STUDIES

Ecological Aurality and Silence in Margaret Atwood

by Stefan Haag

Introduction: Aurality Defined

While the eye has been associated, at least in the Western world, with a desire to control and dominate and thus with instrumental rationality, the ear provides an alternative in that it does not capitulate as readily as the eye to a reductive Cartesian dualism of mind and body. This advantage of the ear over the eye can be noticed especially well in poetry because poetry's intellectual dimension (accessed primarily through the rationality associated with the eye) does not dominate its sensory (for our purposes, auditory) dimension. Whenever the reception of poetry shifts too much towards the intellectual dimension to the detriment of the sensory/auditory, the balance between these dimensions is upset and threatens the optimal experience of poetry. Perhaps in an overreaction to overly intellectual responses to her work, Margaret Atwood in an interview with Joyce Carol Oates directs attention to the importance of sound in her poetry:

> I don't think of poetry as a "rational" activity but as an aural one. My poems usually begin with words or phrases which appeal more because of their sound than their meaning. . . . [E]very poem has a texture of sound which is at least as important to me as the "argument."
> (Atwood, "My Mother" 69)

Atwood seems to be aware of her overreaction and tries to compensate by qualifying her remarks with the comment that the relation between sound and "argument" should be in balance. Nevertheless, coming from a poet whose work is often discussed only for its outspoken intellectual content concerning human rights and feminism, Atwood's words put extraordinary emphasis on sound for its

own sake. Readers (and critics) often seem intimidated by Atwood's intellectual eloquence so that they tend to overcompensate for their own anxiety of missing something and, as a result, they focus exclusively on the "argument" and neglect her poems' sensory dimension. Atwood's concern for the "texture of sound" provides an auditory key that can unlock an eco-ontological reading of her work in that it allows for an amplification of the ecological dimension implied in an ontologically understood aurality. This dimension has been rarely remarked in Atwood criticism and has been lost to the intellectualized readings of the eye.

In written form, poetry often elicits a dialogue between the visual and the auditory, while performances transform the visual into the auditory. Yet the auditory may also go beyond such dialogue and transformation to provide access to a dimension of our existence that seems all but lost to us because we seldom have the time to slow down and listen to our living environment or even ourselves. In other words, the auditory can indeed put us in touch with an eco-ontological state, here understood as a dimension of being that relates us to ourselves and to other living beings. Once we experience this eco-ontological state, the auditory becomes *aural* which here is taken to incorporate *all* its connotations: (1) "of or pertaining to the organ of hearing"; (2) "received or perceived by the ear"; and (3) "of or pertaining to the aura," which itself is defined as "(fig) a subtle emanation" and originates in the Greek for "breath (of air)" (OED). Aurality in this broad sense can be seen as ecological—that is, as an aspect of "the kinship between nonhuman and human" (Buell 180).[1]

The "aura" and its significance to ecology could be substantiated by associating it with D.M.R. Bentley's concept of the "vital moment," which he defines in *The Gay]Grey Moose* "as the record of an intense awareness of living things in which the urge to abstraction has been kept to a minimum" (278). Without losing the significance of the relationships between living beings, Bentley's term avoids the false assurances of mysticism that, for instance, Aldo Leopold invites when he alludes to "the imponderable essence . . . of material things" (Leopold, qtd. in Bentley, *Moose* 278). Such a rejection of mysticism resists understanding the aura as inherently abstract. Thinking of vital moments in which we become "intensely aware of living things" makes the aura accessible to us in the poem through an ecocritical reading. Informed by the auditory and the aura, such

a broadly conceived aural connection to our environment and to ourselves is vital if we want to achieve an equilibrium between our desires and what is feasible without endangering this planet. After all, aurality in this broad sense will recognize the presence of the environment without trying to infringe upon our distance from it. It is here that the poet may well play a crucial role in helping us to develop an aural attitude.

In his "Ontological Responsibility and the Poetics of Nature," John Llewelyn approaches what could be called an eco-ontological responsibility via Heidegger's "fourfold" (*Geviert*), a conception of nature derived from Hölderlin's poetry that consists of "earth, sky, mortals, and immortal divinities" (6). The German word *gehören*, which Llewelyn transliterates as "belongs listeningly,"[2] is key in connecting humans to the fourfold of nature by establishing what human mortals have in common, namely "a preontological, that is to say, preanalytical, understanding of being [so that] man belongs to himself only when he belongs listeningly to the other members of the fourfold" (8, 7). In this way, we can glimpse the function of the poet in regard to this eco-ontological responsibility:

> The poet is the one who can remind us that man is not the only participant in the fourfold that has needs. Man himself is needed by the others, by the immortals, by the sky and by the earth. It is thanks to this recognition of needs other than human need that we can speak of a human responsibility which is, if not yet ethical responsibility, already more than response as aesthetic *Erlebnis*. (Llewelyn 9)

The recognition of mutual need plays a key role in achieving eco-ontological responsibility because an "aesthetic *Erlebnis*"—however sophisticated it may be—seldom ascertains moral claims and seems merely cognitive in comparison. Moral claims have been noted in regard to hearing and the responses it evokes. Thus they bring us back to the auditory.[3]

In *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics*, David Michael Levin thinks of hearing in particular as a "gift of nature" in regard to whose moral claims we possess a "capacity, a potential that calls for its existential realization," to respond (1). Responding to an auditory stimulus makes us direct our hearing into listening and inspires action, thus going beyond an "aesthetic *Erlebnis*": "our listening is a competence which is not just cognitive; it is always also affective and motivational as well" (43).

I want to call this competence in its ontological richness an ecological competence because it refashions our relationship to our natural environment. Hearkening back to an ecological competence and facilitating—as Levin says—a "recollection of Being" (55), listening facilitates an eco-ontological approach that will engage Atwood's "textures of sound" and her "arguments" as well as the interrelations between them.

