

## Writing, Aging and Death in Margaret Atwood's *The Door*

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**Abstract:** In *The Door* (2007) Margaret Atwood continues her movement from the trickster aesthetics of previous works (1965–1986) towards the more human vision that she had developed in her poetry collection *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). *The Door* includes poems written between 1997 and 2007, and they trace similar concerns to other works published at this stage of Atwood's career, such as *The Blind Assassin* (2002) and *Moral Disorder* (2007). My aim in this article is to explore the predominant themes in *The Door*, such as childhood memories, the writing process as a voyage into a dark underworld, death, aging, and the passing of time. Those reflections are accompanied by a formal analysis of the selected poems, where I discuss Atwood's poetic voice, the different structures and rhythms of the poems, as well as the repeated presence of motifs such as the cellar, the underground world, and the well.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood; *The Door*; poetry; writing; aging; death.

**Summary:** Introduction. Memories of the past. Writing the underworld. Artists and aging. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** En el volumen *The Door* (2007), Margaret Atwood continúa su evolución desde la estética ingeniosa de sus obras anteriores (1965–1986) hacia la percepción más humana de la que da cuenta el poemario *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). *The Door* incluye poemas escritos entre 1997 y 2007 que establecen algunos vínculos temáticos con otras obras publicadas durante esta etapa de la carrera de Atwood, como la novela *The Blind Assassin* (2002) o la colección de relatos *Moral Disorder* (2007). El objetivo en este artículo es explorar los temas predominantes en *The Door*: los recuerdos de la infancia, la escritura como viaje hacia un mundo subterráneo, la muerte, el envejecimiento y el paso del tiempo. Estas indagaciones van acompañadas de un análisis formal de los poemas elegidos, que detalla las características de la voz poética de Atwood, las diferentes estructuras y ritmos de los poemas, además de la constante presencia de motivos como la bodega, el mundo subterráneo y el pozo.

**Palabras clave:** Margaret Atwood; *The Door*; poesía; escritura; envejecimiento; muerte.

**Sumario:** Introducción. Memorias del pasado. Escribir el mundo subterráneo. Los artistas y el envejecimiento. Conclusión.

## INTRODUCTION

In *The Door* (2007) Margaret Atwood continues her movement from the trickster aesthetics of previous works towards the more human vision that she develops in *Morning in the Burned House* (1995).<sup>1</sup> Trickster texts have been a hallmark of Atwood's writing. Atwood plays on her readers' preconceptions, prejudices, and on their assumptions about power, relationships and the structures of society. These texts are witty, thought-provoking, and short enough to deceive the reader in one reading. Atwood's novels are too long and complex to be trickster texts, though they use trickster themes extensively. But in her poetry Atwood has constantly subverted conventions and has freely played with language, the primary tool of the trickster. In her early poetic works, Atwood believed that life without art and its tricks was a dead life (Van Spanckeren 104). These initial poetry collections (*The Circle Game*, 1966; *The Animals in that Country*, 1968) build a poetic sequence based on the attraction for make-believe, cruelty, and wit. Her greedy and crafty speakers, her protean and playful poetic personas tend to lure the reader into their traps, as we can see in the famous poem "This Is a Photograph of Me" (1966). Duplicity and paradox are essential in these trickster texts where games are sterile but fascinating, illusory order is false but addictive, the thrill of "love" is exhilarating, but not "loving." The verbal wit shows the excitement of games rather than the pangs of conscience (Davey).

This is a cruel world where hostile economic and political forces threaten our existence, where family and love relationships become abusive. The good guys do not always win in the end; in fact, they almost never win, and loss leads to death. Consequently, according to Atwood, we must use our imagination and wits to survive and to overcome the position of the victim even though this turns us into blithe opportunists. However, a constant reliance on tricks, including deceptions and rhetorical techniques such as masks and dramatic monologues may undermine a work's emotional depth (Van Spanckeren 104). Atwood has

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<sup>1</sup> *The Door* has been reviewed by relevant literary critics in the most important English-speaking journals in the United States, Canada and United Kingdom. It has also been translated into the main European languages and scholars such as Paul Huebener, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson and Marion Wynne-Davis have written about it.

used several of these strategies of projection in her poetry books, usually as a mask to voice her own feelings as a creator and then question the mask's creations, as in "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein" (1968). In "The Wereman" (1970), from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, the speaker fears her trickster husband will return and change her. *You Are Happy* (1974) includes the section called "Circe/Mud Poems," where Circe, a trickster, a witch, the goddess of magic, speaks in a dramatic monologue.

A different poetic vision, more emotionally authentic and human, emerges in *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). Aging, male-female relationships during old age, a look at death from many perspectives (the speaker's own fears at the not so distant transit between life and death, the death of beloved relatives) appear in this poetry collection where the perception that human love, whether present or remembered, is what lasts, pervades most of the poems (Van Spanckeren 106).

