

# Ravines and the Conscious Electrified Life of Houses: Margaret Atwood's Suburban *Künstlerromane*

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Ravines are the chief characteristic of the local terrain, its topographical signature. They are both a tangible (though often hidden) part of our surroundings and a persistent force in our civic imagination. They are the shared subconscious of the municipality, the places where much of the city's literature is born.

— Robert Fulford, "Toronto and Margaret Atwood"

To go down into them is to go down into sleep, away from the conscious electrified life of the houses. The ravines are darker, even in the day.

— Margaret Atwood, qtd. in Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes*

**T**HE RAVINES THAT ROBERT FULFORD characterizes as the "topographical signature" of suburban and urban Toronto are often represented as the unconscious of the personified city's collective, binarized mind — a mind whose converse is described by Margaret Atwood as "the conscious electrified life of the houses" (qtd. in Sullivan 44) that populate neighbourhoods such as Leaside where Atwood grew up. Ravines are insistently vertical, resisting the horizontality of suburban development. Their representation in Canadian literature shares many of the characteristics associated with Freud's system of the unconscious: they are dark, hidden, frequently the domain of childhood, and when they communicate, ravines have a language that seems to operate according to a logic of condensation or displacement like that of Freud's dream-work. In Canadian literature, Fulford further suggests, ravine spaces function as a "topographical equivalent of the human unconscious" (41). For Hugh Hood, also, the metropolis's ravines are a metaphor of the human unconscious, functioning as "dark wounds in the ground" beneath a surface which "conceals black likeli-

hood" (12). As Fulford points out in *Accidental City*, their status in our popular mythology is extremely ambivalent, representing an "emotional geography" characterized by adventure and freedom on the one hand and our most irrational fears on the other (37).

This is particularly true for children and adolescents who come of age in the suburban spaces of Toronto. If adolescence is a time of transition and liminality, ravines are the spaces that mirror this state of ontological instability. They are hidden, disruptive, and ambivalent. Their frequency in Canadian suburban *Bildungsromane* invites us to consider their function as geographies of young people, including them in what geographer Denis Wood refers to as the "hidden spaces of childhood," where "doing nothing" can be "a searching, a time of change, a time of aesthetic" (Aitken 15-16). For Fulford they function as a "republic of childhood," representing "a savage foreign state, a place of adventure and terror. A ravine provides a Torontonians's first glimpse of something resembling wilderness; often it is also the earliest intimation of nearby danger. A Toronto child usually learns about the ravines from an anxious parent's warning that evil strangers lurk down there" (37). While often represented as the only spaces in which child and adolescent protagonists find freedom from the vigilant gaze of adults, they are not free from the threat of adult transgression; in Atwood's novels, sexual predators and rescuers enter this "republic of childhood," and recognizing one from the other is not always a straightforward activity (Fulford 37).

The symbolic importance of Toronto's ravines resonates most potently in the suburban *Künstlerromane* of Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* — two texts that challenge the notion that suburbia's homogeneous landscape is antithetical to the development of an artistic, imaginative vision. As Frank Davey argues, "Atwood's Canadian suburban spaces operate as transitional spaces between uncoded and therefore uninhabitable wilderness and oppressively coded cities — as spaces of class fluidity, eccentricity, and creativity" (97). Indeed, the ravines suggest that suburbia is the condition needed for the development of an imaginative vision not unlike Atwood's own, a vision that is "interested in edges, undertows, permutations, in taking things that might be viewed as eccentric or marginal and pulling them into the center" (qtd. in Sullivan 54). Atwood's biographer, Rosemary Sullivan, attributes this vision to the fact that, like her characters, "she would become someone who was always looking for a space to stand — on the

borderline between city and bush, between reason and feeling, between fear and empathy. She was someone who learned from that wild world what she would call ‘the gaping moment’ — ‘a sense of the hole in the sky’” (54).