From the Visual to the Auditory to the Aural: *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

Sherrill Grace in her *Violent Duality: a Study of Margaret Atwood* comments specifically and lucidly on the visual and auditory qualities of Atwood's poetry, remarking that *The Circle Game*, *Power Politics*, and *Procedures for Underground* are "intensely visual . . . [and] must be seen on the page" (50, 40) while *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is both auditory and visual (40). Furthermore, Grace detects as a key theme in Atwood's poetry a rigorous questioning of perception and, more specifically, vision: "as Atwood says repeatedly in her work, vision is untrustworthy; perception is relative and partial" (8-9). In the course of her detailed discussion of Atwood's poetry, Grace understands the visual and the auditory as an aspect of a "violent duality" that characterizes Atwood's work. But Atwood also anticipates a liberation of hearing that promises to take us beyond dualistic conceptualizations of the world. The recognition of the limitations inherent in the visual/auditory duality and the ontological liberation of hearing make up the "aural" as I use it. In what follows, I want to audit *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and the discourse surrounding it for reverberations of this aurality.

Although in her feminist reading of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* Diana M.A. Relke calls the Afterword "a convenient interpretive crutch that has encouraged critical laziness" (35), she paradoxically supports her argument at least in one key point with a reading of the Afterword. Her point seems curiously reductive of the visual/auditory duality and does not do justice to the subtleties of Atwood's diction. She quotes this passage from Atwood's Afterword: "These poems were generated by a dream. I dreamt I was watching an opera I had written about Susanna Moodie. I was alone in the theatre; on the empty white stage, a single figure was singing" (*Journals* 62). Relke argues that both poet and Moodie seem

threatened by the "vast emptiness" and the "empty whiteness" surrounding them in the theatre. Borrowing from the idiom used to discuss opera, she maintains that "these empty white silences, represented in the *Journals* by snow covering the landscape and vast empty spaces on the page, run like a *leitmotiv* through the work" (38; Relke's italics). Only Moodie's singing interrupts these "empty spaces," and only the poet can hear her. Read closely, however, the passage says nothing about hearing. On the contrary, Atwood's apprehension about the auditory is manifest in her ambiguous words: although the only event "on the empty white stage" is primarily auditory and not visual, the poet is "watching" and not listening, thereby processing an auditory stimulus as though it were visual.[4]

Throughout *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood transfers this apprehension regarding the auditory to Moodie, who feels unsure of and even threatened by auditory stimuli of any kind: she has difficulties understanding the dialect of her neighbours ("The people I live among, unforgivingly . . . speaking a twisted dialect to my differently-shaped ears" [14]), and she feels threatened by the surrounding wilderness ("My brain gropes nervous / tentacles in the night . . . / demands lamps . . . / . . . hears / malice in the trees' whispers" [13]). The representation of the hostility in the surrounding wilderness is not confined to auditory stimuli. The visual also displays this hostility, as in "The moving water will not show me / my reflection," yet it is followed by an auditory allusion, "this space cannot hear" (11). At any rate, the auditory is a stronger harbinger of isolation than the visual because of its lack of formal integration into the poem: where the visual is integrated both syntactically and semantically through the capitalization and punctuation of the sentence on the one hand, and context on the other (it is followed by "The rocks ignore" which conveys a similar sentiment), the auditory seems more of an interruption of Moodie's self-questioning thoughts and is integrated formally neither by capitalization, nor by terminal punctuation, nor by context. I understand the formal implications of the auditory in the first two poems as a trace of the ontological reality that an enhanced auditory awareness (the "aural") will reveal to Moodie in the later stages of *The Journals* and that will put her in touch with a centre of being that vision cannot fully capture.

Moodie's apprehension of the auditory is especially pronounced in the three dreams in Journal II. In "Dream 1: The Bush Garden," the imagery is strikingly visual, whereas the last stanza significantly includes the auditory when summing up what Moodie has learnt from the dream: "In the dream *I said* / I should have known" (34; my emphasis). "Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter" moves back and forth between silence and the spoken word. To Moodie, Brian's distinguishing quality is a prolonged silence that is integrated into an eerie soundscape marked by a paradoxical absence of wind *and* a rustling of leaves: "There was no wind; / around us the leaves rustled" (*Journals* 36). Here it seems as though this paradox provides access to an ontological dimension of experience, not only metaphorically expressing Brian's silence in the poignant (because voiceless) onomatopoeia of "the leaves rustled," but also revealing a shift in Moodie's attitude towards the auditory: finally, she is listening, not because she cannot see, but because she wants to hear. In this paradoxical silence, Brian's story is audible and inaudible because he vanishes into the silence the last stanza creates: "When I woke / I remembered: he has been gone / twenty years and not heard from" (36). Atwood uses the word "rustle" again in Journal III and again with a strong insinuation of an ontological dimension. In "Resurrection," hearing is closely associated with "the angels listening" so that hearing "the rustle of the snow" is one hint of a spiritual resurrection:

> I see now I see
> now I cannot see
>
> earth is a blizzard in my eyes
>
> I hear now
>
> the rustle of the snow
>
> the angels listening above me
>
> thistles bright with sleet
> gathering
>
> waiting for the time

to reach me
up to the pillared
sun, the final city
(58)

Another hint of spiritual resurrection can be found in the last two lines, "at the last / judgement we will all be trees" (59). In these beautifully expressive lines, the significant enjambment of "last / judgement" as well as the dark liquids of "w*ill a*l*l*" lull our ear into accepting both the finality of the auditory ("at the *last*" prepared by "the *final* city") and the eco-ontological aura of a possible human transmigration into trees.[5]

"Dream 3: Night Bear Which Frightened Cattle" shows a contiguity between vision and the auditory as though the ear could hear what the eye cannot see: "*watching* the bear *I didn't see* condense / itself among the trees, an outline / *tenuous as an echo*" (39; my emphasis). This contiguity can also be heard in the assonance of these lines, "b*ear* . . . cond*e*nse . . . t*e*nuous . . . *e*cho." As in the previous dreams, the final impression seems aural in its awareness of another reality—that of the bear / wilderness, another sign that Moodie is ready to trust her ear more than her eye: "But it is real . . . / a mute vibration passing / between my ears" (39).

