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"I Need You to Be Somewhere": Margaret Atwood´s Ecopoetics of Hope and Endurance in *Dearly*

Résumé

Avec Dearly*, Margaret Atwood évoque le chagrin suivant la mort d'un partenaire de vie dans un contexte plus grand de lamentation sur l'altération incessante du monde naturel aux mains de l'humanité. En corrélation avec un environnement perçu comme menacé d'extinction, le sentiment de perte personnelle acquiert des proportions cosmiques voire apocalyptiques, mais le chagrin est également atténué par l'observation de la vie naturelle en mouvement, l'introspection, la mémoire et l'expression poétique, qui fonctionnent comme des vecteurs de durabilité contre la destruction et la mort, dans un monde où l'on apprend, paradoxalement, « s'il n'y avait pas de vide, il n'y aurait pas de vie » (Atwood 2020, 13). Le recueil convoque une métaphore du soi qui est « interconnecté avec l'environnement élargi » (Alaimo 2010, 20), où la mort physique est inscrite dans un réseau fragile mais régénératif d'existence continue, où l'émotion joue un rôle décisif. J'affirme ici que par le médium de la poésie, Atwood met l'accent sur des modes transformateurs de pensée écologique dans un paradigme du renouvellement. En outre, cet article montre comment au centre de tels modes transformateurs se trouve la recherche essentielle de la « structure qui relie » (Bateson 1979, 7) l'humain et le non-humain. Dans mon analyse j'examinerai la manière dont Atwood envisage la poésie comme un « interdiscours réintégrateur » (Zapf 2017, 95) au centre d'un univers durable, en vue d'une nouvelle sensibilité éthique envers la vie et l'environnement.*

Abstract

Margaret Atwood´s most recent poetry collection evokes the sorrow following the death of a life partner in a larger context of lament over the unremitting alteration of the natural world at the hands of humanity. As it correlates with an environment that is perceived as threatened by extinction, the feeling of personal loss acquires cosmic or even apocalyptic proportions, yet grief is also alleviated through the observation of natural life in flux, introspection, memory, and poetic expression, which function as vectors of endurance against destruction and death, in a world in which one learns, paradoxically, "if there were no emptiness, there would be no life" (Atwood 2020, 13). Arguably, the collection conjures a metaphor of the self that is "interconnected with the wider

environment" (Alaimo 2010, 20), whereby physical death is inscribed in a fragile yet regenerative web of ongoing existence, to which emotion is key. It is my contention here that through the medium of poetry, Atwood in Dearly *puts forth transformative modes of ecological thought within a paradigm of renewal and survival. Additionally, I argue that these modes are informed by the essential search for "the pattern which connects" (Bateson 1979, 7) between the human and the non-human. Thus, this paper will show how Atwood frames poetry as a "reintegrative interdiscourse" (Zapf 2017, 95) at the center of a sustainable universe, toward new forms of ethical and ecological awareness for life and the planet.*

The poet has come back to being a poet
after decades of being virtuous instead. […]

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.

("The Poet Has Come Back…", Atwood 2007, 25-26)

1. Introduction: Ecological Poetry and Poetics

"A book is a voice in your ear" (2017, 24:32ff) Margaret Atwood said to the audience in her Peace Prize[1] acceptance speech in Frankfurt, in October 2017. After briefly greeting us in German and making us smile on a journey through personal childhood memories at the beginning of that speech, Atwood talked (in English) about present "moments of threat and rage" (9:29) (due to climate change, social unrest, wars, refugees, fear of refugees, financial unbalance, and others) and dystopian futures – even more predictable to her in the era of Donald Trump's presidency in the US at the time – and our smiles turned to shivers… Following a short incursion into the parable of the "wolf in sheep´s clothing or even [of] a wolf in wolf's clothing" (13:03ff), Atwood decided not to "depress [us] too much" (22:06ff), and continued her speech by stating

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1 In October 2017, Atwood was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book trade for her "political intuition and clairvoyance when it comes to dangerous underlying trends and currents" (Riethmueller 2017).

her faith in the power of human imagination and of books to still change the world for the better. She expressed her hope that literature alone could maybe not save the earth, but remained nevertheless a prolific space of dialog between writers and readers and a carrier of human values into the future. While she justly claimed that there was "cause for alarm on many fronts" (9:07ff), Atwood also pointed out the transformative role of literature toward an ethics of political and ecological commitment.