In her article on *Morning in the Burned House*, Branko Gorjup points out that the idea of metamorphosis is essential in the book, as part of the speaker's journey through life towards death, where she confronts her former and present selves. Atwood is placing human life within the larger context of nature and ceaseless change (Gorjup 143).

According to Sara Jamieson, in *Morning in the Burned House*, Margaret Atwood continues with the idea of change as an essential component of identity, but this time focusing on old age. Aging involves regeneration and not falling away from an "original," superior self. Also, disguise, alias, and illusion appear as ongoing aspects of identity that are not restricted to middle age alone (Jamieson 274–76).

In his relevant scholarly contribution on *The Door*, Paul Huebener focuses on poet-audience relations and the journey underground. None of these topics are original, as he himself acknowledges: they are recurrent in Atwood's oeuvre. By including those topics and some images, tropes and motifs related to them (the cellar, the trip to the underworld, the well) in this essay, apart from Huebener, I will also follow other scholars such as Frank Davey, Branko Gorjup, Sara Jamieson, and Sharon Rose Wilson among others, who have explored these issues in Atwood's fiction and poetry. This essay approaches *The Door* as a continuation of the poetic vision developed by Atwood in *Morning in the Burned House*. This poetic vision is more emotionally authentic and human than the one displayed by Atwood in her previous poetry collections. In *The Door*, I discuss writing but I also focus on memory, aging and death, and these last issues are overlooked by Huebener in his article. He revises previous

poems and novels by Atwood as a frame to his consideration of writing and the figure of the artist in *The Door*.

Huebener only examines those poems that have to do with the process of writing, the relationship audience/writer, or the authorial trip to the underworld. My study of those motifs incorporates poems which are absent in his essay (“Secrecy”; “One Day You Will Reach. . .”). At other times I offer a more detailed analysis than he does, including the formal elements (see the analysis of “The Nature of Gothic,” for example) which he does not. Huebener explores the topics of the passing of time, the past, memory and death exclusively in the poem “The Door,” whereas I deal with these issues in “Butterfly,” “Year of the Hen,” “My Mother Dwindles. . .,” “One Day You Will Reach. . .,” and “The Third Age Visits the Arctic.” Altogether he just considers or mentions nine poems from *The Door*, whereas I discuss thirteen. Besides, in this essay the reader will find a formal examination of all the selected poems, with references to poetic language, each poem’s persona, main tropes, relevant literary devices, point of view, symbols and metaphors.

*The Door* includes poems written between 1997 and 2007, and they trace similar concerns to other works published at this stage of Atwood’s career, such as *The Blind Assassin* (2002) and *Moral Disorder* (2007). Its poetic language articulates loss and acceptance rather than struggle. Although recognizing loss, the poetic voice holds that loss at bay and emphasizes the importance of connection with an Other (Lucas 327). The poetic “I” cannot be conflated into the real woman. However, the author’s repeated attention to childhood memories, the figures of her parents, and her reflections on death confirm the movement towards greater self-presence in her later poetry that Atwood had begun in *Morning in the Burned House* (Fiamengo 151). We also find political and environmental poems in this work (“Ten O’Clock News”; “War Photo”; “War Photo 2”; “Crickets”; “Bear Lament”), but my aim in this article is to explore the figure of the writer and his/her dilemmas, the writing process as a voyage into a dark underworld, death, aging, and the passing of time. These thematic concerns are accompanied by a formal analysis of the poems where I discuss Atwood’s poetic voice, her shifts in perspective, the different lengths, structures and rhythms of the poems, as well as the repeated use of motifs such as the cellar, the underground world and the well. In most poems I find a second-person speaker whose tone shifts between the urgent and the meditative, the humoristic and the passionate, and between irony and indignation.

## 1. MEMORIES OF THE PAST

I have selected three poems which evoke the poet's childhood, memories of youth, and the figures of her parents. The poem that opens the section, "Gasoline," suggests some of the conflicts developed in later poems in the collection, basically the always difficult representations of reality and truth in art and in literature. From a thematic point of view, this poem evokes a childhood episode that links it with "Butterfly," where the poet's father is recreated as a child impressed by the wonders of the natural world. But it also introduces the figure of the artist and his/her power to understand the world through his/her art, in this case through a poem. The speaker of the poem is a child who discovers the beauty of a gasoline stain on a lake, but is frustrated because of its dangerous nature. The first two stanzas visually portray the poetic voice's increasing fascination with the gasoline stain. At first the speaker is "Shivering" (l. 1), and the water appears "sheenless," but then she is able to compose an abstract painting which becomes her "shimmering private show" (l. 10). The alliterations in "Shivering," "sheenless" and "shimmering" emphasize the transformation of an everyday situation into an aesthetic experience. The poetic voice feels frustrated because of the dangerous nature of the gasoline and compensates for this by calling it other names, all of them associated with natural images, "a slick of rainbow / ephemeral as insect wings, / green, blue, red, and pink" (ll. 7–10). The poem reaches its climax with the questions posed in the third stanza,

Was this my best toy, then?  
 This toxic smudge, this overspill  
 from a sloppy gascan filled  
 with essence of danger? (ll. 11–14)

The tension is released when the speaker answers these questions in the final stanzas, where the intellectual tone contrasts with the visual nature of the first ones. The poetic voice puts into practice the consolations of metaphor and the god-like power the poet has to recreate the world and to express her relationship between reality and truth (Huebener 131). This used to be an ability reserved for gods, only,

I would have liked to drink it  
 inhale its iridescence.

