophe, the elegy provides "the clearest example" of how "apostrophes" repair the irreversible temporal structure of loss "by removing the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locating it in a discursive time" (150). While Culler's argument is convincing on this point, J. Douglas Kneale has sought to clarify its terms. Surveying the works of rhetoricians from the classical period to the eighteenth century, Kneale explains that apostrophe always involves a "'diversion' of speech" (143) from one addressee to another. He finds that this diversion to a new listener is not a feature of any of Culler's examples of apostrophe, which are in fact examples of prosopoeia. Among critics of the elegy, Sacks does not employ the term apostrophe, but instead speaks of the elegy's use of the "vocative mood" (96) or the "feigning of address" (121). Ramazani appears to use the terms apostrophe and address interchangeably; Nancy E. Wright does not question Culler's use of the term apostrophe, but applies it herself in its strict sense, to designate an address that turns away from an "initial addressee" (254). Bearing in mind the distinction between apostrophe and other forms of address, from now on I will use the term only when speaking of Culler's essay.

22 The convention of elegiac address often receives special attention from women poets seeking to revise the traditional elegy. Wright argues that apostrophe provides Anne Bradstreet with a discursive strategy that allows her to position

herself as a speaking subject in her elegy for Du Bartas (254-55). Ramazani discusses Plath's empowering and violent use of address in such poems as "The Colossus" and "Daddy" (280-82).

23 Culler notices a similar parody of the apostrophic gesture in Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" (144).

24 C.S. Lewis describes grief as cyclical in *A Grief Observed*: "For in grief nothing 'stays put.' One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral?" (46). Archer notes that within the last thirty years, psychologists have begun to qualify the notion that reactions of grief occur in an orderly, linear progression of "phases" (denial, searching, despair, etc.) by suggesting that these phases may co-exist or repeat themselves in an oscillating or cyclical pattern (24-26).

25 By placing "The Ottawa River By Night" with its consoling vision directly after "Oh," the psychological low point of the sequence, Atwood follows traditional elegiac structure, in which the "consoling revelation" is always preceded by a "dark, self-limiting state of disability" (Sacks 322). The order of the last two poems leads one to look for ways in which the arrangement of the sequence as a whole might loosely correspond to traditional elegiac structure. I have already suggested that the figures of Chemistry and Physics in "Man in a Glacier" might be seen as the muses of Atwood's elegiac art. Their appearance as limiting rather than enabling figures in the first poem of the sequence corresponds ironically to the invocation of the muse with which elegy traditionally begins. I have shown how "Flowers" evokes and interrogates the elegiac trope of mourning nature. In "The Time," the sequential introduction of family members and attendants ("my brother," "the nurse," "my sister," "my mother") echoes the traditional procession of mourners (98). However ironically Atwood at times evokes specific elegiac images and themes, the structure of the sequence as a whole ultimately affirms traditional elegiac closure. For an outline of the ordering of events in traditional elegy, see Abrams 50-51.

26 Cooke calls Carl Atwood "a Darwinist by training" (31) while Sullivan refers to his "scientific commitment to reason" (151).

27 Sacks offers a similar reading of the final section of Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" in which the "healing fountain" thaws the wintry atmosphere of the poem's first section (303).

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