Suburbia is *the* borderline par excellence between city and bush, making it a compelling setting from which to deliberate on the meaning of spaces in Canadian literature. As John Hartley argues, the suburbs can also be read as “an offence to binary logic, being neither city nor country. They’re an in-between, both urban and not urban at once, a logical impossibility, being a third term in a two-term universe” (186). In an early poem called “The City Planners,” Atwood articulates the potential for imaginative and artistic exploration of the gap between dichotomous terms. Critical as this poem is of “the panic of suburb / order in a bland madness of snows” (*Circle* 28), the speaker allows for the possibility of a “gaping moment” to emerge that might “give momentary access to / the landscape behind or under / the future cracks in the plaster” (27). In Atwood’s Toronto, it is in the ravine spaces within suburbia where the collision between city and bush makes possible the artist’s access to the “gaping moment.” They function in her texts as creative, anarchic, and ambiguous spaces between dichotomous terms, resonating with the function Elizabeth Grosz ascribes to Plato’s *chora* as a “third or intermediary category whose function is to explain the passage from one oppositional category to another” (48). Like the *chora*, Atwood’s ravine can be considered conceptually as a liminal space that “dazzles the logic of non-contradiction. It insinuates itself between the oppositional terms, in the impossible no-man’s land of the excluded middle” (49).

Joan Foster’s and Elaine Risley’s narratives of their childhoods in suburban Toronto seem to operate on two levels, exhibiting a logic similar to that described by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which the dream is conceived as “something built up, as a conglomerate of psychic formations” (16). The manifest content tells the story of their everyday lives growing up in a suburban community of Toronto, the story of “the conscious electrified life of the houses.” The latent content, however, occurs in the ravines of this community, a space that is “darker,” and whose geographical reality requires the *Bildungshelden* to “go down” as if into sleep. Such descriptions invite us to read the ravine as a trope for the artists’ unconscious systems, as receptacles

of the childhood experiences that they have repressed, but also as creative, liminal spaces in which the ambiguities of life experiences can be allowed to play.

*Lady Oracle* is one of Atwood's first attempts to explore the meaning of urban, wilderness, and suburban spaces for the developing Canadian female artist coming of age in the 1940s and 50s, a period in Canadian history when, as Rosemary Sullivan points out, "the dream of suburbia had taken over" and in which the "propaganda of marriage" that surrounded young women prohibited many of them from imagining their roles as anything but wife and mother (58, 70).<sup>1</sup> While *Lady Oracle* begins to work out many of the ideas about the relationship between the ideological power of human spaces and the imaginative vision of the artist, Atwood's 1988 novel, *Cat's Eye*, is a more complicated reworking of the *Künstlerroman* that returns to many of the questions posed by *Lady Oracle*. Both are *Künstlerromane* that use and abuse many of the conventions of that genre to create a "gaping moment," a rupture or "hole in the sky" that opens up our understanding of what spaces and art mean, and of how they influence each other. As some critics have noted, however, *Cat's Eye* goes beyond the concerns of the earlier text by subverting not only the conventional, masculinist paradigms associated with novels of formation, but notions of time and space as well.<sup>2</sup>

If the English *Bildungsroman* is a story in which the typical male protagonist "grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination," Joan's and Elaine's narratives of their early "conscious" life growing up in post-war Toronto substitutes suburb for "country" or "provincial town" (Buckley 17). The manifest level of each story explores the "social and intellectual" constraints that sought to limit the imagination of young women at that time, for Joan in *Lady Oracle*, beginning when she turns eight and her family moves to "a bungalow box near a Loblaw's supermarket" (*Lady* 48). It is at this time that Joan begins attending Brownies, an organization that typifies the type of gender ideology to which girls like Joan are subjected. From chants such as "A Brownie gives in to the *older* folk; / A Brownie does NOT give in to *herself*!" Joan learns the proper codes of behaviour for suburbia's future wives and mothers (51).