The aurality of the three dreams prepares Moodie to comprehend the "double voice" through which, as Relke points out, she is "condemned to speak" (44). The first voice appears caught in between seeing and hearing, as though Moodie is on her way to hearing (the poem after all carries the title "The Double Voice" and not "The Double Vision") but cannot quite achieve hearing without considering first the eyes and the visual:

Two voices
took turns using my eyes:

One had manners,
painted in watercolours,
used hushed tones when speaking
of mountains or Niagara Falls.
(42)

There is an ironic slippage in the imagery of these lines. The ambiguity of the "hushed tones" is especially remarkable because it

could either refer visually to the "watercolours" or acoustically to "speaking of mountains or Niagara Falls." "The other voice" and its "other knowledge" seem to recall the aural moments of the dreams. There is no need for the distancing slippage of irony because this voice seems quite in touch with its environment:

> The other voice
> had other knowledge:
> that men sweat
> always and drink often,
> that pigs are pigs
> but must be eaten
> anyway, that unborn babies
> fester like wounds in the body,
> that there is nothing to be done
> about mosquitoes.
> (Atwood, *Journals* 42)

Relke has argued that finding a balance between these two voices (one echoing societal expectations, the other existential certainties) brings women artists to the brink of an "aesthetic of silence" or even an "art of silence" (42, 43). The enjambment in the lines "that men sweat / always and drink often" and "but must be eaten / anyway, that unborn babies" is all the more significant for the absence of enjambment in the lines depicting the first voice, for enjambment here seems to acknowledge a threat of the line to fall silent, a threat that gives pause to our reading, whether silent or intoned.[6]

In the last poem of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, "A Bus along St Clair: December," Moodie achieves an eco-ontological state that lets her experience her environment in terms of possibilities or emanations of the possible. This experience alludes not only to the OED-definition of "aura" but also to Bentley's "vital moment" which captures very well the notion that Moodie and the reader have made some progress in regard to becoming aware of their living surroundings:

> Turn, look down:
> there is no city;
> this is the centre of a forest
>
> your place is empty
> (61)

To be at the centre of a forest while riding on a bus through an urban area seems to approach a madness that echoes Moodie's state when she left the bush too early for the animals to teach her ("There was something they almost taught me / I came away not having learned" [27]). This madness can also be seen as a wholeness that resonates in many of Atwood's works and evokes a forgetfulness of individual being in favour of an eco-ontological state of Being that allows us to connect to our environment (*Surfacing* and "Death by Landscape" are good examples, and I shall discuss the latter in some detail in a few moments).[7] Levin describes a connection to Being that may be attained through listening and seems to capture the letting-go induced by that forgetfulness of individual being:

> When our listening really is well rooted in the body's felt sense of being, it makes contact with our primal, opening relationship to Being as a whole and can retrieve the implicate, pre-ontological understanding of Being that the body has always silently borne—always and already, long before we are mature enough to care about its retrieval. (219)

In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* then, Atwood seems to embrace the auditory and silence as ontological steps towards an eco-ontological wholeness. There is a "double voice" that comprises conflicting stances. As will now be seen in *True Stories*, she takes on a different kind of silence: the auditory and its absence or the stunned silence of speechlessness as a result of war crimes and torture.

Atwood's Images and Their Aural Implications

The poems in the section of *True Stories* entitled "Notes towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written" often originate in recollections of coerced silence against which (and, paradoxically, from which) Atwood struggles to derive images that speak to us:

> Just this: I think of the woman
> they did not kill.
> Instead they sewed her face
> shut, closed her mouth
> to a hole the size of a straw,

and put her back on the streets,
a mute symbol.
(*True Stories* 50)

This "mute symbol" seems to exist curiously in between the visual and the auditory: while the image on the surface evokes a strong visual impression, its final impact is auditory. The poem at first gestures towards a syntactical and thus formal coherence and unity through the regularity of "I think of the woman / they did not kill," a regularity emerging through the syntactical pause after "woman" and through the full stop after "kill." The significant enjambments that follow "they sewed her face" and "closed her mouth" mute the poem's gesture towards coherence and unity into a fragmented stutter. Moreover, rather than filling the spaces in between lines or in between stutters, the poem leaves us in a metaphorical silence that intrudes upon our reading after the words "a mute symbol." I call this silence "metaphorical" not only to point to John Cage's truism that there can be no actual silence except in death, but also to express the idea that this silence occurs in the metaphorical space of the page where the reader experiences it in a very subjective way.

Ontologically, this metaphorical silence touches us and makes us listen in a way that goes beyond our everyday hearing or even listening. The space opened up by breaking through everyday habits of (superficial) listening creates an opportunity to "hearken" in Heidegger's sense. To Levin, "hearkening" signifies the fourth and most profound state of being: a listening that is intricately linked to the recollection of an ontological state which is all too often forgotten, namely a state of belonging: "We belong to [the sonorous beings of the sounds of nature] when we gather up, into our hearing, our presently felt—bodily felt—sense of the natal bonding we 'once' enjoyed" (Levin 211). In a gesture similar to that of Llewelyn, Levin here alludes to the German word *gehören* and its double meaning.[8] Thus to Levin, hearkening does not simply contain a special hearing or even listening but embraces a response with and to our bodies, a response that is best conceptualized in a tactile manner. Tactility is closely related to the auditory because both senses centre us in ourselves rather than project us in opposition to an outside reality, as our visual perception tends to do (Schafer, "McLuhan" 112).