As if I could.  
That's how gods lived: as if. (ll. 21–24)

The phrase “as if” summarizes the position of the artist and her negotiations between reality and truth. She cannot drink gasoline, but can transform it *as if* it were her “shimmering private sideshow” (l. 2). The poem ends with a suggestion about the empowerment provided by the artistic experience, and, at the same time, its futility in a godless world. The phrase “as if” stands out in the last lines as it is built up by monosyllabic words. The aesthetic experience provided by the gasoline stain becomes distilled in sounds and echoes leaving a sense of indeterminacy and transitoriness.

A similar poetic voice of nostalgic remembrance can be found in the poem “Butterfly,” which evokes the childhood of the poet’s father. The poem is built upon images of plenitude and loss, the child’s fascination with the wonders of nature and the fact that that child is now ninety. The precise, flat clarity of remembered detail dominates the poem as the speaker enumerates the flowers, plants and insects her father contemplated on his way to school,

along the sedgy wetfoot shore  
of the brimming eel-filled rush-fringed  
peat-brown river,  
.....  
Along this path he noticed  
everything: mushroom and scat, wildbloom,  
snail and iris, clubmoss, fern and cone. (ll. 5–7, 11–13)

The use of enjambment in lines 11–12, and 14–15 recreates the child’s ceaseless interest in the wild life that surrounded him,

It must have been an endless  
breathing in: between  
the wish to know and the need to praise  
there was no seam. (ll. 14–17)

The smoothness of the previous lines leads to the epiphany experienced by the child when he admires a blue butterfly. This will be the seed of his future scientific career in Biology but, paradoxically, will also set him apart from the natural world of his childhood. The “. . .

abstruse world / of microscopes and numbers, / lapel pins, cars, and wanderings” (ll. 23–25), with its massive presence now replaces the plants and animals of his early wanderings as a boy. The evocation of this lost world marks this poem with a pervading melancholy and fear of the father’s impending death, as well as the difficulty of finding consolation in memory, “and the brown meandering river/he was always in some way after that / trying in vain to get back to” (ll. 29–31).

An abundance of details is also found in the poems devoted to the memory of the poet’s dead mother, “Year of the Hen” and “My Mother Dwindles. . . .” In the first poem, the enumeration of physical objects seems to acknowledge and compensate for the passing of time and the approaching death of the mother:

This is the year of sorting,  
of throwing out, of giving back,  
of sifting through the heaps, the piles,  
the drifts, the dunes, the sediments,  
  
or less poetically, the shelves, the trunks,  
the closets, boxes, corners  
in the cellar, nooks and cupboards— (ll. 1–7)

This return to the past aims to assign connections and assess significance, however, despite the presence of particularized detail, there is always something elusive that cannot be fully expressed (Fiamengo 149). The poem “My Mother Dwindles. . . .” opens with two antithetical parallel structures, “My mother dwindles and dwindles / and lives and lives” (ll. 1–2), introducing the speaker’s anguish at her mother’s mental and physical decline and the mystery of her tenuous hold on to life. The initial antithesis continues with the paradox we see in line 14, “Her blind eyes light the way,” emphasizing the poet’s mixture of admiration for her mother’s resistance and her powerlessness to help her beyond words. In her visits to her mother, the speaker does not bring flowers but contemplates the weeds in her mother’s “derelict garden” (l. 15). She hacks them, but they grow again, “Each time I hack them down / another wave spills forward, / up towards her window” (ll. 18–19). Her mother’s decaying mind resembles this derelict garden where the weeds, “. . . batter the brick wall slowly, / muffle border and walkway, / slurring her edges” (ll. 21–23). Like these unharmonious plants, the old woman’s “. . . order of words / collapses in on itself” (ll. 24–25). The speaker of the

poem acknowledges the mystery of her mother's words, but she does not give up language to reach out to her mother and to dispel despair and grief,

I promised to see this through  
 whatever that may mean.  
 What can I possibly tell her?  
*I'm here.*  
*I'm here.* (ll. 35–39)

In these poems about her childhood and her parents, Atwood shows the ambivalent consolations of memory, which provides moments of illumination which are shadowed by awareness of loss. The repetition of characters and very specific details is a way of acknowledging and compensating for loss. Atwood refuses pessimism and despair and seems to accept these memories as unmerited moments of grace, but is by no means optimistic (Fiamengo 148, 160).

