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Presence and Absence in Margaret Atwood's *Dearly*

Pilar Sánchez-Calle

psanchez@ujaen.es
ORCID: 0000-0002-4566-5300
Universidad de Jaén, Spain

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ABSTRACT
In *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Margaret Atwood includes a sequence of elegiac poems mourning the process of her father's illness and death. Her subsequent collection, *The Door* (2007), while not explicitly elegiac, explores topics such as memory, aging, death, loss, and decay. These subjects are often central to both traditional and contemporary elegies. Other poems in this volume deal with writing and poetry, examining their capacity to offer consolation in the face of death, a key aspect of elegy. Drawing on critical studies of elegy in contemporary English-language poetry and on the role of elegy in Atwood's poetry, this essay analyses the elegiac dimension of *Dearly* (2020), Atwood's most recent poetry collection. Many of these poems are dedicated to her partner Graeme Gibson, who was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2017 and passed away in 2019. Through close readings and formal analysis, I aim to demonstrate how these elegiac poems articulate a psychic landscape of mourning where separation after death is rejected and an alternative space for reunion with the deceased is created. Atwood moves beyond simple lamentation, exploring the liminal space between life and death, presence and absence.

Keywords
Margaret Atwood; *Dearly*; Elegy; Poetry; Mourning

1. Introduction

In *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Margaret Atwood includes a sequence of elegiac poems mourning the process of her father's illness and death. Her subsequent collection, *The Door* (2007), while not explicitly elegiac, explores topics such as memory, aging, death, loss, and decay—subjects often central to both traditional and contemporary elegies. Other poems in this volume deal with writing and poetry, examining their capacity to offer consolation in the face of death, a key aspect of elegy. Drawing on critical studies of elegy in contemporary English-language poetry and on the role of elegy in Atwood's poetry, this essay analyses the elegiac dimension of *Dearly* (2020), Atwood's most recent poetry collection. Many of these poems are dedicated to her partner Graeme Gibson, who was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2017 and passed away in 2019. Through close readings and formal analysis, I aim to demonstrate how these elegiac poems articulate a psychic landscape of mourning where separation after death is rejected and an alternative space for reunion with the deceased is created. Atwood moves beyond simple lamentation, exploring the liminal space between life and death, presence and absence (Montassine 111).

Section 3, "Reshaping Loss," examines two poems where the speaker grapples with the impending void her partner will soon leave behind. In these poems, helplessness and grief evolve into an active mourning process, moving beyond passive remembrance into a more engaged response to loss. In section 4, "Liminal Spaces," the selected poems portray the speaker's partner as existing in the in-between space that those with dementia often inhabit, caught between life and death. Symbols such as thresholds, doors, and flatlines represent the passage to "the other side," where the speaker continues to reshape the presence of her absent lover. The poems in section 5, "Lost Landscapes as Sources of Memory" depict the memory of vanished landscapes that can be reclaimed through repeated visits, where each return generates new layers of memory. Section 6, "Poetry and Memory," explores the power of poetry to give form to absence and addresses death through the transformative impulse at the heart of all elegiac poetry.

2. Contextualising the Modern Elegy

The experience of death is undeniably universal, but ways of responding to death are both period- and culture-specific. The word "elegy" comes from the Greek *elegeia*, which means "lament," and the term "elegy" in its present use in English literature refers to a lyric poem written in response to the death of a particular person (Uppal 1–6). In his book on the modern elegy in contemporary poetry in English, Jahan Ramazani states that poetry has become an

important cultural space for mourning the dead. He considers that contemporary poets question and subvert many of the conventions of traditional elegies. However, mourning and the ancient literary dialogue with the dead persist in these poets' compositions (1). For Stephen Regan, at the core of the elegiac form, lies the urge to confront the mystery of death and to make the dead live again, if only in the realm of poetry. He believes that there is still a genuine public need for celebrating rituals of mourning and a persistent drive to resort to the consoling powers of art and song in the face of loss (119). According to Ramazani, modern elegists question the propensity of the genre towards the transformation of grief into consolation, refusing the closure, rebirth and substitution and the use of the elegiac composition as a replacement for the person it mourns. They tend to represent mourning as ambivalent, unresolved and sometimes violent. Loss is an open wound and grief is often complicated by guilt. Other times the elegies exude rage and attack the dead. The erosion of social codes of mourning has enabled the modern elegy as a private refuge from the social denial of grief. The often intimate representations of mourning and the dead resist the impersonality of modern mortuary institutions (1–18).