Joan's mother provides for her daughter a grotesque reminder of the consequences of suburban gender education. Her mother internalizes

the image of the perfect wife and mother to a pathological degree, a fact that reveals itself to the young Joan when she is permitted to watch her mother “put on her face” (63). During this ritual, Joan observes, her mother “often frowned at herself, shaking her head as if she was dissatisfied; and occasionally she’d talk to herself as if she’d forgotten I was there. Instead of making her happier, these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate” (63). Joan also recognizes that as an overweight child, she is to her mother “the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize” (65). She imagines her mother as a “three-headed mother,” as reflected by her vanity’s triple mirror, aligning her with the excessiveness of the grotesque (215). When her mother’s “astral body” appears to Joan, it is always hyper-feminine, dressed in suit and gloves, “clutching her purse” and with “a bigger mouth” drawn “around her mouth with lipstick” (173). The exaggeration of her mother’s body is a flamboyant reminder of the effects of postwar suburban ideology on women’s bodies and — most importantly — on their imaginations. Joan’s flight from suburbia when she is old enough to leave home is, then, a flight from her mother’s pathological compliance with repressive gender norms.

Like Joan’s, the structure of Elaine’s narrative of artistic and emotional development in *Cat’s Eye* is deceptively simple, mimicking that of the English *Bildungsroman* but adding a third space to the typical movement of the heroine. It begins with Elaine’s early childhood, or period of innocence, in the bush of northern Ontario, moving her to suburban Toronto during her adolescence. Suburbia, once again, is seen as being akin to the “provincial town” that Jerome Buckley identifies as the conventional setting for the childhood experiences of the hero of the English *Bildungsroman* or *Künstlerroman*, for whom “the journey from home is . . . in some degree the flight from provinciality” (20). For Elaine, as for Joan, the journey from home is a “flight” from suburbianity and from the constraints that its associated values of materialism and consumerism place upon women. Elaine attempts to escape these constraints by moving to the city as a young adult to study art and engage in formative love relationships like the typical hero of the *Künstlerroman*. She often employs spatial metaphors to evoke her sense that her movements are a form of exile, however, rather than

development. She feels an affinity with the “D.P.s” or “displaced persons,” refugees from Europe like Josef Hrbik who populate the city following World War Two (*Cat’s* 299). Her movements from bush to suburbia to city are little more than displacements, then, ironic parodies of the characteristic structural movements of the genre that chart the *Bildungshelden’s* personal and artistic development from innocence to experience.

Once she and her family arrive in the “lagoon of postwar mud” that is their suburban neighbourhood, Elaine’s education in the cultural logic of suburbia begins (35). Having spent her early childhood in the wilderness of northern Ontario with her unconventional family, Elaine knows nothing of the codes of behaviour that govern suburban subjects, particularly young girls and women. As her family gradually finishes their incomplete bungalow, Elaine observes their evolving compliance with these rigid codes. Even her unconventional mother stops wearing pants, causing Elaine to notice that her “legs have appeared, sheathed in nylons with seams up the backs. She draws a lipstick mouth when she goes out” (36). Many of the rules that govern suburbia are nonsensical to Elaine, such as the prohibition against touching the Smeath family’s rubber plant (60) or the separate door for girls and boys in her school. “I am very curious about the BOYS door,” Elaine recalls. “How is going in through a door different if you’re a boy? What’s in there that merits the strap, just for seeing it?” (49) Elaine’s education in the norms of her culture occurs at school and when she plays with other girls. They colour images of hyper-femininity in their “movie star coloring books,” play school, and create scrapbooks made from old Eaton’s Catalogues” (55, 56).

These activities are governed by rules that are consistent with the codes of behaviour and the consumer skills necessary for girls who were being groomed for futures of suburban housewifery. The scrapbooks function as a kind of parodic trousseau:

We cut the small colored figures out of them [the catalogues] and paste them into scrapbooks. Then we cut out other things — cook-ware, furniture — and paste them around the figures. The figures themselves are always women. We call them “my lady.” “My lady is going to have this refrigerator,” we say. “My lady is getting this rug.” “This is my lady’s umbrella.” (56-57)

This imitation of a woman's future social role as consumer is "tiring" to Elaine, whose family lived a nomadic existence prior to settling in Toronto. As an outsider to the conventions of suburbia, Elaine is able to perceive the ridiculousness of what the other girls take for granted as natural. "I know a lot about moving house. But Carol and Grace have never moved anywhere. Their ladies live in a single house each and have always lived there. They can add more and more, stuff the pages of their scrapbooks with dining room suites, beds, stacks of towels, one set of dishes after another, and think nothing of it" (57). Having spent her early childhood in the wilderness of northern Ontario with only her brother for a playmate, Elaine is "self-conscious" when she participates in the activities of other girls, aware that she is "only doing an imitation of a girl" (55). Of course, this is exactly what the other girls are doing as well; the difference is that Elaine is always conscious of the fact that she is imitating.