## 2. WRITING THE UNDERWORLD

In this section I have selected a number of poems where Atwood reflects on the writing of poetry and its challenges. She discusses the role of the poet as a kind of prophet and seer, the double-nature of his/her personality as a common human being and as an artist. Also, she explores the poet's attraction towards what lies behind the surface of ordinary life and that she defines as the underworld or the cellar, where he/she will have to face the dead and death. Atwood does not forget the conflictive relationships between authors and audiences, or the deceptive nature of fame. Her poetic voice oscillates between a colloquial and an ironic approach and a confessional and an intimate one.

"The Poet Has Come Back. . ." is built on ideas about the duality and doubleness of the poet. In a detached and mocking tone and displaying a wry humour, Atwood contrasts the traditional image of the poet as a powerful figure in a legendary past, ". . . when God was still thundering vengeance / and liked the scent of blood" (ll. 6–7) with a contemporary period of "deferential smiling" (l. 13), "baking of cookies" (l. 13) and being "*a nice person*" (l. 14). But the speaker welcomes the return of the poet as an authority figure after visiting the dark zones of the self and the world,



Welcome back, my dear.  
 Time to resume our vigil,  
 time to unlock the cellar door,  
 time to remind ourselves  
 that the god of poets has two hands:  
 the dextrous, the sinister. (ll. 15–20)

The cellar is the mysterious and dangerous place the poet needs to visit to confront his/her fears and to face death in order to be able to produce meaningful art for the living. Only after this painful descent to the underworld can the poet come back to the world of the living and show them what he/she has seen and found there. For Atwood, all writing is motivated by a fear of and fascination with mortality and by the artist's wish to make a trip to the underworld and to bring something or someone back from the dead (*Negotiating* 156).

From a formal point of view, Atwood has used couplets, anaphoras, and parallel syntactic structures to reinforce the doubleness, the split self of the writer/poet. The subjective self and the poet self which is created by his/her works and poems and perceived by the audience is not the same person who leads an ordinary life. Only that "authorial part" of that subjective self will survive death (*Atwood, Negotiating* 45).

The final reference to the god of poets as having ". . . two hands: / the dextrous, the sinister" (ll. 19–20) insists on the artists' double nature. He/She can be admired by his/her talents, his/her skills, but inevitably, his/her works display a sinister side which is the product of every artist's visit to the cellar, the underground. Atwood pushes this suggestion further because everybody has two hands, so the issue of split identity and doubleness has to do with all human beings (Huebener 120).

"The Poets Hang On" continues the concerns raised in "The Poet Has Come Back. . ." using a similar wry and ironic poetic voice. In an insolent tone, the collective speaker of the poem expresses their resentment towards the dark message poets transmit. They ridicule their, according to them, pathetic figures, and scorn the poets' pretended insights into human life and death. The use of the present simple tense and the present continuous, together with the presence of casual and rhetoric questions in the first three stanzas adds a sense of immediacy to the poem. The speaker tries to undermine the statement of the first two

lines by accumulating proof against the poets, “The poets hang on. / It’s hard to get rid of them” (ll. 1–2), and repeats that the poets “are having trouble” (ll. 24, 27). Also, the poetic voice wishes to transform poets’ gloomy message into a commercial (“How love is the answer: / we always liked that one” ll. 43–44), and criticizes their pessimism, their inability to fly and to hide the unpleasant elements of reality.

They’re having trouble with their wings, as well.

We’re not getting much from them

.....

No more soaring, no radiance,  
no skylarking.

.....

If they fly, it’s downwards,  
into the damp grey earth. (ll. 27–28, 30–31, 36–37)

All the previous certainties about the negative role of poets dissolve in the last two stanzas. The poetic voice changes its ironic tone to a self-questioning one. The speaker wonders with a certain anxiety what would happen if poets were right, after all. The lines “When asked about it, they say / they speak what they must” (ll. 55–56) stand out over the previous derogatory comments. The positive message contained in the last stanza is formally reinforced by the presence of almost identical parallel syntactic structures (ll. 58–59), by the anadiplosis and anaphora of the word “something” (ll. 59–61), and the anaphoric elements present in the questions. What remains in the readers’ mind is that poets know something about sex, dust and fear, and consequently about life and death,

They know something, though.

They do know something.

Something they’re whispering,  
something we can’t quite hear.

Is it about sex?

Is it about dust?

Is it about fear? (ll. 58–64)

These final questions are the consequence of line 56, “they speak what they must.” The downward movement these poets recreate in their works does not have anything to do with imagination and fantasy, but with facing the grim elements of reality. Poets do not fly, on the contrary,

they stick themselves onto the earth and dig into it. The material for their poems lies there, under the surface. Poets are hard to get rid of because they may have some answers about essential feelings and questions about human existence that we hide in the depths of our mind, mainly answers about life and death.