Priscila Uppal, in her work on the contemporary English-Canadian elegy, considers that English-Canadian poets present an alternative elegiac strategy to their English and American counterparts in their response to loss: in their poems of mourning, the living refuse to accept separation from the dead and try to establish a dialogue and engagement with the dead loved ones. She emphasises that many English-Canadian elegies discover the possibilities for healing in language and landscape and use the elegy for reconnection between the living and the dead (13–14). Contemporary English-Canadian elegists "want their dead to return to them and remind them not of death but of the possibilities of continued life and how the past can interact with the present and the future" (37). In her study of elegiac poetry by Margaret Atwood and contemporaries such as Dennis Cooley, Patrick Lane, Libby Scheier, Daphne Marlatt, Anne Carson, and Roo Borson, Uppal illustrates how these poets seek to transition from passive grief to active mourning (39). Their psychic landscapes of loss are populated by dreams, fluid and elusive memories of the deceased, natural elements and multiple voices that challenge the conventional role of the mourner poet whose voice traditionally shapes the mourning process (44). These poetic strategies foster moments of connection and shared experience between the living and the dead, as well as between past, present, and future (265).

Margaret Atwood writes in her volume *Negotiating with the Dead* that all writing involves and responds to a fascination with mortality. Writers descend into the realms of death in search for something of use to bring back to the surface (178). Atwood observes that poets are the ones who "can bring the knowledge held by the Underworld back to the land of the living, and who can give

us, the readers, the benefit of this knowledge" (173–74). The underground is for Atwood the site not only of knowledge but of riches, excitement, the loved, the lost, and other imaginative treasures (Huebener 109).

A number of critics have already discussed Atwood's poems of mourning. Janet Fiamengo shows that topics such as death and the process of mourning have been an ongoing concern in Atwood's fiction and poetry. In *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator starts a trip to the Canadian bush with the aim of restoring her present life through a search for her father which ends up in her acceptance of both her parents' deaths and her reconciliation with their humanity. *Cat's Eye* also reexamines the narrator's dead parents and her need to forgive them for their human failures. Elaine, the narrator, is aware that her parents' lives have been as complex as hers and that they are part of herself, even though she will never be able to understand them in full (146–48). Fiamengo briefly mentions the presence of elegiac compositions in Atwood's early poetry. In "The Totems" and "Elegy for Giant Tortoises" (*The Animals in That Country*), the speaker laments what we have destroyed. "Girl and Horse, 1928" (*Procedures for Underground*) presents a picture of the speaker's young mother and explores the illusion of permanence pictures create. According to Fiamengo, critics have not considered Atwood's writing in the context of personal elegy because of her poetic voice, which would seem to be aggressively anti-elegiac, something that changes in *Morning in the Burned House* (150). Here Atwood works within and against the traditions of the elegy. She deals with the ambiguous relationships between preservation and loss, and the futility of language to offer consolation in the face of excessive grief and mourning (152–55). Fiamengo suggests that Atwood's elegiac poems feature self-elegy because "mortality is at the root of our relations to others, every act of mourning is also a mourning for one-self, especially with the death of a parent, which prefigures one's own death in taking away the person who stands between us and mortality" (156). Also, in her analyses of Atwood's elegiac poems, Fiamengo states that memory does not provide consolation because the images of the deceased person always elude the speaker (158) and cannot substitute for him/her. These images offer a representation which testifies to loss without achieving consoling substitution (158). Fiamengo concludes that the elegiac sequence in *Morning in the Burned House* articulates the complex gift of loss, which allows the poet to accept her sadness though not overcoming it completely. Atwood is not a religious person, so in the absence of faith, consolation becomes difficult. However, she refuses to succumb to despair and pessimisim (160).

Sara Jamieson agrees with Fiamengo in her appreciation of the ambivalence of Atwood's uses of some of the conventions of elegy in *Morning in the Burned House*. For Jamieson, Atwood tries to write consoling memorial poetry in the context of a secular and materialistic society in which death is often absent. She

portrays her father as a sympathetic and nurturing man, but without idealising him. Atwood's father remains enigmatic, which stresses the writer's limited knowledge of him (40–44). Jamieson supports Fiamengo's vision that Atwood questions the power of the poem in place of the dead man, that it to say, the extent to which writing about a beloved dead person offers any consolation, particularly in a world where a general attitude of death denial prevails. Atwood is aware that poetry lacks big audiences, consequently, its consoling powers may come to nothing. Nevertheless, she seems to believe that mourning rituals are necessary and that they have a value even in the arenas of modern death: the nursing home, the hospital and the cemetery (46).