While there is no question that suburbia is a problematic environment for the developing female artist (one need only think of the "plastic covers" on the Fosters' chairs to imagine the sterility), Atwood's *Künstlerromane* suggest that it can play a meaningful role in the apprenticeship of young female artists. It is in suburbia, after all, that Joan learns about the audience for whom she will write as an adult: "About the only advantage to this life of strain was that I gained a thorough knowledge of a portion of my future audience: those who got married too young, who had babies too early, who wanted princes and castles and ended up with cramped apartments and grudging husbands" (*Lady* 93). Just as Joan's suburban apprenticeship is vital to her artistic development, Elaine's suburban education is more than an exercise in conformity. Surprisingly, translating painful emotions or experiences into art is a technique Elaine first learns in her suburban elementary school. In spite of suburbia's renown for a single-minded pursuit of symmetry and conformity (Elaine relates Miss Lumley's "recipe for symmetry" in the making of bells and snowmen by folding construction paper so that "everything has two halves, a left and a right, identical" [*Cat's* 136]), it is here that Elaine experiences a significant "gaping moment" when another teacher responds with empathy to one of her drawings. Miss Stuart's ability to recognize the emotional pain that Elaine communicates in a picture of herself in bed surrounded by darkness causes her to experience a minor epiphany "like a blown-

out match” (174). Not only does Elaine find a means to express the unspeakable, but she also finds an audience who can read the signs of her emotional distress.

While the scrapbook game in *Cat's Eye* certainly encourages the girls to mimic good suburban consumerism, it also functions as an early exercise in imaginative expression, making it an integral part of Elaine's artistic education. Elaine learns that material reserved for “use as toilet paper” in some environments can be treated “with reverence” in other situations, or even used as art (56). The collage technique of juxtaposing different images as a way of making meaning will resurface later when she paints domestic items such as a “silver toaster,” a “glass coffee percolator,” and a “wringer washing machine” that “seem to arrive detached from any context” (357). And in Elaine's description of her home are hints of the creative potential inherent in the paradoxical nature of this space:

The house is hardly on a street at all, more like a field. It's square-shaped, a bungalow, built of yellow brick and surrounded by raw mud. On one side of it is an enormous hole in the ground, with large mud piles heaped around it. The road in front is muddy too, unpaved, potholed. There are some concrete blocks sunk in the mud for stepping-stones so we can get to the door. (33)

In this new development, the tidy, uninspired architecture of the houses contrasts with the rawness and chaos of the mud surrounding them. In the spring, Elaine observes, “Our house looks like something left over from the war: all around it spreads rubble, devastation. My parents look over the expanse of raw mud, planning the garden” (63). Mud is a paradox here, functioning, like the iron lung, as a metaphor for inertia but also of creativity. While most suburbanites turn their “expanse” of mud into something static, namely a lawn or “expanse” of grass, Elaine's parents plan something more practical and creative — a garden. Mud in this context is a metaphor for a state of liminality and evanescence, then, of transition and becoming so essential to an artist. “The Atwood suburb is a transitional space, through which wilderness is transformed into artifice,” Frank Davey observes (“Class and Power” 100). As Josef Hrbik will tell his students in the life drawing class Elaine attends, an artist needs both “dirt and soul” (*Cat's* 291).