In "Sor Juana Works in the Garden," the underground poetic journey is presented in a different way. Atwood imagines the seventeenth-century Hispanic poet finding inspiration for her poems. The presence of enumerations, of parallel noun phrases and the varying lengths of lines build an intimate poetic voice that portrays this process in a crescendo, with a climax (l. 27) and a final release of the accumulated tension. Gardening and poetry are equated in the first line ("Time for gardening again; for poetry; for arms / up to the elbows in leftover" ll. 1–2). Both activities have to do with digging, either physically or metaphorically. Gardening becomes effective if one pulls out weeds and puts one's "hands in the dirt" (l. 3). The earth needs to be penetrated and dug by "Scissors, portentous trowel. . ." (l. 20). Digging is essential for effective gardening, although it can also be unpleasant because one may also find ". . .lost marbles, blind / snouts of worms, cat droppings, your own future/bones. . ." (ll. 4–6). Likewise, inspiration, the creative process, requires a descent underground, into the underworld, where darkness and death cohabit. The intellectual discharge that poetry provides is powerful but painful, the same way gardening has to do with flowers but also with dirt and manure, ". . .and that's what poetry is: a hot wire. / You might as well stick a fork / in a wall socket. So don't think it's just about flowers." (ll. 11–13).

Atwood describes poetic inspiration in sexual terms, the power of the physical sensations associated to orgasms to resemble the findings of the poet in her trip to the underworld. The author suggests that the body loses control of itself during an orgasm, and similarly, the revelations the poet encounters after this trip to her personal underworld deprive her of control and occupy her poetic self. The poet cannot protect herself against this invasion of poetic material coming from the underworld:

. . .Your arms hum, the hair  
stands up on them; just one touch and you're struck.  
It's too late now, the earth splits open,  
the dead rise, purblind and stumbling  
in the clashing of last-day daily

sunlight, furred angels crawl  
 all over you like swarming bees, the maple  
 trees above you shed their deafening keys  
 to heaven, your exploding  
 syllables litter the lawn. (ll. 27–36)

These apocalyptic tones reveal the suffering and the difficulties of this personal journey to the dark zones of the poet's life. The gardening metaphor is also applicable to poetry. Working in the garden involves touching dirt and hurting oneself with gardening tools in order to plant or preserve a beautiful flower. Likewise, poetic work is risky and painful, and its findings are often gloomy, because, as we can read in line 13, poetry is not just about flowers.

The intimate poetic voice and the theme of the compulsion to write as a physical function of the body are also present throughout the poem "Secrecy." Secrecy means the state of keeping something secret and evokes the physiological process of secretion by which substances are produced and discharged from a cell, gland or organ for a particular function in the organism. Images of blood (l. 2), melting (l. 6) and dissolution (l. 9) dominate the first stanza. In the previous poem, Sor Juana's ". . .exploding / syllables litter the lawn" (ll. 35–36), in "Secrecy," writing can be "a different kind of blood. / It's as if you have eaten it" (ll. 2–3), like "a different food" which is absorbed by the body and secreted ". . .into its glottals and sibilants" (l.10). The alliteration of /s/ in "secrecy," "sweetly," "slide," "reverse," "dissolved," "sibilants," and "slow" evoke the physical process of a substance becoming part of the body. The secrecy the poem alludes to appears as something physical inside the body, "Secrecy flows through you, / a different kind of blood" (ll. 1–2). It has to do with words, the dark words written on a white piece of paper, it is powerful and becomes obsessive.

In the second stanza, that "different blood" which nourished the compulsion to write has become "dark velvet" (l. 14), and "a poppy made of ink" (l. 16). Literally, writing is setting black ink on a white page, but these dark images also suggest that writing can reveal the obscurity of the soul, and of human existence.

The growing tension of the poem comes to its climax in the last stanza, when the "poppy made of ink" (l. 16) inside the poet becomes ripe. Ripeness is power and the anaphoric repetitions of the last stanza display the different stages of the poet's painful trip to the underworld.

We are struck by the violence of the images, but this journey downwards, this digging into the dark zones of the self and of life, are not without fear or pain. The speaker of the poem uses some images which are fundamental in this poetry collection: the door, the bones, and the well. The stone door gives way to the bottom of the well, a metaphor of the underworld, where the poet has to confront death and the dead (bones). Only after this painful and obsessive trip can he/she rescue something which was buried and bring it to life. The last line, “crying out from the bottom of the well” (l. 25) echoes the “power of knowing without being known,” in line 20, suggesting the necessity of hearing those painful cries to acquire valuable knowledge,

You can think of nothing else.  
 Once you have it, you want more.  
 What power it gives you!  
 Power of knowing without being known,  
 power of the stone door,  
  
 power of the iron veil,  
 power of the crushed fingers,  
 power of the drowned bones  
 crying out from the bottom of the well. (ll. 17–25)

A similar sense of mystery continues in the poem “The Nature of Gothic,” which offers another turn of the screw to the theme of the personal and authorial trip to the underworld. In the first three stanzas, the mysterious and hard voice of an omniscient speaker introduces the reader to a girl who is lost and looking for herself. The nocturnal setting and “the shadows of many fathers” (l. 3) suggest the girl’s inner darkness. Her confusion has to do with a chaotic and cruel reality where fathers do not provide any guidance. Echoes of the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” appear for the first time and nature is silent, without answers or consolation,

I show you a girl running at night  
 among the trees that do not love her  
 and the shadows of many fathers  
  
 without paths, without even  
 torn bread or white stones  
 under a moon that says nothing to her.