As *Dearly* was published in 2020, it echoed back to Atwood's Peace Prize speech from 2017. Certain nuances of dark humor notwithstanding, *Dearly* is a profoundly lyrical, meditative, and cautionary collection. It contains poems of personal and political change written across a time span of about 11 years (2008-2019): "During those eleven years, things got darker in the world. Also, I grew older. People very close to me died." (Atwood 2020, Preface to *Dearly*, n.p.). On a personal level, the book is dedicated to Atwood's life partner – "for Graeme, in absentia" (*Dearly*, dedication, n. p.) – whereas politically it is largely informed by the ecological crisis of the past years and decades. As it unfolds under the sign of mourning for the loss of someone dear, the collection takes us on a journey beyond personal grief, through a natural world that is "burning up" ("Aflame," 52) due to human negligence in what Atwood calls the "Plasticene" ("Plasticene Suite," 83) era, and into an apocalyptic future populated by zombies, werewolves, and aliens threatening or even replacing humans as part of a "thrilling […] horror show" (60).

Dearly first and foremost highlights non-hierarchical processes of connectivity and reciprocity between self and the world and invites ecological awareness. I argue that through its attentiveness to nature, its ecocentric rhetoric, and its interrelational aesthetics, *Dearly* is a work of ecopoetry. One accurate definition of the term, which summarizes the main goals and functions of ecopoetry, is given by Ann Fisher Wirth and Laura-Gray Street:

> Generally, this poetry addresses contemporary problems and issues in ways that are ecocentric and that respect the integrity of the other-than-human world. It challenges the belief that we are meant to have dominion over nature and is skeptical of a hyperrationality that would separate mind from body – and earth and its creatures from human beings – and that would give preeminence to fantasies of control. Some of it is based in the conviction that poetry can help us find our way back to an awareness that we are at one with the more-than-human world. (2013, xxviii)

Moreover, *Dearly* raises questions about the ways in which perception, memory, and artistic creation negotiate the relationship between self and world. Its ecopoetics (a term that generally refers to the incorporation of ecological perspectives and

principles into writing)[2] consists of the associative flux created between human, nonhuman, animate and inanimate elements seen as part of a universal continuum. These elements are placed in a relationship of transformative co-dependence that resonates with Jonathan Bate's definition of ecopoetics "not as a set of assumptions or proposals about particular environmental issues, but as a way of reflecting upon what it might mean to dwell with the earth" (Hume/Osborne 2018, 10). In short, my main argument here is twofold: Firstly, I will show that Atwood's ecopoetics, which appears based in the conviction that there is a visceral connection between humans and their surrounding ecosystem, raises awareness about loss and renewal on a personal *and* universal scale through explorations of perception, memory, and writing as ecological acts. Secondly, I claim that *Dearly* exemplifies how literature works as a force capable of instilling an ecological ethics into our hearts through poetic emotion. Methodologically, in what follows I will provide an overview of Atwood's writing about nature from the 1960s until today, which will serve to emphasize the ways in which *Dearly* puts forth an unprecedented approach to the theme of the environment and is in this respect distinct from Atwood's previous works. I will then explain why Gregory Bateson's concept of *connecting patterns* (as first developed in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity,* 1979) as well as a phenomenological reading best suit Atwood's artistic and ethical goals in *Dearly*, before demonstrating the validity of my arguments through a more elaborated analysis of the poems.

2. Margaret Atwood and the Environment

Atwood is not the only (Canadian) influential writer who, in the past few decades, has been drawing attention to the dangers of climate change as a direct consequence of human irresponsibility. Like Atwood in *Dearly*, Don McKay, Di Brandt, Randy Lundy, or Ross Belot[3] (to name only a few Canadian poets whose works in the field have been published between roughly 2000 and 2020) have also seen in poetry a useful tool to explore the complexities of the ecological crisis we are currently going through and to implicitly raise a call for action in texts that express a compelling sense of anxiety, empathy, and rage, but also oppose artistic beauty to environmental destruction. Coming back to Atwood, nature and environmental concerns have played a major part in her work from the 1960s onwards. Since then, Atwood has repeatedly warned her readers and audiences about the "galloping environmental carnage" threatening to take over the world as a result of human ignorance and the careless exploitation of natural resources. Thus, in her Clarendon lectures published under the title *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), she suggests: "If white Canadians would adopt a more traditionally Native attitude towards the natural

2 See Hume and Osborne (2018, 2).

3 More specifically: Di Brandt, *Now You Care* (2003), Don McKay, *Paradoxides* (2012), Ross Belot, *Moving to Climate Change Hours* (2020), Randy Lundy, *Field Notes for the Self* (2020).

world, a less exploitative and more respectful attitude, they might be able to reverse the galloping environmental carnage of the late twentieth century and salvage for themselves some of that wilderness they keep saying they identify with and need" (Atwood 1995, 60).