Atwood's most striking "visual" images are not primarily visual in their perception. Take for example these lines from "Notes

towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written": "The razor across the eyeball / is a detail from an old film" (*True Stories* 69). If the first impression of this image is visual, it is immediately deflected into an entirely rational sphere through its intertextual allusion to the notorious slashing-of-the-eyeball scene in the surrealist Dali/ Bunuel film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Ironically, a similar "rationalization" occurred in the reception of the film's crucial scene. According to Martin Jay, the slashing of the eyeball has been "variously interpreted . . . as a simulacrum of sexual cruelty against women, a symbol of male castration anxiety, the conception of an infant, an indication of homosexual ambivalence, and an extended linguistic pun, [while] the act's literal dimension has sometimes been overlooked" (258). Paradoxically, says Jay, the scene makes those viewers who keep watching—those who are most ocularcentric—watch an attack on the ocularcentrism of the cinema.[9] Atwood's allusion to this crucial scene from *Un Chien Andalou* demonstrates well how easy it is for readers to overemphasize the poetry's intellectual dimension to the detriment of the sensory dimension. As long as we are reflecting on the infamous scene in the film, on the identity of the film, its directors, its year, and so on, we are not engaged on a sensory level with the poem: in short, we are thinking, not listening. However, the voiced and voiceless fricatives of these lines ("ra*z*or . . . acro*ss* . . . i*s* . . . *f*rom . . . *f*ilm") and the voiced and voiceless stops ("*d*e*t*ail") add up to a significant auditory gesture that should be considered "at least as important" (to use Atwood's words) as the visual and intertextual/intellectual significance. As Brian Moore writes, "Fricatives are produced by forcing air past a narrow constriction which gives a turbulent air flow" and "stops are produced by making a complete closure somewhere in the vocal tract" which stops the air flow and the acoustic energy (276). In this way, we can *feel* fricatives and stops in the mouth so that the auditory gesture leads also to a tactile effect on the reader.[10] These auditory qualities merge with, or even lead to, a second level of tactile perception: while listening to or reading these lines, we tend to create a sympathetic experience in our minds that makes us feel rather than see the "razor across the eyeball"; that is, this image is only visual on the surface but its primary impression is tactile, not to say visceral. Therefore, the more profound and, I would add, more lasting impact of Atwood's image on the reader is the audi-

tory/tactile dimension because it leads to aurality which may trigger an inst-ance of hearkening in Levin's sense.[11]

The silence in which these poems of *True Stories* originate is not the silence to which they return. After reading these poems, the reader is left with another kind of silence, a point that Atwood emphasizes in "A Woman's Issue" through her skilful use of questions. At the end of this poem, which depicts ways of oppressing and sexually assaulting women, she asks: "Who invented the word *love*" (*True Stories* 55). The stark conceptual juxtaposition between poem and question cannot but baffle readers, thus opening up a space that is metaphorically silent. In this space, the readers can listen: either to the tactile/auditory reverberations of the preceding images or else to their own breathing; what matters is *that* they listen. And it is important to remind ourselves here that this listening is not merely a cognitive act; it is an act with a moral dimension that not only responds but also takes responsibility towards others.

Touching Others through the Aural: Three Short Stories

While these examples illustrate how the auditory opens an eco-ontological understanding of Atwood's poetry, some of her short fiction is equally significant in its treatment of the acoustic dimension. In such works as "Polarities," "Spring Song of the Frogs," and "Death by Landscape," a complex interplay between visual and auditory awareness situates characters vis-à-vis a centre of experience that may provide them with existential insights. Often not sustained, this interplay occurs just as often in decisive moments of the stories. "Death by Landscape" exemplifies how Atwood's aurality includes many characteristics of the "audio-visual fiction" that Marcienne Rocard has detected in Margaret Laurence's work.[12] At the same time, Atwood goes beyond "audio-visual fiction" in extending aurality into an eco-ontological realm.

Both in "Polarities" and "Spring Song of the Frogs" the male protagonists seem isolated and have difficulties establishing meaningful contact with others. In "Polarities," Morrison feels himself painfully at the edge of a landscape—he is looking in yet remains thoroughly detached: "He had felt . . . that the land was keeping itself apart from him, not letting him in, there had to be more to it than this repetitive non-committal drabness" (Atwood, *Dancing*

Girls 49). Even at the end of the story where he gets a view through the old woman's gaze at the seemingly endless land, Morrison is detached from his surroundings and has no chance to learn from his vision. A hint at what he could learn is given in an earlier scene in which Louise confronts him with her plans for her non-conformist paper for a graduate course. Morrison manages to avoid taking a stance because of his downstairs neighbour who just at that moment plays her organ and sings. The noise appears intrusive and unwanted although it resolves an impasse in their conversation: the noise *seems* to give an answer that Morrison cannot give and it is Morrison's silence that Louise comprehends through the noisy intrusion of the neighbour. Only by listening or by letting himself be touched by Louise's queries and responding to them openly can Morrison leave the detached position of the uninvolved observer. Such a response could make him a part of the life that's going on around him, whether it is Louise's life or that of the land observed. Hence a possibility for aurality is implied but not realized.