I mean it says: *Nothing*. (ll. 1–7)

The accumulation of images of absence, emptiness and nothingness in the following stanzas reveal the girl's attraction towards the dark side of life and her reluctance to accept sensible advice ("It's no use to say/to this girl: You are well cared for" ll. 13–14). The speaker alludes to the girl's mistaken perception as the reason for her wish to transgress the border between life and death and abandon herself to the darkness that threatens to engulf her, "The darkness washes towards her / like an avalanche. Like falling" (ll. 18–19). The line "She would like to step forward into it" (l. 20) anticipates the final poem in this collection, "The Door," where the speaker faces her last journey, the one towards death and is ready to open the door and "step forward" into the other unknown and mysterious side.

In the seventh stanza, the poetic voice unexpectedly changes from the third person to the first, adding a comic relief to the serious content of the poem, "I am the old woman / found always in stories like this one, / who says, *Go back, my dear*" (ll. 25–27).

Suddenly we are in the middle of a tale, with clear reminiscences of "Hansel and Gretel." The lost girl in the dead of the night meets the old woman in the woods who tells her "*Go back, my dear*" (l. 27). But these words have another meaning and this old woman is not the perverse lady of the Grimm Brothers' story. These are the words of the poet asking her to visit a familiar underground place, the cellar, whose importance is emphasized by the use of anaphora and parallel syntactic structures. The cellar is the necessary destination of any poet, but also it is also our destination at some moments of our existence as human beings. The word "cellar" resembles "hell" and the whole stanza evokes Jean-Paul Sartre's words "Hell is other people" in his play *No Exit*. For Atwood, in the cellar, the writer and those who are not writers, like the girl in this poem, face their weaknesses, their fascination with and their fear for mortality, as she reminds us in *Negotiating with the Dead* (156). Mediation with the dark part of the world and the psyche is a necessary part of life itself (Huebener 129):

*Back* is into the cellar  
 where the worst is,  
 where the others are,  
 where you can see

what you would look like dead  
and who wants it. (ll. 28–33)

In the last stanza Atwood refers to personal and artistic freedom as the reward for visiting the cellar. The use of enjambment and the repetition of infinitives in these last lines reinforce the mandatory tone of the speaker's words, "Then you will be free / to choose. To make / your way" (ll. 34–36).

### 3. ARTISTS AND AGING

The last three poems I would like to address aging, growing old and the transformations age imposes on the speaker and her beloved. The themes of metamorphosis, shape-shifting and survival, present in Atwood's previous poetry collection, *Morning in the Burned House*, are explored in these poems. In "One Day You Will Reach . . .," the poetic voice can be interpreted as being simultaneously self-addressed or appealing directly to the reader. The poem is built on stanzas whose content opposes old age, youth and the passage between both time periods. In the first one, the awareness of being old appears after a circular movement, "One day you will reach a bend in your life. / Time will curve like a wind" (ll. 1–2). The use of parallel syntactic structures with the verb "will" reinforces the inevitability of this aging process whose most immediate consequence is a sense of personal loss. The second stanza focuses on what once was and is not anymore, anticipated in the initial lines of the poem and emphasized by the presence of anaphora,

the way they were when you were minus fifty  
and had a glare like winter,  
and kept men's souls in cough syrup bottles  
and could cause dogs to burst into flames. (ll. 6–9)

Whereas in this second stanza, the speaker describes the fierce agency of youth, the third one returns to the future tense, which in the poem is associated with old age. The speaker imagines a future where the gap between her past and present identity is enormous. The loss of a once powerful self, which inspired fear, gives way to "a kind of dutiful respect / that isn't really serious" (ll. 11–12). The old person becomes disempowered and relegated to the world of "a preposterous expensive

hat” (l. 15). The “men’s souls” (l. 8) and flaming dogs (l. 9) are replaced by the juxtaposed elements in these lines: “Wall paper with pink flowers. / Buds in vases. Butterflies” (ll. 19–20).

The progressive draining of the illusions and strength of youth in old age can be appreciated in the transition between stanzas, where loss or changing emotions are contrasted, “will no longer be afraid of you / the way they ought to be, / the way they were when you were minus fifty” (ll. 4–6); “The glittering eyes of the old aren’t gay / or if gay they have the gaiety / of things that have no power” (ll. 16–18).