Whereas associating Atwood's writing with the theme of nature, the land, and the wilderness has become standard practice in literary criticism, a few distinctions should be made at this point as to the role nature plays in Atwood's texts. Undeniably, natural landscapes and the wilderness are ubiquitous motifs in Atwood's fiction, poetry, and essays, in the context of a twentieth-century crisis of space that both matched and exacerbated Canada's obsession with the land. As Verena Bühler Roth writes in 1998,

> [t]he twentieth century has seen unprecedented forms of human interference with nature. Natural spaces have been destroyed not only through the development of new technologies but also by accompanying changes in political and cultural thinking. The new quality and dimension of the loss of nature and our alienation from the natural have increasingly been reflected in the arts, meaning that a re-orientation of our relationship to the natural environment has been thematized. (8)

A few years later, in her 2006 study titled "Margaret Atwood's Short Stories and Shorter Fictions", Reingard M. Nischik aptly points out that especially Atwood's short stories often deal with "the contemporary ecological problems which affect Canada so profoundly" (152). I will use Nischik's statement as a starting point for a brief survey of Atwood's work on nature as a first frame of reference for my analysis of *Dearly* further below. To begin with, as early as 1972, in the novel *Surfacing*, Atwood's protagonist evades human civilization to merge with the wilderness in a search for identity that beside raising questions of gender also draws attention to the larger post-1960s debate around Canada's national and cultural identity. Similarly, in *Survival*: *A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Atwood shows how the Canadian natural environment simultaneously exerts fascination, terror, and claustrophobia, and by drawing on Northrop Frye's idea of a "garrison mentality" (Frye in Klinck 1965, 342) criticizes Canadian tendencies of using space as a physical, psychological, and cultural frontier in the relationship with the rest of the world. *Survival* also provides an early perspective on Atwood's view of literature as capable of shaping patterns of action and thought, which will resonate with the message of her Peace Prize speech forty-five years later: "A piece of art, as well as being a creation to be enjoyed, can also be [...] a mirror. The reader looks at the mirror and sees not the writer but himself; and behind his own image in the foreground, a reflection of the world he lives in" (1972b, 15). If, further on, we take a look at Atwood's short stories, we see how for instance in *Wilderness Tips* (1991), or more recently in *Stone Mattress* (2014), nature is often a mighty central setting, the force of which can be

deadly when underestimated or ignored. In Atwood's earlier fiction the landscape is often meant to have a healing effect, but more often than not also appears as bewildering and 'malevolent', simultaneously protective and threatening, seductive and destructive. This ambivalence is sublimated with *The MaddAddam* trilogy (2003; 2009; 2013), which by taking its readers into one of Atwood's possible futures urges them to envision the devastating effects of human carelessness toward the environment in three interrelated apocalyptic, ominous, and dystopian narratives. Moving on to Atwood's poetry, the environment often emerges as a prevalent theme there as well: Chronologically, *The Animals in That Country* (1968) and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) both tackle the relationship of the first settlers with the new land and emphasize the necessity to merge with the environment and to acknowledge its power in order to survive or not go insane. Afterward, *You Are Happy* (1974) and *True Stories* (1981) connect traditional quest and conquest narratives with the intrusive violence of patriarchy on women and on the land, which again may lead to madness and death, before *Interlunar* (1984) readdresses such threats but also alleviates them through an embedded rhetoric of hope. In her latest poetry collections, then, Atwood suggests that awareness about the disturbed relationship between humans and nature and the wish to counteract the inevitability of destruction with a new sense of responsibility and care are the only forces that can improve the prospects of life on the planet. Additionally, in *The Door* (2007), she first draws an explicit connection between gardening, the future, and poetry, which will be further explored in *Dearly*: "Time for gardening again; for poetry; for arms / up to the elbows in leftover / deluge, hands in the dirt, groping around / among the rootlets, bulbs, lost marbles, blind / snout of worms, cat droppings, your own future / bones (…)" ("Sor Juana Works in the Garden," 30).