In "Spring Song of the Frogs," Will (like Morrison) seems acutely aware of his visual surroundings while silences in conversations make him anxious. On a date with Robyn and in conversation with his anorexic niece, he is unable to make true contact, treating the women as objects and commenting in his mind on Robyn's make-up and attire and on Cynthia's pale appearance. Only at the end of the story is there a hint at an effort to bridge the gap between his friend Diane and himself. This effort involves the auditory, which Will associates with a new beginning of life: "'I wanted you to hear the frogs,' Will says. . . . The frogs live in the pond, down beyond the slope of the lawn. Or maybe they're toads, he's never been sure. For Will they've come to mean spring and the beginning of summer: possibilities, newness" (Atwood, *Bluebeard's Egg* 180). While thus describing his effort to make contact with Diane, Will also communicates his lack of ambition to ascertain the precise source of the sounds. The story ends with Will and Diane listening as Will had wished, but his earlier associations with a new beginning are frustrated. The actual soundscape appears to resonate with the suffering of the women he met earlier in the story: "They stand there . . . listening to the trilling of the frogs. This doesn't have the effect on Will he has hoped it would. The voices coming from the darkness below the curve of the hill sound thin and ill. There aren't as many frogs as there used to be, either" (180). Reaching beyond the allu-

sion to Lampman's poem, this is a "vital moment" (Bentley, *Moose* 278) whose aurality may also explain why Atwood has chosen a title, "Spring Song of the Frogs," that puts the auditory at the centre of attention.[13] It appears that the auditory promises an aural recognition that could put the characters in touch with their being. A real manifestation of aurality does not yet take place; if we are all ears, we may detect a possibility for aurality, as in "Polarities." While these two stories ultimately only hint at such possibilities, "Death by Landscape" takes us considerably closer to an eco-ontological aurality.[14]

"Death by Landscape" focusses on Lois's recollections and reflections as related to us by a third person narrator speaking from Lois's perspective. The story's principal tense is the present. In following Roland Barthes's notion of "écriture orale," Marcienne Rocard points out that the present tense can be heard as "[conveying] the tone of voice . . . because [the present tense] is closer to life than the past" (98, 97). In "Death by Landscape," the narrative voice gains immediacy and presence by establishing a frame through which we enter Lois's recollections. Lois is a middle-aged woman who, when she was young, lost her friend Lucy in an enigmatic way. As teenagers, Lois and Lucy spent several summers in Camp Manitou, a camp for girls where Lucy vanishes during a canoe trip.

"Death by Landscape" seems to invite two mutually exclusive clusters of readings. It can be read as an admittedly mysterious account of a girl's suicide or murder. The mystery in this reading could be rationalized as resting entirely in Lois's account. She would then be concealing, perhaps subconsciously, the details of her friend's suicide, or, more sinisterly, intentionally covering up a murder. As becomes clear in her interrogation of Lois, Cappie, the head of Camp Manitou, believes in the murder rather than the suicide. In a similar reading, Carol Ann Howells raises murder as a possibility by analogy to the "Death by Nature" device that Atwood describes in *Survival*, where some "foul deed" is disguised as an accident. Howells quickly dismisses this reading because the "survivor's reconstruction 'casts a different light on the story'" (63; internal quotation from *Survival* 57). This "different light" leads to a second reading, namely "Death by Landscape" as uncanny story or as ghost story.

D.M.R. Bentley links the story to his notion of "unCannyda," a neologism based on the Freudian uncanny and the way it may

materialize in Canada. The signs and hints of the uncanny in "Death by Landscape" are numerous: from Lois's feelings about their canoe trip, to the vanishing of Lucy at noon, to the "presence" of Lucy in Lois's paintings.[15] Bentley also points to a post-colonial, quasi-ecological reading of the story that would support the argument I am pursuing below:

> Like Lois's paintings, literary texts in which Canada figures as a site of the uncommon and uncanny are . . . artefacts that simultaneously subject the disconcerting aspects of the environment to rational control and open the reader to unnerving puzzles and mysteries. A need to control the environment has been fundamental to European civilization in Canada, but so, too, has been a desire to encounter and celebrate the country's northern strangeness. (*Muse* 138)

In yet another reading of the story, Rocard points to its gothic overtones. One of the hinges of her argument is the Group of Seven-work in that Lois's paintings "n'ont pas qu'une valeur esthétique et marchande pour la collectionneuse" (153) but that they nevertheless enable Lois to identify with the gothic terror she felt in regard to Lucy's disappearance (154). In light of her gothic reading of the mystery of Lucy's disappearance, Rocard reaches the conclusion that "Atwood ne clôture pas sa nouvelle et laisse le lecteur face à la peur de la protagoniste et sceptique quant à l'effet cathartique de sa vision" (156). Rocard neglects for the most part the auditory dimension of "Death by Landscape." What she does take into account is the second shout in the story, emanating in Lois's mind from the Group paintings, only to suggest that, in emulation of Edgar Alan Poe, this shout is a possible sign of Lois's madness (156): "She hears something. . . . : a shout of recognition, or of joy. She looks at the paintings, she looks in to them."[16]

While the suicide-murder reading forestalls speculation by fixing meaning, stilling desire, and providing security (Cappie's interrogation of Lois ends when "[Cappie] got what she wanted" [DL 119]), the ghost story retains the mystery and keeps us speculating. The language of Atwood, Howells, Rocard, and myself betrays an ineluctable visual bias through the "different light" and the "speculation," which comes from the Latin *specere* (to see) and *specula* (watchtower), and the "mystery"—from the Greek, to close the eyes or to keep secret. At the centre of the story, there is an auditory event of the highest significance—Lucy's shout.