For critic Pauline Montassine, the elegiac poems in *Dearly* can be considered an elegy-to-be because they were written before Atwood's husband died. By anticipating her partner's death, Atwood gains a sense of control over the future tragedy (110). According to Montassine, Atwood uses poetry not to accept and process separation but to keep the object of loss closer and fight the reality of death. The figure of her partner occupies a liminal space, between presence and absence, in which death can be redefined and relegated (112). Montassine suggests that, in *Dearly*, Atwood questions the assumption that elegiac poetry just expresses sorrow and grief, on the contrary, her poems encourage the reader to redefine separation thanks to art and language. Words retain the loved one through their physical presence on the page (122), and they can metaphorically reanimate the dead loved ones (124).

3. Reshaping Loss

"Late Poems" is the first poem in *Dearly*, acting as an introduction to the rest of the book. The speaker explores the polysemic title, and writes variations on what "late" means, all of them linked with futility and uselessness:

> These are the late poems.
> Most poems are late
> of course: too late,
> like a letter sent by a sailor
> that arrives after he's drowned.
>
> Too late to be of help, such letters,
> and late poems are similar. (lines 1–7)

Poems may be too late to console someone, like the message of a dead person. The enumeration of the information contained in the letter intensifies the

desolation of the addressee who must accept those words as a replacement for the dead one:

> Whatever it was has happened:
> the battle, the sunny day, the moonlit
> slipping into lust, the farewell kiss. The poem
> washes ashore like flotsam. (lines 8–12)

According to Montassine, the repetition of the word "late" provokes a feeling of helplessness. Action seems impossible and hope is lost (122). The fourth stanza reinforces the futility of words because they are "cold or eaten" (line 14), or "thrice-gnawed songs / Rusted spells. Worn choruses" (lines 18–19). The last stanza closes the poem in a circular way, emphasizing the initial idea of futility, "It's late, it's very late; / too late for dancing" (lines 20–22), but this helplessness is suddenly counteracted by a change in the speaker's tone and syntax. Instead of enumerations and passivity, the poetic voice turns to the imperative mode to move the reader into action, in the hope that something can be done:

> It's late, it's very late;
> too late for dancing.
> Still, sing what you can.
> Turn up the light: sing on,
> sing. On. (lines 20–24)

Maybe it's too late for dancing, but dancing is more difficult than singing. Everybody cannot dance, but everybody can sing. The string of imperatives "sing," "turn up," "sing on" creates a crescendo which reaches its climax in the last line "sing. On" (line 24), which echoes "switch on." The speaker insists on continuity and activation, as suggested by the particle "on." Both defeat and counteract the initial helplessness as reaction to tragedy. Poetry is what "washes ashore like flotsam" (line 12), after all is lost, thus allowing for a reshaping of the experience of loss (Montassine 123).

"Invisible Man" describes the future life of the speaker in her partner's absence. It starts in a casual and anecdotic way. The speaker explains how the problem of drawing invisible men was solved in comic books: "They'd solve it with a dotted line / that no one but us could see . . ." (line 4). After this light introduction, the speaker identifies the invisible man with her beloved:

> That's who is waiting for me:
> an invisible man
> defined by a dotted line:

the shape of an absence
in your place at the table,
sitting across from me,
eating toast and eggs as usual
or walking ahead up the drive,
a rustling of the fallen leaves,
a slight thickening of the air. (lines 8–14)

The painful topic of separation is delayed here by the speaker's completion of the dotted line through the reference to activities of their daily life together. This way she keeps him closer and present in the poem: "It's you in the future, / we both know that. / You'll be here but not here . . ." (lines 18–20). The poem gives shape to the lover's absence, much like the dotted line in cartoons that outlines unseen characters (Montassine 119). It transforms into a space for ongoing dialogue and interaction with the dead (Uppal 53).

4. Liminal Spaces

The poem "Ghost Cat" alludes to the liminal space occupied by people with dementia, such as Atwood's husband. In the first line "Cats suffer from dementia too. Did you know that?" (line 1), the speaker adopts an informal tone to address the reader, drawing a parallel between the cat and Graeme Gibson, who suffered from dementia. In some parts of the poem, the speaker reports the cat's words, in a juxtaposition of bathos and pathos: "*Is this what I'm supposed to eat? / Guess not. But what? But where*?" (lines 12–13); "*Let me in, / enclose me, tell me who I was*" (lines 19–20). The absurd image of a cat with dementia is used by the speaker to alleviate the suffering provoked by her sick partner, who inhabits the same liminal space of the cat, a threshold between their bodies and their minds: "No good. No purring. No contentment. Out / into the darkened cave of the dining room, / then in, then out, forlorn" (lines 21–23).