The previous conversational tone leads to the condensed language, emphasized by the ellipsis of verbs and the enumeration of objects, that we find in the last stanzas:

Wallpaper with pink flowers.  
Buds in bud vases. Butterflies  
drunk on fermenting pears.  
Drunks in the gutter.

Drunks in the gutter singing—  
I forgot to add that. (ll. 19–24)

The bitterness in this last image of old people, “Drunks in the gutter” (l. 22), is intensified by the final couplet, “Drunks in the gutter singing— / I forgot to add that” (ll. 23–24). Line 22 is sad and its repetition with the inclusion of the word “singing” (l. 23) turns the drunks into pathetic figures. The “you” of the poem becomes a first-person speaker who seems to be talking about himself / herself. This casual comment is disturbing because it heightens the powerless and preposterous condition of old age and rejects the expected positive answer to the question posed in the title of the poem, “One Day You Will Reach. . .” There is no summit to reach but a gloomy journey downwards, to the gutter.

“The Third Age Visits the Arctic” offers a very different portrait of old age. In a colloquial tone, the poetic voice, a collective “we,” describes in a comic and irreverent way the trip of a group of old people to the Arctic. The poem is built on the contrast between images of absence, separation from ordinary life, lightness and images of plenitude, and freedom. These old people are enthusiastic and irresponsible, like children, and ready to make the most of this experience:

Off we go, unsteadily down the gangway,



boulded up in our fleecy layers,  
 mittened like infants, breasting—as they  
 once said— the icy waves  
 in our bouncing rubber boat,  
 so full of pills we rattle.

.....  
 Meanwhile, we scream full throttle  
 as the spray hits us,  
 delighted to be off the hook.  
 Not responsible. (ll. 1–6, 11–14)

These details of their trip to the Arctic act as a metaphor of anybody's life journey: to walk unsteadily, to sail in a bouncing rubber boat, to breast the icy waves of life. The heavy burdens of life have not sunk their boat and now these people's lot is light: they do not take themselves too seriously.

The minder's serious attitude contrasts with the old people's unruly behaviour. She wishes to herd them but they insist on doing what they like, "Herding us will be like herding / lemmings. We'll wander off. / Plus, we don't listen" (ll. 21–23). Also, they are not interested in their minders' lessons. The old people escape those enumerations of "flat land," "view of the sea," "berry bushes," "a ring of stones," "a grave," and paradoxically look for emptiness and silence as the most cherished and fulfilling experiences,

So we lie down on the soft moss, gaze up  
 at the sky marbled with cloud  
 and a raven circling, and it's total peace  
 among the voices that do not speak (ll. 38–41)

This is another step in their process of empowerment. The speakers are not afraid of projecting an eccentric image of themselves. The gay and positive tone is kept throughout the poem and the speakers indulge in their behaviour "like huge old children called back to school" (l. 47).

The last stanza represents the culmination of this visit in a real and figurative sense. The strict minder looks at the group from a distant hill ("She stands on one foot, lifts her arms, / a silent message: / Hello! I'm here!") (ll. 50–52). At that moment, the poetic "we" becomes an individual "I," and the poem ends with an epiphany where the speaker asserts her life, her identity and her survival despite her pills, her

clumsiness and her age. She is an old woman who feels fully human and emotionally alive. Her words run parallel to those in line 50. Now she is not a spectator anymore, but the protagonist of her life: “Here is where I am. / I stand on one foot, too” (ll. 53–54). The light conversational tone of the poem, the presence of anecdotes, and the description of comic situations give way to the sincerity and simplicity of these last lines. They evoke the condensed ending of the previous poem, “One Day You Will Reach. . .” and provide an alternative answer to the conflicts of aging. The feeling of life being redundant is replaced by empowerment as a consequence of a sympathetic approach to human life.

The last poem in this collection, “The Door” delves again into issues such as the passing of time, aging and death. It offers a close and intimate overview of the different stages in a woman’s life. The poetic voice is a “you” which simultaneously includes both the speaker and the reader. From a formal point of view, the poem stands out due to its regularity. Each stanza has six or seven lines, and each line includes three or four stresses. The lines “The door swings open” (l. 1) and “The door swings closed” (l. 7) frame four of the seven stanzas as a kind of litany while the rest of the lines build a portrait of the woman’s existence through the juxtaposition of ordinary life details and the enumeration of casual actions and situations associated to life’s different stages: childhood, youth, adulthood, middle age, and old age.