Learning to exist in the space between dichotomies, to find there material to translate into art, is also a part of Joan's education as a writer, and her childhood experiences in the ravine provide her with a vital apprenticeship in ambiguity. In her description of the ravine near her home, Joan's language reveals a common fear of spaces within which nature has not been subjected to the orderliness that governs in the suburbs. Joan recalls that the ravine near her home "crawled with vines and weedy undergrowth, it was dense with willow trees and bushes" (*Lady* 49). For Joan's mother, it is this chaos that makes the ravine attractive to "the lurking pervert," "old derelict," and "child molester" that she imagines inhabits it (49). The ravine also frightens Joan, who must cross it weekly to attend Brownies. Ironically, however, it is not the so-called evil men children need to fear in the ravines, but the other children who inhabit this "republic of childhood." It is Joan's peers who find in the ravines away from the eyes of adults the opportunity to inflict emotional suffering upon her as punishment for her nonconformity: "Sometimes they would claim that their running off was a punishment, deserved by me, for something I had done or hadn't done that day: I had skipped too heavily in the fairy ring, I hadn't stood straight enough, my tie was rumpled, I had dirty fingernails, I was fat" (55). Abandoned frequently by the other members of her Brownie troop, Joan learns to use her imagination to help her endure the frightening experience of being left alone "in the darkness and cold" (56). In the dark spaces of the ravine, Joan's imagination turns the figure of adult panic into an embodiment of justice and retribution. She imagines that "the bad man would really come up out of the ravine and do whatever he was fated to do. That way, after I'd been stolen or killed, they would be punished, and they would be forced to repent at last for what they'd done" (56).

The contrast between Joan's tidy suburban street and the unruliness of the ravine resonates with Freud's characterization of the contrast between the conscious and unconscious systems of the mind, a comparison Atwood invokes when she compares going down into the ravines to going "down into sleep, away from the conscious electrified life of the houses" (qtd. in Sullivan 44). When the so-called bad man actually appears, there is something absurdly dream-like about him. Far from looking like the "tall" man "in a black suit" with red eyes, a hairy head and "long sharp teeth" of Joan's imagination (*Lady* 56), the real "bad" man looks quite harmless, and Joan's memory of the

experience reads almost like the narrative of a dream, with its attention to oddly incongruous details and the reversal of our expectations. She describes him as “a nice-looking man, neither old nor young, wearing a good tweed coat, not at all shabby or disreputable.” It is a shock, then, when the man lifts the daffodils he holds “to reveal his open fly and the strange, ordinary piece of flesh that was nudging flaccidly out of it” (57). The following week, Joan’s friends tie her to the bridge, then abandon her. She is rescued by a man who looks, like the flasher, “neither old nor young” and “wearing a tweed coat” (60).

According to Freud, characters in dreams often represent several people or even multiple aspects of the dreamer’s self, communicated to the dreamer covertly by the unconscious using such signifying tools as displacement or condensation. In the ravine, Joan is confronted by the same baffling logic and ambiguity as dreamers meet. “The daffodil man” is mystifying because Joan can’t pin down his identity: “Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?” (61). In later years, Joan explains that the mystery of “the daffodil man” haunts her: “he was elusive, he melted and changed his shape like butterscotch or warm gum, dissolving into a tweedy mist, sending out menacing tentacles of flesh and knotted rope, forming again as a joyful sunburst of yellow flowers” (61). The daffodil man and the ravine operate as signs of the ambiguous; while each appears “menacing” at times, they also “dissolve” into their opposites, functioning as the *chora* of Joan’s unconscious and of the transformation of her experience into art.

Likewise for Elaine, the creative potential of suburban spaces is evoked by her experiences in the ravine near her street, which comes to function as the unconscious of both the text and of Elaine in a rather more complex manner than it does in *Lady Oracle*. As in Atwood’s earlier novel, the ravine is the liminal space where city and bush collide, and it is significant that the ravine is situated within suburban Toronto, for both are epistemologically unstable spaces. The potential dangers of the ravine are implied by the presence of “deadly nightshade” on the path, a plant whose “berries red as valentine candies” might be “a good way” to poison someone (79). The poisonous nightshade berries provide an interesting contrast to the more benign blueberries Elaine and Stephen pick for their mother in the forests up north, and from which she makes puddings and sauces (71). The contrast suggests that

the ravine is not considered dangerous simply because it is wilder, but because of its ontological ambiguity as a space that is neither fully wild nor fully cultivated.