In the last lines, the speaker trivializes the fact of aging and the loss of autonomy:

And when I go that way, grow fur, start howling,
scratch at your airwaves:
no matter who I claim I am
or how I love you,
turn the key. Bar the window. (lines 24–28)

These lines can be understood as a self-elegy, which has been defined as "the genre for the self-standing meditation on the author's mortality" (Ramazani

120). The speaker sides with the situation of her partner by imagining her own physical deterioration. Her partner occupies that liminal space between life and death, a place one day she may also inhabit. This vision of herself in that place diminishes her suffering for the prospective loss of a beloved person and establishes a common ground for interaction with him once he is not here (Montassine 118).

The opening lines of the poem "One Day" introduce a "you" who adopts the role of the speaker, thereby diminishing traditional elegiac authority and challenging conventional notions of mourning. This shift disrupts the elegy's typical structure, where a singular voice is often seen as the definitive expression of the mourning process (Uppal 44):

> One day I will be old,
> you said; let's say
> while hanging up the wash–
> the sheets, the pillowcases–
> with their white smell of June rain
> in the years when you still did that
> and pear blossoms fell around you
> joyous as weddings
> and your brain sang Yeah yeah yeah
> like a backup group,
> three girls with long legs
> and thigh-high boots, wagging their miniskirts
> like bees announcing honey in some complex dance
> in time. (lines 1–14)

The anticipation of old age is mentioned at a moment when that person has the energy of youth. Unfortunately, the line "in the years when you still did that" (line 6) contrasts a past of youthful vitality with a present marked by physical decline, signaling that the once-distant "One day" has now become a reality.

The following stanza continues with a description of how that aging process will be: "In time my eyes will shrink, Yeah, yeah / my mouth will fill with metal, / my spine will crumble, Yeah yeah" (lines 15–17); "But maybe I'll get wisdom, / you said, laughing, / like stepping through a door" (lines 21–23). In the imaginary world of the young, old age is the threshold you cross into the country of the wise.

The optimistic and casual tone of these first stanzas evolves towards the disappointment expressed in the second half of the poem. The distant and hopeful expression "One day" has shifted towards the hard realism of the word "Today":

> Today you're poking with your stick
> among the wilted hostas
> in the quiet garden.
> Where is it? you say . . . (lines 27–30)

In this stanza, the energetic "you" of the first lines of the poem is an old person looking for wisdom "among the wilted hostas" (line 28). The "it" in line 30 works as a cataphoric reference to "wisdom" in line 34, "Where is that wisdom?" But the searching is fruitless, as we learn in the last stanza: "You pry with your stick: / Just earth and roots. A stone. / Maybe it's a door, you say" (lines 45–47). The speaker's partner turns the stone into the imaginary door mentioned in line 23, which led to the promised wisdom of old age. This could be the statement of a person whose mind does not work properly because of dementia or any other illness, an old person who mistakes a stone for a door. Instead of pitying this person's situation, the speaker concludes that

> But nothing is locked. There's nothing
> to it. Never was
> Just open.
> Just walk down. (lines 49–52)

This invitation to open the door and walk down confirms Atwood's interest in the psychic landscape of the underworld, which for her is the site not only of knowledge but of riches, excitement, the loved, the lost, and other imaginative treasures (Huebener 109). The speaker is not afraid of opening the door to the other side and exploring what is there. She's going to find her fears, her weaknesses but also treasures that can be brought back to the land of the living. In this way, death can be redefined and even pushed back (Montassine 112).

The loss of memory causes a person's dissolution of the self in the poem "Mr Lionheart." This person's name is "Mr Lionheart," maybe as a reference to his unconscious bravery and his unpredictability, like wild animals. Mr Lionheart inhabits a liminal space of selfhood and loss of the mind:

> Mr Lionheart is away today.
> He comes and goes,
> he flickers on and off.
> You might have heard a roar,
> you might not. (lines 1–5)

The speaker articulates the contrast between the golden days of plenitude, of celebration of life and his present condition of mental deterioration:

What is it he forgot
this last time?
I don't mean the keys, the hat.
I mean his tawny days,
the sun, the golden running.
All of our furry dancing.

but then what? Then regret
because we're not. (lines 6–14)

Once they danced together, now their union has disintegrated. The speaker recalls their shared interest in identifying birds in the past, "Birds don't need them, those lost names. / We needed them, but that was then." (lines 17–18), but now the ability to name both others and onself has faded. This loss becomes a powerful symbol of one partner's isolation, as he loses the sense of who he once was, and the speaker's resulting desolation.