On the one hand, not only through her work as a poet, novelist, and short-story writer, but also through her lectures, speeches, and postings in the social media, has Atwood become known for her activism and her commitment to environmental issues. On the other hand, although nature has played a large part in Atwood's writing to date, there is lack of critical consensus when it comes to calling Atwood an environmentalist or an ecocentrist writer. Ronald B. Hatch, for instance, addresses one facet of this debate by claiming that

> Atwood has something in common with recent ecocentrist writers in their rejection of the anthropomorphic viewpoint and their struggles to re-position humanity as one species among many in a web of natural connections. Yet Atwood can hardly be called ecocentrist, since she rarely focuses on the natural world as her *principal* subject. (2000, 181; original emphasis)

Indeed, as Shannon Hengen seems to confirm shortly after the publication of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the treatment of nature in Atwood's work often refers to the

preservation of a "human place" in the natural environment and thus retains traces of the more traditional human/nature dichotomy, regardless of its dismissal of hierarchies or of its focus on the importance of natural, non-artificial conditions for human life:

> Environmentalism in the works of Atwood […] becomes a concern with the urgent *preservation of a human place* in a natural world in which the term 'human' does not simply imply 'superior,' or 'alone,' and in which what is fabricated or artificial is less satisfying than what has originally occurred. (Hengen 2006, 74; emphasis added)

Starting from this brief overview of Atwood's works and considering the main points of the critical debate around Atwood's treatment of the environment across different genres, it seems to me that *Dearly* marks *a turning point* in Atwood's vision of nature in her writing. Thus, unlike its precursors, the speaker of Atwood's most recent poetry collection hardly identifies as separate from nature, and appears in fact to be organically, painfully aware of being one with the natural environment. In *Dearly*, there is no distinct vantage point from which the speaker observes nature as a separate entity. Moreover, in contrast with earlier texts, *Dearly* neither deals with feelings of human loneliness in nature, nor does it acknowledge nature as threatening or as terrifying. On the contrary, nature here is perceived as vulnerable, comforting, and intimate. The theme of environmental decay is to a large extent approached with deep tenderness and sadness, but equally imbued with hope. As previous questions of identity recede into the background, the trope of nature no longer seems to be a means to an end: Emphasis is no longer placed on the human speaker's position in relation with nature, but on modalities to ensure the survival of a natural environment of which humans are an intrinsic part. Nature's devastation and its destruction appear contingent with the aging and death of the human body, and a sense of acute mutual empathy and regeneration, co-dependence, or symbiosis emerges throughout the collection – what Hubert Zapf would call "a deeper biosemiotic symbiogenesis between human and nonhuman life" (2017, 166).

3. Connecting Patterns

In his 1996 study titled *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell formulated four influential criteria for environmentally-oriented writing, which are arguably all implicit in *Dearly*:

> 1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. […] 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. […] 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation. […] 4. Some sense of the

> environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7-8)

My contention here, however, is that Atwood in *Dearly* goes beyond expressing environmental concern mainly through the choice of subject matter (as Buell's criteria seem to suggest) and focuses in addition on a central rhetoric of connectivity and on the kind of interrelational aesthetics that, as shown above, pertain to ecopoetry.

Starting from this premise, in my analysis of the collection I will mainly draw on Gregory Bateson's concept of "connecting patterns" (1979) – defined as a form of "recognition and empathy" (8) between living and nonliving entities. The concept permeates Bateson's writing in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unit* (1979), in which he revises the relationship of mind and nature as separate entities and advances new modes of interrelational and transformative ecological thought. A recent reading of Bateson's *Mind and Nature* by Hubert Zapf through Noel G. Charlton emphasizes how these connecting patterns are indicative of hidden or repressed human knowledge that can be reactivated symbolically through art:

> These connecting patterns belong to the domain of "buried knowledge" which, according to Bateson, art and literature make symbolically accessible, a deeper knowledge of human culture and the human psyche relating to primary processes and unconscious memories which remain inaccessible to "straight-line linear causal" thinking (Charlton 2008, 107). The most important feature of this buried knowledge, which both reflects and undermines the civilizational split between mind and body, is the repressed knowledge of "our unity with the rest of the living world, our inextricably integrated membership of the family of living beings" (Charlton 2008, 107). (Zapf 2017, 165-6)

Bateson's connecting patterns are therefore directly related to poetry's more 'expansive' way of knowing. His insistence on more capacious epistemologies of self and the world based on relational and metaphorical thinking (rather than on Cartesian rationality and logics) appears helpful in exploring Atwood's ecopoetics in *Dearly*. In fact, I see a central connection here between Bateson's trust in metaphorical thinking as a means to bring to surface hidden human knowledge about life and the universe and Atwood's vision of poetry as a means of cultural regeneration: Atwood's relational poetics in *Dearly* seems significantly informed by Bateson's call for increased responsiveness to the rhythms of the natural world:

> We have been trained to think of patterns, with the exception of those of music, as fixed affairs. It is easier and lazier that way, but of course, all nonsense. In truth, the right way to begin to think about the pattern

> which connects is to think of it as primarily (whatever that means) a dance of interacting parts and only secondarily pegged down by various sorts of physical limits which organisms characteristically impose. (Bateson 1972, 13)

Moreover, Bateson's suggestion that "the poets have always known these things" (1979, 469) relates well to Atwood's own conviction that the poets "…do know something. / Something they are whispering, / something we can't quite hear" ("The Poets Hang On", *The Door*, 40).