As it does for Joan in *Lady Oracle*, the ravine becomes the site of the peer abuse Elaine endures as an adolescent. When she falls into the frozen creek and nearly drowns, she has a near-death experience during which she believes she is rescued by a woman, whom she associates with the Virgin Mary, who moves through the air and through the bridge, then “holds out her arms” to Elaine, causing her to feel “a surge of happiness” (*Cat's* 203). Whether she is an apparition, a projection of wish-fulfillment, or an actual person is never made clear. Like the daffodil man in *Lady Oracle*, it is possible to see her as a more ambivalent figure, with a menacing side, such as the legendary Belladonna, whose name is another designation for the deadly nightshade plant. Her ontological status is, therefore, as ambiguous as the ravine from which she emerges. She functions as a transitional figure, enabling Elaine’s development into a more empowered child, one capable of recognizing her tormentors’ need for a victim and her own resiliency: “They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them. There’s something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass” (208).

The importance of Joan’s experiences become clear when the ravine and the daffodil man both appear later in her collection of poetry, *Lady Oracle*. Ironically, the text that is regarded as Joan’s more serious work of art comes from her unconscious when she makes an attempt at “automatic writing,” ostensibly for one of her gothic heroines. The symbolism that emerges when she hypnotizes herself communicates her repressed memories, using the systemic language of the unconscious. The ravine is condensed into underground imagery as the place inhabited by the female protagonist of her poems, a woman who lives “under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building,” inviting us to interpret the symbolism, in Jungian fashion, as aspects of her personality (*Lady* 224). Although Joan is unable to recognise it, this protagonist is a displaced version of an aspect of her multiple self, that part of her who is “enormously powerful, almost like a goddess,” but who possesses “an unhappy power” (224).

Mired as her conscious mind is in keeping dichotomies separate, Joan does not see herself in her character; she thinks she is too “happy and inept” to be like her (224). The daffodil man is also displaced in

Joan's poetry, emerging ambiguously as a man who is "evil" but who also "seemed good" (224). The source of his identity is hinted at when Joan's publishers ask her "who's the man with the daffodils and the icicle teeth?" (227). When condensation and displacement begin to operate later in Joan's gothic romance, *Stalked by Love*, readers of Atwood's text begin to realize that they have been brought into a "gaping moment." Like its protagonist, Felicia, we enter a confusing maze where characters and dichotomies collide and dissolve into one another. There is no ontological certainty: high and low art, city and bush, reality and fantasy, hero and villain — all are as "tenuous" as the bodies of the women Joan/Felicia/Charlotte encounters at the centre of the maze (342). This ambivalence regarding the nature of spaces is connected to Joan's linguistic training, for, as a poet, recognizing the arbitrary connection between signifier and signified is an experience that frees her both from her own romanticism and from her self-imposed creative limitations. In effect, it is this ability to inhabit the space between dichotomies that Joan has had to learn in order to take herself seriously as an artist, and for which her adolescent apprenticeship in suburbia and its ravines has prepared her.

Elaine's art functions, much like Joan's writing, as a means for her to translate repressed memories by displacing the painful contents of her unconscious into images. Given her fascination with displacement, it follows that it should be the communicatory method she uses most in her art. A wringer washer, for example, is one of the domestic items Elaine paints when she moves beyond painting only things that are "in front" of her to begin to paint from her unconscious or imagination (*Cat's* 357). She seems puzzled by the fact that "the wringer itself is a disturbing flesh-tone pink" (357), having repressed her childhood attraction to the idea of going through the wringer and coming out "flat, neat, completed, like a flower pressed in a book," (130) or, significantly, like the ladies she and her friends cut out of the Eaton's catalogue, figures who embody the "flatness" of postwar suburban femininity (130).

Joan's and Elaine's experiences in the ravines encourage them to disassociate themselves from rigid cultural values and ways of being. As Martha Sharpe argues, for Elaine, a significant part of this is her ability to think beyond a limited conception of time and space. Sharpe argues that Elaine's conception of time as a dimension like space is the root of her dissidence (174). Her ability to "think outside the box," to see

beyond the limiting construction of the universe in dichotomous terms, is, perhaps, a more significant part of her artistic education than it is for Joan in *Lady Oracle*. For both characters, the fact that this education is set in a subterranean section of suburbia is highly relevant; it is in this liminal space that they find the freedom to learn how to translate the contents of their unconscious — their often traumatic or troubling adolescent experiences — into the covert linguistic or imagistic systems of their creative articulation.