In "Flatline," the speaker addresses an undefined "you" in the liminal space between life and death. The first stanzas describe the deterioration of different body parts and the uselessness of the body when not ruled by the mind: "Things wear out. Also fingers." (line 1); "Feet have their own agendas." (line 5); "Ears are superfluous: / What are they for, / those alien pink flaps?" (lines 8–10). For the speaker, her beloved's body has become a trap: "The body, once your accomplice, / is now your trap" (lines 12–13). The fifth stanza depicts his previous life as a landscape of "knotted snares" (line 17), "lacework" (line 17), "tornadoes" (line 18) and "rubble" (line 19), that is to say, complexity, dangers and risks. She imagines him in his present situation as craving for "the end of mazes" (line 20). The following stanza opens with images of natural lines, "a white shore (line 21), "ocean with its horizon" (line 22), which converge into a "flat line" (line 24). The flat line, usually linked to encephalograms and to the end of life, is resignified here as a desirable resting destination for a worn-out body and mind:

and pray for a white shore,
and ocean with its horizon;
not –so much– bliss,
but a flat line you steer for.

No more hiss and slosh,
no reefs, no deeps,
no throat rattle of gravel.

It sounds like this: (lines 21–28)

The flat line is the entrance to a void, a gap, a tabula rasa, represented by a blank space in the page, where, in my view, the speaker can continue recreating the shape of her absent lover. According to Uppal, what is preserved is not as important as what can still be created (51).

The speaker fantasises with the idea of being buried alive with her beloved in the poem "Within":

> Outside we see a shrivelling,
> but from within, as felt
> by heart and breath and inner skin, how different,
> how vast how calm how part of everything . . . (lines 1–4)

The initial "We" gives way to "The lovers caught / and sealed inside a cavern" (lines 6–7). But these dream images of union in death are abruptly interrupted by a memory of the speaker's more realistic experience of her lover's passing:

> Well, anyway
> I held your hand and maybe
> you held mine
> as the stone or universe closed in
> around you.
> Though not me. I'm still outside. (lines 10–15)

The last line intensifies the painful experience of loss and separation that death involves. The speaker admits that she is not sharing this moment with the beloved, that their initial proximity in death was just a fantasy. She is alive and her lover dead and she must continue living with the burden of his absence. The poem provides no comfort in the prospect of a future reunion with the departed, nor does it depict a peaceful farewell. Instead, the speaker expresses uncertainty about whether her lover was even aware of her presence in his final moments: "I held your hand and maybe / you held mine" (lines 11–12). According to Fiamengo, "For Atwood, the clasp of hands represents more than bleak solidarity; it is a celebration rescued from suffering. As the best we can hope for, we reach out to one another in the awareness of our own and one another's mortality" (160).

5. Lost Landscapes as Sources Of Memory

The poem "Salt" starts with direct self-questions the speaker asks herself about a generic past time, "Were things good then? / Yes. They were good. / Did you know they were good? / At the time? Your time?" (lines 1–4). The persistence

of questions in the previous lines adds a sense of urgency for an answer which can only be elusive, as we observe in the second stanza:

> No, because I was worrying
> or maybe hungry
> or asleep, half of those hours.
> Once in a while there was a pear or plum
> or a cup with something in it,
> or a white curtain, rippling,
> or else a hand.
> Also the mellow lamplight
> in that antique tent,
> falling on beauty, fullness,
> bodies entwined and cherishing,
> then flareup, and then gone. (lines 5–16)

The vagueness of the speaker's memories is emphasised by the numerous alternatives introduced by the word "or." The softness of the "white curtain" (line 10) and the "mellow lamplight" (line 12), the evocation of the "the antique tent" (line 13) are abruptly interrupted by a flareup which precedes their vanishing.

In the following stanza, the speaker attempts to repress a past which perhaps was only a mirage: "Mirages, you decide: / everything was never" (lines 17–18). However, her own body seems to affirm the reality of that "mirage":

> Though over your shoulder there it is,
> your time laid out like a picnic
> in the sun, still glowing,
> although it's night. (lines 19–22)

The last stanza questions the biblical story of Lot's wife who turned into a salt statue by looking back to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The poetic persona counteracts that old discourse with some rhetorical questions:

> Don't look behind, they say:
> You'll turn to salt.
> Why not, though? Why not look?
> Isn't it glittery?
> Isn't it pretty, back there? (lines 23–27)

Although the past is a lost landscape that will never return, the speaker insists on recovering that landscape as a source for the creation of memories

and as a site where she can establish a continual dialogue and interaction with herself and with the dead ones, those bodies entwined and cherishing mentioned in line 15.