In what follows, I will describe the way in which the world reveals itself through awareness to the responsive, sensing speaker of *Dearly.* For that, I will be looking at the poems through the lens of phenomenology and of new materialism. As Don McKay puts it, "phenomenology is one name for the path back from the object to the thing, the counterbalance to objectification, or 'progress'. Poetry is another" (2012, 66). Keeping in mind French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim that "we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world" (1966, xiii), I mainly rely on David Abram's investigative study of language as the expression of a fluid, "participatory nature of perception" (1996, 57) in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996). When referring to "the mindful life of the body" (44), Abram argues that

> [t]he living, attentive body […] is this very being that, pondering a moment ago, suddenly took up this pen and scribbled these thoughts. It is the very power I have to look and to see things, or to turn away and look elsewhere, the ability to cry and to laugh, or to howl at night with the wolves, to find and gather food whether in a forest or a market, the power to walk upon the ground and to imbibe the swirling air. Yet 'I' do not deploy these powers like a commander piloting a ship, for I am, in my depths, indistinguishable from them, as my sadness is indistinguishable from a certain heaviness of my bodily limbs, or as my delight is only artificially separable from the widening of my eyes, from the bounce in my step and the heightened sensitivity of my skin. (46)

Abram envisages the ideal relationship between humans and the world as filtered through a form of consciousness that requires a permanent attunement of perception to the surrounding environment, in which one does not seek to explain the world from an outer perspective but co-participates in engendering this world in a spontaneous process of improvisation and reciprocation.

In my reading of *Dearly*, I also include Jane Bennett's vision of a more horizontal experience of the relationship "between persons and other materialities" (10), in favor of an increased ecological sensibility, as she describes this vision in *Vibrant Matter* (2010): "These vital materialists do not claim that there are no differences between humans and bones, only that there is no necessity to describe these differences in a

way that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex" (11). Not only do Bennett's arguments in favor of a de-hierarchization of the relationship between humans and the environment mirror Atwood's ethics in *Dearly*, but in Atwood's blurring of borders between human and natural life (and death) throughout the collection we also recognize the truth of Bennett's statement whereby "[w]e are walking, talking minerals" (ibid.) – creatures of nature, made of nature, and subject to its laws.[4]

4. The Ecopoetics of *Dearly*: Perception, Memory, and Writing

To exemplify, I will now turn to the title poem, "Dearly" (Atwood 2020, 118-120), and show how the feeling of sorrow that pervades the collection is framed here as a benign and integrative metaphor of endurance that highlights the ecological dimension of perception. As the speaker takes a walk "along the sidewalk / mindfully" ("Dearly", 118) and dives into memory "trying to remember what words once meant" (118), we come to deplore the imminent loss of first one word – "dearly" (118, 120) – and then of another one, "sorrow" (120) – which in the last line of the poem will become complementary in the speaker's confession: "I sorrow dearly" (120). Elegiac in tone, the poem is centered on the fragility of words facing extinction, on loss, aging, and a general sense of decay. From the beginning, loss functions as a connecting pattern between the human element – the aging speaker, with "wrecked knees" (118) – living entities – the "dusty" (119) flowers the speaker passes by, themselves "fading" (119) and "heading into fall" (119), – and nonliving elements – words, belonging to "an old world, fading now" (118). By zooming in on details of perception, the poem choreographs an empathetic correlation between apparently non-adjacent realms, in which fragility also emerges as a connecting pattern. The speaker's gesture of awareness toward the fading flowers, however, snatches them for a moment from the flux of time, decay, and death.[5] This is indicative of a dialogue between human and non-human, animate and non-animate elements that is reminiscent of David Abram's claim whereby on a deeper level humans should be

4 In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett makes a further point that relates well to Atwood's ethical approach in *Dearly* and reinforces phenomenological principles that seem central to it: "We are vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way. The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it." (2010, 14)

5 A comparison with William Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud," focused on the symbolism of daffodils vs. chrysanthemums, the choice of setting (rural vs. urban landscape), and the dominant mood (melancholy vs. anxiety) in the two poems, might create a productive parallelism between a 19th-century text usually associated with nature poetry and Atwood's 21st-century ecopoetry.

capable of engaging in a "sort of silent conversation […], a continuous dialogue" that takes place "far below [one's] verbal awareness" (1996, 52).[6]