We find a door in each stanza, a door that leads towards that mysterious dark passage we all must take one day as we move from life into death (Huebener 130). The poetic voice appears with different emotional intensity corresponding to the speaker’s responses to the fact of mortality. As a child, she experiences an intense physical fear of death and keeps the door closed to escape from it,

The door swings open,  
 you look in.  
 It’s dark in there,  
 most likely spiders:  
 nothing you want.  
 You feel scared.  
 The door swings closed. (ll. 1–7)

In her youth, the woman is uninterested in the door,

you buy a purse,  
 the dance is nice.  
 The door opens  
 and swings closed so quickly  
 you don't notice. (ll. 10–14)

As she becomes older, she reflects more and more on what may be found on the other side. The casual poetic tone of the previous stanzas becomes introspective, “why does this keep happening now? / Is there a secret?” (ll. 25–26), “it’s dark in there, / with many steps going down. / But what is that shining?” (ll. 36–38). The last stanza shows the woman’s final enigmatic words, “O god of hinges, / god of long voyages, / you have kept faith” (ll. 51–53). These lines are spoken ambiguously either “by” or “to” the “you” of the poem, suggesting that the woman’s life literally hinges upon a gateway to the unseen realm, but that she herself is her own gatekeeper, accepting the transit towards death in a peaceful way, without anger, “You confide yourself to the darkness. / You step in. / The door swings closed” (ll. 55–57) (Huebener 130).

If we read “The Door” in isolation, it is a meditation on death, but read in the context of *The Door* as a whole, it evokes the other motifs which are recurrent in this poetry collection such as the cellar (“The Poet Has Come Back . . .,” “The Nature of Gothic”), the disturbed earth, (“Sor Juana Works in the Garden”), the well (“The Nature of Gothic,” “Secrecy”) the tomb (“The Poets Hang On”), the dug garden (“Sor Juana Works in the Garden,” “The Nature of Gothic”). As I have discussed in this essay, those places are the necessary destination of the essential underworld journey which for Atwood is an inevitable component of being a poet and a human being. Through them, one gains access to poetic knowledge and to the buried past upon which present-tense life is built (Huebener 130).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have discussed a selection of poems from the volume *The Door* (2007), by Margaret Atwood. The first poems dealt with are those concerning the author’s autobiography, containing memories from her childhood and the figures of her parents. Indeed, “Gasoline” and “Butterfly” display a poetic voice of nostalgic remembrance and they both begin with an image, that of gasoline and a butterfly respectively.

The poems devoted to the poet's deceased mother enumerate many physical objects in an attempt to compensate for the imminent emptiness her mother will leave after her death. Atwood shows the ambivalent consolations of memory, which provides moments of illumination which are shadowed by an awareness of loss.

The core part of the essay is devoted to the analysis of a number of poems where Atwood reflects on writing, and the role of the poet as a common human being and as an artist. The author also explores the poet's drive towards what lies beyond the surface of ordinary life. She imagines this attraction as a trip to the underworld or the cellar, where the poet/artist will face the truth about his / her existence. In "The Poet Has Come Back . . ." and "The Poets Hang On," Atwood uses a wry and ironic poetic voice to describe the conflictive relationships between authors and audiences and the necessity of the poet to descend to the underworld in order to gain poetic insight, despite audiences' derogatory comments.

This poetic underground journey is presented in a different way in "Sor Juana Works in the Garden." In an intimate and confessional voice, Atwood describes the seventeenth-century Hispanic poet finding inspiration for her poems after a personal journey to the dug garden which symbolizes the dark zones of the poet's life. A similar intimate poetic tone is displayed in "Secrecy," which refers to the compulsion to write as a physical function of the body. The journey downwards, the digging into the dark zones of the self and of life are painful and risky but essential to obtain valuable poetic knowledge. "The Nature of Gothic" revisits a familiar place in this poetry collection such as the cellar, where writers and non-writers face their weaknesses and their most intimate fears. Their reward will be personal and artistic freedom.

The last poems in this essay deal with aging and death. "One Day You Will Reach . . ." mixes a conversational tone with a more elliptical and condensed approach to the process of growing old, which is presented as a trip towards powerlessness and death. "The Third Age Visits the Arctic" offers a very different portrait of old age. In a colloquial and humorous tone, the speakers turn a trip to the Arctic into an opportunity for personal empowerment. A final meditation on life and death can be found in the poem "The Door," where the poet and the ordinary person share fundamental preoccupations (Huebener 132).

Fernando Pessoa, the Portuguese poet, said that the poet is a pretender ("O poeta é um fingidor"). But in this poetry collection,

Atwood invites us to open the doors of our existence and be ready to face the truth about it. Poetry offers consolation against the fear of death and aging. The protean self, the disguises of identity shown in the author's previous poetry collections have been replaced by an acknowledgement of something permanent in us. Our bodies age, but we still maintain some features of the person we once were, just like Atwood's father who continued to feel wonder for the natural world of his childhood even after becoming a scientist. The Canadian landscape so often used as a metaphor in Atwood's first poetry collections parallels the inner wilderness which this book helps to confront and explore.

The fireworks and technical bedazzlement of Atwood's early poetic works give way to emotional authenticity and personal openness in *The Door*. Cruelty has been left behind in favour of irony and wit. The poet is not a pretender but a human being who shares her findings after many trips to the underworld. Her poems build the path for us to reach this place by ourselves with the promise of not being betrayed.

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