In the poem "Hayfoot," the poetic persona contrasts her true love's current state as an old man with her memories of his prime, when he was healthy, strong, and able to explore the wilderness. In the first stanza, the speaker follows his love while he walks along a street with great effort due to his difficult physical condition:

> My truelove limps along the street
> hayfoot strawfoot lame foot
> who once was an army marcher.
>
> He's up there now, ahead, in silhouette
> against bright windows, against
> the leather coats, the Sunglass Hut,
> the Ladies' Jewellery:
>
> Hayfoot, straw ...
> Now gone. Blended with shadow. (lines 1–9)

The contrast between the young and the old man dominates nearly every stanza in the poem. In the opening ones, the speaker creates a sense of immediacy by using the present tense, giving the impression that she is reporting her partners' movements as they happen. The alliteration of "limps" and "lame" and the juxtaposition of "hayfoot strawfoot lame foot" underscore the physical deterioration of someone who "once was an army marcher" (line 3). As a young man, he could keep the army cadence of right (hay-foot) and left (straw-foot) foot, but now he must add "lame foot" which is both comic and sad.

The second stanza continues with his difficult and unglamorous walking along the streets. The juxtaposition of "against bright windows, against / the leather coats, the Sunglass Hut, / the Ladies' Jewellery" (lines 4–7) projects a double perspective of this person: the vision of his physical shape against the shop windows but also the effort he is making to complete a simple stroll. In the third stanza, the poetic voice shifts from reporting his steps to simply announcing his disappearance: "Now gone. Blended with shadow" (line 9). The figure of the limping man has slowly faded, from silhouette into shadow. This vanishing image precedes the fourth stanza, where the speaker's certainty about her lover is questioned. She admits the gap between the man she once knew and the man she sees now:

Maybe not himself. Not the same one,
the strider in the autumn woods, leaves yellow,
a whiff of snow
on the frozen ground, bears around,
a skim of ice in the ponds.
then uphill, hayfoot, me gasping
to keep up. (lines 10–16)

The speaker's true love is here "the strider in the autumn woods" (line 11), an energetic and brave man who is neither afraid of bears nor of winter hazzards. In the first stanzas, her partner appeared with his back turned. Now the speaker also sees his back turned but this time because he walks faster than her.

The final stanzas confirm the increasing distance between the speaker and her beloved. He walks on, despite his having no knee: "Why are you still walking? / said the doctor. You have no knee. / Yet on he limps, unseen by me" (lines 18–20). The speaker does not gasp behind him but appears to be waiting for him. Despite the darkness, on this occasion she is able to recognise him:

The red light changes. Darkness clots:
It's him all right,
not even late, his cane foot
hayfoot, straw,
slow march. It's once

it's once upon
a time, it's cane
as tic, as tock. (lines 25–32)

The speaker's beloved is identified because of his cane foot. The repeated syntactic expressions "it's him" (line 26), "it's cane" (line 31) strengthen the metonymy of the cane, symbolising the old man. The sounds "tic" and "tock" (line 32) replace the old marching cadence of "hayfoot" and "strawfoot" and intensify the absence of the person he once was "once upon / a time" (lines 30–31).

In this poem, the speaker affirms a love that continues despite the decrepitude of the body. At the same time, long-term love always involves a certain mourning because we must confront the loss of the selves we once were (Fiamengo 153).

6. Poetry and Memory

The poem "Souvenirs" begins in a conversational tone. The speaker evokes time spent in "alien moon shores" (line 2) and describes the common habit of buying souvenirs for other people. The use of enumerations simulates the accumulation of those objects:

> We'll give these foreign things away,
> the ones we bought at stalls:
> folkloric knitting, droll hardware,
> wooden trolls. Shells, hunks of rock.
> They silt up our luggage.
> They're souvenirs for our friends,
> remembrances. (lines 5–11)

The word "remembrances" becomes fundamental in the later stanzas, where the speaker contemplates the nature of memory and gradually shifts from the casual tone of the opening stanzas to a deeper reflection on poetry and writing as tools to combat loss and oblivion.

In the second stanza, Atwood offers a witty comment on souvenirs and their role. She plays with the word "remember" as if it was a Russian doll:

> But who is to remember what?
> It's a cute hat, but you've never been there.
> I can remember buying it
> and you can remember that I once
> remembered: I remembered
> something for you. (lines 12–16)

The following stanza begins with the speaker transitioning from memories to dreams, detailing how she appears in other people's dreams:

> I appear in other people's dreams
> much oftener than I used to.
> Sometimes naked, they say,
> . . . . . .
> Sometimes as an old dog
> . . . . . .
> Sometimes as a skeleton . . . (lines 21–28)

Finally, the last two stanzas culminate this vision of souvenirs, remembrances and dreams:

> This is what I've brought back for you
> from the dreamlife, from the alien moon shore,
> from the place with no clocks.
> It has no colour, but it has powers,
> though I don't know what they are
> nor how it unlocks.
>
> Here, it's yours now.
> Remember me. (lines 33–40)

As in so many poems by Atwood, this "you" can be personal or collective and she may be addressing her partner or any reader. The speaker shows the final souvenir, the most important one, the one which is not physical but is made of dreams and found in alien moon shores. Its powers are enigmatic and unpredictable, because once it is delivered, it escapes the owner's control. The final lines "Here, it's yours now / Remember me" (39–40) confirm that, for the speaker, only art, poetry and writing will survive and will vanquish death. No other souvenir is more important than the poem. In a materialistic and secular era, the poem becomes a prayer that resurrects the poet. Every time one reads it, she will be there. The poems question separation or severance as a result of death (Uppal 43).