Perception implies attentiveness, and care: By looking at old photographs, old passports, mittens, buttons, shells, "hunks of rock" (Atwood 2020, "Souvenirs", 10) the speaker of *Dearly* inscribes physical disappearance on the regenerative trajectory of affective memory. The material / external memory captured in such "remembrances" (ibid.) meets the emotional memory of a "place with no clocks" ("Souvenirs", 11) where time stands still, and which decay or forgetfulness therefore cannot enter. The dwelling on objects for psychological comfort attests to an ecological sensibility that is subversive of separateness, in which the human and the non-human coexist in a non-hierarchical and mutually supportive relationship. Objects, words, and flowers thus become, as Jane Bennett would have it, 'vibrant matter' within a space of hypersensitivity in which one is human not only *in*, but especially *with*, the environment. Earlier on in the collection Atwood implies that, beside objects, the stories that we tell (and that are also stored in memory) can bring solace against despair and provide a space of renewal in response to physical death: "These were the kinds of stories / we used to tell. They were comforting in a way / because they said // everyone has to be somewhere" (2020, "The Dear Ones", 40). Further on, the way memory can function as a connecting pattern between past and present, self and other, or death and life, is reiterated as the speaker's effort to remember the word 'dearly' in context (i.e. in familiar situations and phrases) is meant not only to literally rescue the word itself from extinction, but also as a mantra capable of replacing the sense of emptiness given by loss with a sense of continuity and comfort. The speaker's attitude toward words in *Dearly* confirms Atwood's long-term belief in language as vital to the human condition and as an integrative, ecological force. This becomes apparent if we consider that, in the title poem, the word "fading" (Atwood 2020, "Dearly", 118, 120) is repeated five times, which at a careful reading seems to place it in direct contrast with the word "missing" (120), also repeated five times all in all. In the symmetry thus created, 'missing' can be read as the counterpart of 'fading': What is 'missed' (i.e. summoned in memory, recalled, longed for, needed, and wished for) can no longer 'fade'. In other words, only what is not disregarded can continue to exist. Language captures here the "conative nature" that "every nonhuman body shares with every human body", (Bennett 2009, 2) which Jane Bennett refers to in connection with Spinoza's concept of *conatus* (in Parkinson 2000, 171), defined as "an 'active impulsion' or trending tendency to persist" (Bennett 2009, 2). Poetic expression therefore also emerges as a connecting pattern between what has vanished or is threatened and what continues to exist.

6 "The world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn." (Abram 1996, 33)

Another example, which well illustrates the ecological force of affective memory in *Dearly* and asks the question of what kind of borders exist between body and the universe,[7] is a small poem titled "Bird Soul" that is part of the cycle titled "Songs for Murdered Sisters". The poem deals with the speaker's feelings of grief over "[s]o many sisters lost / So many lost sisters // [...] Over the years, thousands of years, / So many sisters lost / So many tears..." (Atwood 2020, "Bird Soul", 36). Ambiguity is here a dominant device, since the referent of "bird soul" is never clear: Is it one of the many women / "sisters" murdered throughout a history of violent patriarchy, as the entire cycle might suggest? Or is it, again, the life partner whose death is mourned in the entire collection? Is it up to the reader to assign another, more personal and subjective referent to the title phrase? In the speaker's imagination, the "bird soul" takes up a diversity of forms – "a spring bird with a joyful song", a fearless "high flyer", a melancholic "evening bird", or a "soft-feathered predator" –, which invests the spirits of the dead with new life and connects human memory to notions of cyclic temporality and endurance. What is, however, clear from the beginning is that "bird soul" connotes a shape-changing process that challenges fixed notions of corporeality and identity and connects the elements of earth and air. [8]

Significantly enough, the entire poem seems written under the sign of the conditional 'if' ("*If* birds are human souls", emphasis added), which not only posits human existence as co-extensive with the nonhuman, but also seems to function as a premise of connectivity of the living with those already gone. Semantically, the first two lines of the poem can be read simultaneously as invocation, lament, and prayer: "If birds are human souls / What bird are you?". In addition, the present continuous tense used to describe the bird souls' actions ("watching", "singing", "hunting"), the oxymoronic construction of the last stanza ("I know you are not a bird, / Though I know you've flown / So far, so far away"), and the multiple interrogations the poem contains converge toward the impression of openness and relationality in the speaker's ontological search for a connecting pattern in the memory of the living "holding" the dead, across species and time. The poem stands out through its compelling aesthetics of plurality and continuity, which lies in fact at the core of the entire collection but is manifest here in more compact form. The quest for connecting patterns bringing together past and future, mind and soul, self and other functions in this poem (and in the whole collection) as a vector of hope within a paradigm of love and endurance: As the speaker dwells on the observation of birds in stanzas of powerful nature imagery, the birds inspire the poem, and the poem in turn immortalizes their ephemeral existence through language, in an organic dynamic of growth that bridges the gap between nature and thought. As noted by Timo Müller, "[...] nature imagery is not an unfortunate deviation from clear, rational description