Although there is no ambiguity when Lois's eyes are concerned ("She looked at her watch: it was noon" [DL 115]), uncertainty occurs when she pictures a heard event while not actually seeing it: "One voice was yelling, 'Ants! Ants!' *Someone must have sat on an ant hill*" (115; my italics). Because she cannot picture the heard event, things become ambiguous to her. This ambiguity occurs when she tries to describe Lucy's shout in a series of similes:

> She has gone over and over it in her mind since, so many times that the first, real shout has been obliterated, like a footprint trampled by other footprints. But she is sure (she is almost positive, she is nearly certain) that it was not a shout of fear. Not a scream. More like a cry of surprise, cut off too soon. Short like a dog's bark. (DL 115-16)

These similes are vaguely evocative but fall far short of representing the shout: Lois cannot substantiate her acoustic impression because her similes never attain the necessary precision to evoke a coherent mental image, either visual or acoustic. In other words, Lucy's shout resists Lois's attempts at creating meaning; Lois has not yet come to understand the shout as an utterance "which appeal[s] more because of [its] sound than [its] meaning," as Atwood put it in the interview with Oates (Atwood, "My Mother" 69).

At any rate, Atwood describes Lois as a very visual person: she owns a private collection of art, especially of canvasses of the Group of Seven. The Group's status in Canadian Modern art is well known, of course, but it will be worthwhile to reiterate some points made by Jonathan Bordo in "Jack Pine—Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape."[17] Bordo points out that the Group of Seven viewed the land as wilderness with a notable human absence that "has the quality of stalking the image, almost of haunting it" (119). This haunting is intensified by a single foregrounded tree that seems to replace the human (108). Bordo's characterization of the Group's canvasses captures well Lois's experience of them: she feels the human absence and, simultaneously, an enigmatic presence that is linked to trees and Lucy's disappearance. When first recounting the events on the cliff, she says, "but Lucy did not rise from behind a rock or step out, smiling, from behind a tree" (DL 116). Later, after more reflection on the Group's paintings, she adds, "Who knows how many trees there were on the cliff just before Lucy disappeared? Who counted? Maybe there was one more, afterwards" (121). The trees, now signi-

fying an enigmatic presence as well as a human absence, make her connect the paintings with Lucy's fate and lead to her epiphany at the end of the story.

The Group of Seven paintings, furthermore, help Lois to come to terms with the confusion that she felt after Lucy's disappearance. She comments:

> She was tired a lot, as if she was living not one life but two: her own, and another, shadowy life that hovered around her and would not let itself be realized—the life of what would have happened if Lucy had not stepped sideways, and disappeared from time. (DL 120)

Here Lois cannot decide her subject position: if Lucy vanished without a trace, how can Lois prove that she exists herself? Bordo's observations vis-à-vis the Group paintings are again helpful. He posits that "whatever the meaning of the image, the fact of the image proves the presence of the Subject: the Subject was there" (116). Lois responds similarly to the Group of Seven paintings at the end of the story. In this way, she feels certain that the Subject was there, but not so certain as to whether that subject is hers or Lucy's or both.

The human absence in the Group paintings can also be understood as the absence of the auditory in a visual artifact. Thus, when Lois looks at her Group of Seven paintings at the beginning of the story, she feels a "wordless unease" (DL 102) that may signify a liminal awareness of the absence of the auditory—"liminal" because she seems well on her way to understanding why she "wanted [the paintings]." At this point, however, her reflections are still as unsure and grasping as the ones on Lucy's mysterious shout: "She wanted something that was in them, although she could not have said at the time what it was. It was not peace: she does not find them peaceful in the least. . . . Despite the fact that there are no people in them or even animals, it's as if there is something, or someone, looking back out" (102). Only at the end of the story when she finally integrates the visual with the auditory does she connect the paintings with Lucy's shout.

The "wordless unease" also refers us to the "wordless ritual" (108) when the girls burn Lucy's first sanitary napkin: "Lois is not sure why they did this, or whose idea it was. But she can remember the feeling of deep satisfaction it gave her as the white fluff singed and the blood sizzled, as if some wordless ritual had been fulfilled"

(108). The onomatopeia in this description ("the white *fluff singed* and the blood *sizzled*") reveals the auditory dimension of this event while Lois's ambiguity is reminiscent of her ambiguity about her description of Lucy's shout. Her ambiguity seems to reveal her insecure attitude to the auditory: it is something she cannot grasp and cannot relate to in the way that she can to the visual.

To be sure, there is much to feel ambivalent about, not least Lucy's last remark, which is ostensibly a question marked by its intonation (Lois as narrator ends it with a question mark), yet its manifest content could just as well be a command: "Wait for me?" (DL 115). It is a question or command that Lois takes literally, and she is paralyzed with waiting until she reconnects with Lucy through or in her paintings. Cappie's interrogation is similarly ambiguous and frustrating to Lois because Cappie is not listening to her and rather "hears" something that Lois never uttered in their exchange. Cappie also takes from Lois the opportunity to hear herself: "She is accusing Lois of pushing Lucy off the cliff. The unfairness of this hits her like a slap. . . . Lois does the worst thing, she begins to cry. Cappie gives her a look like a pounce. She's got what she wanted" (119). Cappie's refusal to listen to Lois is indeed so absolute that Lois loses the capacity to know her own real concerns; she ends up being out of touch with herself, which is "the worst thing"—both for Cappie and for herself.

While Lois suggests a popular reading of their names in the text,[18] the more relevant readings are etymological and literary. "Lois" is of suspected Greek origin. In the New Testament, she is the grandmother of Timothy and is praised for her genuine faith (2 Tim. i.5). "Lucy" is from Latin, *lucius*, which comes from *lux* (light; of the day). Furthermore, St. Lucia was a virgin who had her eyes put out at Syracuse, Sicily, under Diocletian and became a martyr and patron saint of those suffering from diseases of the eyes. The reading that offers itself through these etymologies is semi-allegorical: Lois attains her genuine faith by incorporating Lucy into her life and art. Lucy supplies (not represents) that which the eyes cannot see, namely an auditory awareness that incorporates the visual and the auditory into a benevolent ontological epiphany that significantly lets the story end on the word "alive" (DL 122). "Lucy" may also allude to William Wordsworth's so-called "Lucy poems,"[19] where "Nature" is infatuated with Lucy to the point of promising to take her:

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;

She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.
(Wordsworth 2: 214-15)

In "XI" ("A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"), Lucy finally does become one with nature:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.
(Wordsworth 2: 216)

While the Lucy of the "Lucy poems" is not the girl of Wordsworth's "Lucy Gray; or, Solitude," "Death by Landscape" can also be seen to refer to the latter poem. Not only does Lucy Gray vanish without a trace of her body, but she continues to be auditorily present:

—Yet some maintain that to this day
She is a living child;
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray
Upon the lonesome wild.