"The Dear Ones" mourns the painful absence of those dead beloved ones. The title sounds like a variation of the expression "the dead ones," which anticipates the content of the poem. It starts with a naive question, "But where are they? They can't be nowhere" (line 1), as if posed by a child asking for absent people. In the following six stanzas, the speaker reports in a conversational tone all the stories told to justify the fact that there were people who disappeared. Those tales were populated by Little People, gypsies, magic places, gold, dancing ceremonies:

> But where are they? They can't be nowhere.
> It used to be that gypsies took them,
> or else the Little People,
>
> who were not little, though enticing.
> They were lured into a hill,
> those dear ones. There was gold, and dancing. (lines 1–6)

The key element in these stories was that the dear ones came back, even though those who awaited them had died:

When they finally reappeared
not a day older
wandering down the road in tatters

in bare feet, their hair all ragged,
those who had waited for them so long
were decades dead. (lines 13–18)

The speaker felt conforted because these stories confirmed that "everyone has to be somewhere" (line 40). Yet, over the years, the same question resurfaces insidiously, but this time the response shapes a narrative of absence:

But the dear ones, where are they?
Where? Where? After a while

You sound like a bird.
You stop, but the sorrow goes on calling.
It leaves you and flies out

over the cold night fields,
searching and searching,
over the rivers,
over the emptied air. (lines 23–31)

The poetic persona tries to dissociate herself from her suffering which, like a bird, starts an impossible search that cannot be completed. Sorrow is associated to inner and outer emptiness: it "leaves you and flies out" (line 27), "over the emptied air" (line 31). The expression "searching and searching" (line 29) conveys perseverance and futility at the same time. As mentioned by Fiamengo, language always fails before the excess of grief (155). The dead ones are the dear ones, and they are not somewhere. This time poetry and language only represent emptiness and offer no consolation against loss. A desolate landscape of "cold night fields" (line 28) and "emptied air" (line 31) is all that remains, where the magic, gold, and dancing have long disappeared.

The poem "Zombie" focuses on how poetry can create zombies, that is to say, on its potential to bring dead people back to life again. Atwood uses a light and comic tone:

How many poems about
the dead one who isn't dead,
the lost one who semi-persists,

nudging hungrily up
through the plant litter, the waste paper,
scratching against the window? (lines 6–11)

According to Montassine, the poetic voice is aware of the power of poetry to bring the dead back to life (121). Former lovers and chilhood monsters are resurrected in poems, haunting the writer with their warnings from the page. Once these figures and stories from the past have been reshaped in a poem, they become eternal and going back is impossible. In a comic way, the speaker begs "*Stay dead! Stay dead!* you conjure, / you who wanted the past back. / Nothing doing. The creature / ambles through the dim forest . . ." (lines 29–32). The poem is the poet's reflection in the mirror and also "The hand on your shoulder. The almost-hand: / Poetry, coming to claim you" (lines 39–40). Poetry may be the best way to win over death, because poems will be there once her own life has ended but, at the same time, the past stories and people that populate those poems cannot be erased and remind us of the painful gap between life and death. Poetry and writing are just attempts to close that gap in order to alleviate the sorrow of living.

In "Dearly," the penultimate poem in the collection, Atwood once again demonstrates that poetry can serve as a space for active interaction with the dead, and that language can be a tool to give shape to absence.

The poem starts as a reflection on the word "Dearly," which the speaker views as old-fashioned and nearly obsolete. She playfully explores it by weaving it into several familiar expressions:

It's an old word, fading now.
Dearly did I wish.
Dearly did I long for.
I loved him dearly. (lines 1–4)

An introspective and nostalgic tone permeates this first stanza, empahsised by the shift from present tense in the opening line to past tense in the final three lines, evoking the remnants of a lost past.