The importance of space for Elaine's artistic vision is made clear when she relates her fascination with glass and with Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*. As she explains, it is not the depiction of marriage (that most suburban of institutions) that captures her imagination, but the reflection of an alternative story in the pier glass behind the figures who are the subject of the painting. In its "convex surface," Elaine is captivated by the presence of "two other people who aren't in the main picture at all" (*Cat's* 347). The glass represents an alternative vision: "These figures reflected in the mirror are slightly askew, as if a different law of gravity, a different arrangement of space, exists inside, locked in, sealed up in the glass as if in a paperweight. This round mirror is like an eye, a single eye that sees more than anyone else looking" (347). Van Eyck's mirror functions like Elaine's cat's eye as a metaphor of a *way* of seeing differently and of imagining "a different arrangement of space" and therefore inhabiting that space differently as well. As a child, this ability is a survival strategy Elaine develops to momentarily escape peer persecution by fainting, an activity she characterizes as a kind of temporal and spatial rearrangement: "There's a way out of places you want to leave, but can't. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time" (183). When she faints, Elaine experiences an "edge of transparency," during which she is spatially "off to the side" (185). It is a parallel of this alternative experience of time and space that she finds in art, and that will become important in her own imaginative expression.

What is most intriguing about the way Elaine's personal concerns and experiences converge in her art is that they unwittingly take on a wider relevance, something akin to a political vision, however distant Elaine herself may feel from political activism. In this respect, I disagree with Frank Davey, who argues in *Post-National Arguments* that it is "not always easy to find Canada or Canadianness within this text"

and that Canada in *Cat's Eye* is “an individual space,” constructed by a subject who is threatened by various “fashionable ideologies” such as “multinational consumerism, international feminism,” and “modernist aesthetics,” all of which “come from outside Canada” (223, 238). I would argue instead that Elaine’s art — and by extension, Atwood’s novel — articulates a vision of “Canadianness” but also of a personal feminism, a vision that grows out of an individual woman’s struggle to understand how the time and space in which she grew up influences her.

This convergence of seemingly unrelated concerns is most evident in one of Elaine’s more contemporary paintings, *Picoseconds*. Highlighting the importance of multiple interpretations to how a text means, Elaine explains that the organizer of her retrospective describes the piece as “*A jeu d’esprit* . . . which takes on the Group of Seven and reconstructs their vision of landscape in the light of contemporary experiment and postmodern pastiche” (*Cat's* 427). Elaine then shares her own interpretation of the painting, which both supports the organizer’s reading of the painting as a “reconstruction” of the Group of Seven’s “vision of landscape,” but also suggests its relevance to her own “individual,” personal experiences and the influence of time, space, and place:

It is in fact a landscape, done in oils, with the blue water, the purple underpainting, the craggy rocks and windswept raggedy trees and heavy impasto of the twenties and thirties. This landscape takes up much of the painting. In the lower right-hand corner, in much the same out-of-the-way position as the disappearing legs of Icarus in the painting by Bruegel, my parents are making lunch. They have their fire going, the billy tin suspended over it. My mother in her plaid jacket bends over, stirring, my father adds a stick of wood to the fire. Our Studebaker is parked in the background.

They are painted in another style: smooth, finely modulated, realistic as a snapshot. It’s as if a different light falls on them; as if they are being seen through a window which has opened in the landscape itself, to show what lies behind or within it.