O'er rough and smooth she trips along,
And never looks behind;
And sings a solitary song
That whistles in the wind.
(Wordsworth 1: 236)

At the end of "Death by Landscape," the "wordless unease" that Lois feels toward her paintings at the beginning of the story is replaced with the equally wordless joy of recognition when she discovers the aural dimension in them. But before that discovery, Lois must first realize her visual bias. After she has finished recounting Lucy's disappearance, we see Lois in her apartment. She is behind glass and thus cut off from the sounds of the outside world. Yet on

this particular day, even her vision is obscured and so she daydreams until her gaze meets her paintings where she finally finds the landscape in which she lost Lucy: "There is the pinkish island, in the lake, with the inter-twisted trees. It's the same landscape they paddled through, that distant summer" (DL 120-21). But the more she looks at the pictures, the more she feels the need to correct herself:

> And these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense, with a gentle hill, a curving river, a cottage, a mountain in the background, a golden evening sky. Instead there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock. No matter how far back in you go, there will be more. And the trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour. (121)

Lois here re-sees, or better, re-experiences the landscape as an environment radiating with energy that manifests itself in colour and also in sound. Despite Lois's visual disposition through much of "Death by Landscape," there is a development in her experiential horizon from a limited visual to a comprehensive aural awareness that ultimately provides her with a centred and integrated sense of life. At this moment, finally, she listens to Lucy's aural presence in the paintings:

> She hears something, almost hears it: a shout of recognition, or of joy. She looks at the paintings, she looks into them. Every one of them is a picture of Lucy. . . . Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She is in Lois's apartment, in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is entirely alive. (DL 121-22)

Earlier, Lois had commented on her "wide view of Lake Ontario . . . and of the willows of Centre Island shaken by a wind, which is silent at this distance, and on this side of the glass" (120). In other words, glass allows us to observe without listening, while doors usually must be opened to observe and hence we cannot help but listen too. At the end of the story, I suggest, Lois has made an

important conceptual change in replacing the (visually transparent but isolating) windows with doors that must be opened to see *and* hear.

Yet her mention of the "willows of *Centre* Island" is also significant because it suggests that, once she shatters the glass windows and replaces them with something she can open and gain access to the auditory experience, she is at her centre. In this way, Atwood could not have chosen a more appropriate setting for Lois's apartment than the one facing Toronto's Centre Island, for this accentuates the journey that Lois takes in this story from a decentred, searching character to a centred human being who comes to terms with Lucy's disappearance. Although Lucy "disappeared from time," Lois recovers her at the end because, finally or once again, Lois can hear Lucy's shout *and* describe it, this time in precise language that is linked to mental images. What is more, this new awareness also enriches her visual awareness of the paintings so that we can now speak of a comprehensive awareness that transcends the merely visual as well as the merely auditory. She has found an "aural" awareness that would etymologically encompass the ear and the breath, the auditory dimension and the aura that establishes an existential and spiritual link to her past and what she lost there.

Lois's aural awareness leads to a re-evaluation of the two clusters of readings suggested earlier, for at the end the story is not unstable, as Howells and Rocard argue and as a ghost story, albeit a postmodern one, would be (Howells 64; Rocard 156). Nor is its mystery resolved, for an epiphany resolving the mystery into visual clarity does not materialize; rather, we find Lois's experiences and reflections anchored in a comprehensive "aural" awareness.

With the observer gazing into the landscape and becoming aware of aurality, we enter the "border country" that Atwood evokes in *Surfacing* and that Lorraine Weir described as making obvious the illusion of human supremacy over ecosphere (143- 45). (Incidentally, the border country in *Surfacing* is also communicated through auditory awareness. Here we find a journey towards a silence which, according to Weir, "is the beginning of authentic language, unfiltered memory, the vision of earth" [147].) While in "Polarities" and "Spring Song of the Frogs" the main characters reach a silence, it is an impotent one that does not lead to new awareness. In "Death by Landscape," Lois can be seen to redefine

silence in terms of "a Practice of the Self" (as Levin conceives it)[20] which grants silence and provides access to the affective and motivational aspects of listening. And since, as Murray Schafer once stated, "Hearing is a way of touching at a distance" (11), she is finally touched by Lucy's shout.

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In key-moments in Atwood's work, we can hear persistent reverberations of aurality that Atwood often uses to project and explore a state of being that, if it does not realize it, at least holds the promise of bringing her characters in touch with an eco-ontological reality. On the one hand, this eco-ontological dimension is at work in imagery that often touches readers directly in its immediacy and brings them to their senses (to use a cliché that nonetheless captures the process a reader goes through when confronted with Atwood's images in both her poetry and fiction). On the other hand, readers are drawn into the eco-ontological dimension of Atwood's texts by formal and thematic devices that make them aware of a need to respond to the environment without, however, neglecting the difficulties inherent in any response to the environmental crisis. I concur with Erazim Kohák, who argues for the role that poetry can assume in recognizing the ecological dilemma as it presents itself today: while he is confident that "reason can cope with the environmental threat" (171), Kohák maintains that we need poetry for an attempt at grasping what Paul Ricoeur has called "la tristesse du fini" (the sorrow of finitude) (qtd. in Kohák 170). In other words, we experience two dimensions of ecology: the ecological crisis to which reason and action can respond, and an awareness that all things and all life must end and that "action is futile" (171). Poetry, and in my view especially aurality in poetry, can reconcile us to the dilemma opening between these two dimensions of ecological action. Atwood evokes an aurality that connects the auditory to an eco-ontological reality and triggers a new attitude to our actions with which we may recognize this dilemma, a recognition that in Kohák's opinion is "perhaps what we need most of all" (171).