In the second and third stanzas, the speaker is still thinking about the use and meaning of "dearly" while involved in her daily routines, which she depicts in a humorous and playful style: "I make my way along the sidewalk / mindfully, because of my wrecked knees / about which I give less of a shit / than you may imagine" (lines 5–8). While having a coffee, in a mixture of pathos and bathos, another expression with "dearly" comes to her mind:

bearing half a coffee
in a paper cup with–

dearly do I regret it–
a plastic lid–
trying to remember what words once meant. (lines 11–15)

Stanza four opens with the speaker producing more linguistic sequences with "dearly," which form part of the ritual of marriage. The anaphoras reflect the speaker's efforts to revive this old marriage formula, imbuing it with new meaning. Instead of "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God to join together this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony," the speaker adopts these ritualistic words to create a personal elegiac prayer:

Dearly.
How was it used?
Dearly beloved.
Dearly beloved, we are gathered.
Dearly beloved, we are gathered here
in this forgotten photo album
I came across recently. (lines 16–22)

This parodic use of linguistic formulas associated to different rituals challenge traditional notions of grief and mourning (Uppal 49). The pictures in "this forgotten photo album" have deteriorated. Images of fading photographs have appeared before in Atwood's work ("This is a Photograph of Me," *The Circle Game*, 1966; "Girl and Horse, 1928," *Procedures for Underground*, 1970; "Daguerrotype Taken in Old Age," *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 1970; "Man in a Glacier," *Morning in the Burned House*, 1995; "War Photo," *The Door*, 2007). Atwood exposes the limited and deceptive nature of photographs themselves, because they offer only an illusion of permanence and stability (Jamieson 48):

Fading now,
the sepias, the black and whites, the colour prints,
everyone so much younger.
The Polaroids.
What is a Polaroid? asks the newborn.
Newborn a decade ago. (lines 23–28)

The speaker shows an emotional attachment to the photographs, but it is difficult for her to accept them in place of the dearly beloved. In the sixth stanza, the speaker struggles to convey to others her connection with the people in the photographs, along with the ambivalent emotions of preservation and loss these images evoke in her:

So hard to describe
the smallest details of how–
all these dearly gathered together–
of how we used to live. (lines 33–36)

In stanza nine, the speaker concludes the linguistic comments that started in the initial stanza where she paid particular attention to the word "dearly." She broadens the challenge of describing flowers in detail into a deeper reflection on the potential of language and poetry to authentically capture the essence of others' lives and deaths. Poetry would be an unsatisfactory substitute for the dead one, failing to offer consolation against loss and death (Fiamengo 12):

It's the smallest details that foil translators
and myself too, trying to describe.
See what I mean.
You can wander away. You can get lost.
Words can do that. (lines 63–67)

However, the speaker makes a last effort to connect with the dearly beloved by repurposing the traditional marriage vows, creating a secular prayer that expresses both her yearning to preserve their memory and her grief over their absence. The speaker moves from a passive grieving state into an active mourning one (Uppal 39):

Dearly beloved, gathered here together
in this closed drawer,
fading now, I miss you.
I miss the missing, those who left earlier.
I miss even those who are still here.
I miss you all dearly.
Dearly do I sorrow for you. (lines 68–74)

7. Conclusion

For Margaret Atwood, all writing involves and responds to a fascination with mortality, as she explores in her book *Negotiating with the Dead*. In her long career as novelist and poet, topics such as death, memory and the process of mourning have played a significant role in her oeuvre. Atwood's first sequence of elegiac poems appears in the volume *Morning in the Burned House*, where she juxtaposes her father's long paralyzing illness and death with her memories

of him as a younger man. The poet struggles to come to terms with his death by writing a series of poems where she makes an ambivalent use of the conventions of the elegy. The figure of her father remains enigmatic and is never idealised, and the poetic persona questions the potential of poems as consolatory artifacts. However, Atwood resists despair and pessimism in the face of death by crafting dream landscapes where she envisions future encounters with her father.

In this essay, I have discussed a selection of poems from the volume *Dearly*, where Atwood mourns the future absence and the death of her husband, who died after a long illness. In a casual and conversational tone, mixing pathos and bathos, the author portrays psychic landscapes of mourning which reshape loss by placing her beloved one in a liminal space where past and present are juxtaposed as sources of memory. Some poems reveal the difficulty of finding consolation and the painful reality of absence. Yet, Atwood holds on to the act of writing poetry as a means of engaging in an active mourning process, creating a legacy populated by the presence of beloved departed ones. In *Dearly*, Atwood's elegiac poems transform into secular prayers, functioning as both private and communal mourning rituals that facilitate interaction between the living and the dead. The repetitive nature of these rituals suggests the possibility of future encounters with lost loved ones. While art and poetry cannot replace the dead, they serve as spaces for dialogue and connection. The poems emphasise active mourning and memory-making over passive remembrance.

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