Underneath them, like a subterranean platform, holding them up, is a row of iconic-looking symbols painted in the flat style of Egyptian tomb frescoes, each one enclosed in a white sphere: a red rose, an orange maple leaf, a shell. They are in fact the logos from old gas pumps of the forties. By their obvious artificiality, they call into question the reality of landscape and figures alike. (427-28)

Elaine invites us to interpret her work much as she interpreted Van Eyck's painting or Bruegel's landscape: the representation of what appears to be going on "behind or within" the landscape — the representation of Elaine's memory of her parents — is arguably more important than the manifest content of the text, in this case, the landscape as a reconstruction of the works of the Group of Seven. The piece accomplishes this by foregrounding the background, by placing a higher value on the painting's representation of Elaine's personal history, and by juxtaposing the landscape and the figures with the "artificiality" of the "subterranean platform" composed of gas station logos. Elaine's description of her work, therefore, allows for a reading of the text in which nationalist or political concerns grow out of the personal. Like the collages she created from Eaton's catalogues as a child, the disparate layers of *Picoseconds* complement each other. The representation of her parents domesticates the wilderness, while Atwood's invocation of the Group of Seven challenges us to reconsider how limited our conception of Canadian spaces can be. The painting suggests that the personal can indeed be political, challenging a limited notion of art that devalues anything that smacks of autobiography.

*Picoseconds* makes meaning on multiple levels; most interesting to my purposes is its reconsideration of the meaning of wilderness spaces to a construction of "Canadianness" and its feminist challenge to the representation of the personal in relation to time and space. Highlighting the epistemological insecurity of the wilderness/urban binary through the trope of the ravine, both *Cat's Eye* and *Lady Oracle* perform a concomitant reconsideration of the meaning of time and space for the female Canadian artist coming of age in postwar suburbia. As *Künstlerromane*, these texts contest the denigration of the autobiographical as they posit a creative potential for a social and cultural space most often associated with sterility. They articulate a political vision in which the female artist, as a subject of suburbia, refuses to be confined to the spaces of domesticity. By her refusal, she is made present in time and space by taking up the "outsider-within stance" that is crucial to Gillian Rose's feminist politics of paradoxical space. As Rose explains, "The subject of feminism . . . depends on a paradoxical geography in order both to acknowledge the power of hegemonic discourses and to insist on the possibility of resistance. This geography describes that subjectivity as that of both prisoner and exile; it allows the subject of

feminism to occupy the centre and the margin, the inside and the outside” (322). We are reminded of the role of the artist as it was formulated within Canadian criticism by Marshall McLuhan; as Richard Cavell makes clear, McLuhan contested the idea of the “artist outside society” and “held that artists could contest environments from within by creating anti-environments” and by making of art a “material practice” (209).

In suburban Toronto, Joan’s artistic vision shapes, and is shaped by, both the man-made landscape of the “bungaloid boxes” and the ostensibly “natural” topography of the ravines. As suburban *Künstlerromane*, then, Atwood’s novels posit a creative potential for a social and cultural space most often associated with sterility. As for so many Canadian protagonists, Joan’s and Elaine’s attempts to escape the landscapes of their adolescence and to emulate the romantic model of the artist in exile inevitably fail; there is no getting outside, for as Joan wryly observes, “my own country was embedded in my brain, like a metal plate left over from an operation; or rather, like one of those pellets you drop into bowls of water, which expand and turn into garish mineral flowers” (*Lady* 311-12).

As spaces that are ambiguous and ambivalent, the suburbs and their hidden ravines operate as the materialization and spatialization of the artist’s expanding artistic unconscious system, challenging us to find merit in the process of that transformation, however “garish” the result. For Joan and Elaine, the ravine is the *chora* of this paradoxical space. Regarded as a “gap” or “crack in the plaster,” it can be argued that the existence of a “natural” ravine space within the “artificial” landscape of suburbia troubles the natural/artificial dichotomy, exposing what Eli Mandel has called the “perceptual flaw” of the “duality” of “self and landscape” within the history of Canadian criticism (218). It may well be that the “garish” suburban landscape will come to have as much influence on the postwar Canadian imagination as the wilderness, the north, and the small town have had in the past.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> More recently, Ellen McWilliams argues that the novel “marks a departure in Atwood’s writing in the way that it emphasizes the creative possibilities of strategies for survival over its more negative implications and takes a more flamboyant approach to writing the female *Bildungsroman*” (3).



<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Martha Sharpe's "Margaret Atwood and Julia Kristeva: Space-Time, the Dissident Woman Artist, and the Pursuit of Female Solidarity in *Cat's Eye*," Arnold E. Davidson's *Seeing in the Dark: Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye*, and Ellen McWilliams's *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*.

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