As John Cage illustrates in a very practical manner in *4'33"*, there is no silence in an absolute sense except in death. In regard to literature, Jean Paul Sartre notes that silence has a way of speaking still, for if we refuse to speak, we still send a message: "Se taire c'est n'est

pas être muet, c'est refuser de parler, donc parler encore" (Sartre 32; transl.: "To be silent is not to be mute, it is refusing to speak, and so, to speak still."). In Atwood's works, I perceive a similar gesture of attempting to grasp what appears as silences, incommunicative screams, and other aural events. Paying close attention to these events may well provide an opportunity to alert readers to hearken for their own eco-ontological groundings in order to respond to the environmental crisis that is enveloping us today.

Notes

1 In her "Nature's Nation, National Natures? Reading Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context," Susie O'Brien argues that any definition of ecology and ecocriticism must be rethought from within a Canadian context. Ascertaining an American bias in "general" definitions such as Buell's, she contends that "the American . . . is characterized by an unmediated relationship…not just with nature, but also with nation. . . . The Canadian, by contrast, is plagued by an awareness of mediation, of the presence of language as language, a structure through which nature—and nation—can never be directly experienced but must always be translated" (30-31). Of course, unmediated relationships are difficult to defend; however, in my view, they should not be reduced to a national issue but should be interrogated skeptically yet without forestalling opportunities at understanding underlying relationships. I do not want to argue for aurality as an unmediated access to being but rather as mediated in ways we do not fully comprehend.

2 *Gehören* means "to belong" but points with its root *hören* also to "to hear."

3 I analyze the ethical and aesthetical implications of hearing at length in "Listen and Be Touched: Creating and Disturbing Silence in 'Wandering Rocks'."

4 Fiona Sparrow is at the verge of listening when she associates "the two solitary figures in the theatre" with the double voice, but ultimately she also does not pursue Atwood's ambiguous stance towards the auditory (27).

5 The spiritualism echoing through these lines also evoke Moodie's interest in the subject as pointed out by John Thurston in regard to her short fiction, see Thurston's Introduction to *Voyages: Short Narratives of Susanna Moodie*, xxiv-xxvi.

6 Relke has shown this threat of silence to be at work in other poems of *The Journals* (Relke 42-46).

7 Sparrow comments specifically on the ambiguity of madness/wholeness in *Surfacing* (30-31).

8 See note 2.

9 My thanks to the *Canadian Poetry* reviewer of my article for mentioning Atwood's allusion to *Un Chien Andalou*.

10 Garrett Stewart's *Reading Voices* argues for the relevance of auditory features even in silent reading and could well be employed here to emphasize the tactile dimension of Atwood's poetry. However, this would mean pursuing a tangent to my argument and spelling out a point that I think is intuitively clear from what I presented, but see Stewart esp. 1-3, 27-33.

11 By analogy, the auditory/tactile leads to aurality as I understand it in Atwood's often-quoted "fishhook" epigraphic poem from *Power Politics*. While the initial

impression of this image is also visual, the more lasting impact of it is auditory/tactile and thus aural: "you fit into me / like a hook into an eye // a fish hook / an open eye."

12 See Rocard, "Margaret Laurence's Attempt at Audio-Visual Fiction," passim.

13 The allusion is to Archibald Lampman's poem "The Frogs," where "mother earth" has selected frogs to reveal her spirit in their song to men:

> Often to me who heard you in your day,
> With close rapt ears, it could not choose but seem
> That earth, our mother, searching in what way
> Men's hearts might know her spirit's inmost dream;
> Ever at rest beneath life's change and stir,
> Made you her soul, and bade you pipe for her.
> (7)

Lampman later specifically evokes a spring song:

> In those mute days when spring was in her glee,
> And hope was strong, we knew not why or how,
> And earth, the mother, dreamed with brooding brow,
> Musing on life, and what the hours might be,
> When love should ripen to maternity,
> Then like high flutes in silvery interchange
> Ye piped with voices still and sweet and strange,
> And ever as ye piped, on every tree
> The great buds swelled; among the pensive woods
> The spirits of first flowers awoke and flung
> From buried faces the close-fitting hoods,
> And listened to your piping till they fell,
> The frail spring-beauty with her perfumed bell,
> The wind-flower, and the spotted adder-tongue.
> (7-8)

14 "Death by Landscape" was first published in *Saturday Night* (1989) and then in *Wilderness Tips* (1991).

15 See Bentley, *Muse* 137-39 and 142, n.23, where he explains lucidly the significance of Lucy's noon-disappearance.

16 Margaret Atwood, "Death by Landscape" 121, henceforth abbreviated as DL.

17 Bordo's research on landscape art is groundbreaking because he shows in general how landscape art is always entangled with ideological gestures and, in particular, how erasing the aboriginal presence from the North American landscapes serves to lay a Western claim to these landscapes. See also how he uses "Death by Landscape" as an example to support his claims in his articles "The *Terra Nullius*" and "Picture and Witness."

18 See DL 108.

19 "X" and "XI" of "Poems of the Imagination" in Wordsworth 2: 214-16.

20 See Levin 39-44.

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