7 Abram argues that "[...] the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and change" (1996, 46).

8 All quotations in this and in the following paragraph are taken from Atwood 2020, "Bird Soul", 36, if not otherwise indicated.

but a source of creativity in itself. Anything but devoid of societal relevance, it acts as a corrective to the dominant patterns in which we think (causality, linearity, rationality) as it asserts and disseminates organic conceptions of language, thought, and life" (2016, 599). In the end, the last line of the poem in its use of the second-person pronoun and its direct implications of obligation and necessity – "I need you to be somewhere" (Atwood 2020, "Bird Soul", 36) – adds an emotional dimension to nature imagery and conjures a potential space of life and renewal against loss through the perceptive reader.

Birds are a dominant motif in *Dearly* and a symbol of transcendence beyond the limits of material experience. Their existence is set in close relationship with the human condition in the poem "Feather", where the speaker mourns the death of a bird that was "[a] high flyer once / as we all were" (Atwood 2020, 73) and muses that:

> Every life is a failure
>
> at the last hour,
> the hour of dried blood.
> But nothing, we like to think,
>
> is wasted, so I picked up one plume from the slaughter,
> sharpened and split the quill,
> hunted for ink,
>
> and drew this poem
> with you, dead bird. (ibid.)

In "Fear of Birds", birds' wings are compared to those of angels, and the rustle of feathers is like "thin paper" (Atwood 2020, 75). Birds therefore symbolically stand for life and renewal, while appearing at the same time as mediators between the world and artistic creation. In "Fatal Light Awareness", dying birds seem to share humans' fragility in environmental crisis: "We are a dying symphony. / No bird knows this, but us – we know" (74), in lines that contain a plea toward awareness, responsibility, and change, where change ultimately implies hope – as in Emily Dickinson's vision of hope as "the thing with feathers – / That perches in the soul – / And sings the tune without the words – / And never stops – at all –" (1927, 314; 19-20). In the preface to the collection, Atwood admits that "[t]here are more birds in these poems than there used to be. I wish for even more birds in the next book of poems, should there be one; and I wish also for more birds in the world. Let us all hope" (Atwood 2020, Preface, n. p.). Birds signify hope, continuity, survival, and life – for humans as for the natural environment.

Even though, as the opening poem in *Dearly* warns us, "[i]t's late, it's very late" (Atwood 2020, "Late Poems," 3) (because birds are dying and even poems are 'late'),

the collection opposes words / poetry / creation to cultural destruction. It accommodates a plea for ongoing action and artistic faith in view of renewal and survival: "Still, sing what you can. / Turn up the light: sing on, / sing: On". (ibid.) In a frightening future populated by zombies, werewolves, and aliens, poetry is also envisioned as a supernatural force making its own claim on us: "The hand on your shoulder. The almost-hand: / Poetry, coming to claim you" ("Zombie", 57). Overall, *Dearly* brings together the forgotten, the silenced, the marginalized, and the other in an ecological vision of diversity and continuity. When Atwood draws attention to the imminent loss of words such as "dearly" ("Dearly", 118, 120) and "sorrow", ("Dearly", 120) she evokes notions of connectivity, community, and empathy that appear central to our human experience as well as to our relationship with the animate and the inanimate world. Words must endure as essential carriers of human memory, which is the reason why the speaker in the title poem takes the time to imagine explaining what a "Polaroid" ("Dearly", 119) or a "newspaper" (ibid.) is to a young reader. Similarly, care and attentiveness towards objects – photographs collected in a photo album, shells, rocks, pieces of clothing, and various souvenirs – imply retrieving human experience from the flux of time and signify an organic connection between human memory, emotion, and the inanimate world. Objects, Atwood argues in "Souvenirs", become "remembrances", (10) which refers both to the mental *process* of traveling back in time through memory and, etymologically, to the resulting *state* of being re-membered or of being brought to life again. Once again, only what is not disregarded can continue to exist. Intriguingly enough, Atwood uses the same word – "fading" ("Dearly", 118, 120) – to describe the loss of language, but also to signal the dangers of forgetting female figures of our cultural history. When remembering Frida Kahlo, she writes: "You faded so long ago / but here in the souvenir arcade / you're everywhere" ("Frida Kahlo, San Miguel, Ash Wednesday", 28). In another poem dedicated to Cassandra, the mythological figure, Atwood criticizes forms of ignorance and forgetting that have turned this figure into "brash" ("Cassandra Considers Declining the Gift", 30). Alternatively, in "Siren Brooding on Her Eggs", sirens reject their own image as creatures of death and recreate themselves as loving, strong, and tender creatures, "ravenous with song" (63), watching their eggs and thus ensuring their own future against the former bashing into myth. Ignorance, Atwood implies, is a connecting pattern that makes victims in cultural memory, the collective imagination, and the natural environment. In "Update on Werewolves", the latter are humanized and imagined as "no longer gender-specific" (54) anthropomorphic creatures invading our contemporary daily life, as one hears their cries for "*freedom, freedom and power*!" (55) and watches them march ahead in "bluejean clothing" (54) and "Jimmy Choos" (55) to flirt, have dates, attend sales meetings, or walk in the parks. Attention is drawn as well to the fate of man-made robots – compared to human children – that are easily discarded as soon as they become non-functional or outdated:

Little dollface robot,
what will you make of yourself
in this world we are making?
What will you make of us?
Where will you bestow yourself
when you are obsolete?
On what cosmic trashheap?
Or will you live forever? […]
Or will you erase us?
Will you drop us on the floor?
Would that be better? ("Little Robot", 91f)

The poem stresses the boomerang-effect of technology and engineering, and criticizes ambitions of replacing natural ecosystems with artificial ones, which not only will lead to increasing pollution on earth and in space, but will also eventually cause the extinction of humans.[9] Eventually, Atwood envisages the moment when "the aliens arrive" ("The Aliens Arrive", 58-61) as a bitter comedy show, in which humans appear bewildered, terrified, submissive, while the aliens take over the earth as a result of long-term ignorance and arrogance, in a manner that perfectly resembles humans previously 'taking over' the natural environment: "The aliens arrive. / We like the part where we get saved. / We like the part where we get destroyed. / Why do those feel so similar? / Either way, it's an end. / No more just being alive. / No more pretend." (61)

Remarkably, despite so many poems of warning, Atwood in *Dearly* opposes memory to forgetting and hope to destruction, and constantly highlights a deep vital connection between humans and the natural environment. Thus, the lives of cicadas become a beautiful metaphor of human existence as propelled by desire, love, and creative impulses against the inevitability of death: "This is it, time is short, death is near, but first, / first, first, first / in the hot sun, searing, all day long, / in a month that has no name: / this annoying noise of love. This maddening racket. / This – admit it – song." ("Cicadas," 22) Similarly, in "Blizzard", the eponymous natural phenomenon becomes an objective correlative for the emotional whirlwind raised by the painful memory of the mother, which the speaker both summons and resists. In the last poem of the collection, as the speaker is observing "an old woman / picking blackberries in the sun" ("Blackberries", 121), an emotional connection is created between past and present, life and death, self and other, within a paradigm of cyclic renewal and hope. Here, the positions of speaker and addressee are more clearly delineated in the speaker's claim that the image of the old woman picking

9 See Sharon Hengen's article "Margaret Atwood and Environmentalism" (2006), which shows how already in the 1990s Atwood was preoccupied with the works of biologists such as Edward Wilson, who called for the necessity for humans to adapt to the natural environment, rather than contribute to the careless exploitation of its resources.

blackberries is being deliberately "conjured" (ibid.) for a "you" (121-122) that is again ambiguous, yet this time (at the very end of the collection) seems to directly refer to the poem's reader: "Once, this old woman / I'm conjuring up for you / would have been my grandmother. / Today it's me. / Years from now it might be you, / if you're quite lucky" (121). The pattern which connects the speaker and the addressee – "you" (121-122) – here is given by time and mortality, and the conditional 'if' (121) is invoked again as a warning about the future and as an indicator of the fragility of natural life. Still, Atwood remains undeterred in completing the ecological cycle of memory, life, and nature with a glimpse of hope in this last poem, as she does offer a projection of the "quite lucky" (ibid.) reader picking blackberries in the future and dares to assume that the blackberries will still be there to survive "temporary hands" (ibid.).

5. Conclusions

In so many ways, *Dearly* is an example of the potential of literary texts to forge cultural, social, and natural renewal through imagination patterns that can work to prevent human and environmental extinction. Loss, fragility, emotion, perception, memory, and creation emerge as connecting patterns between humans and nature, in texts that offer a strengthening perspective on the future through an 'ecology of the heart' based on connectivity and empathy with the natural environment. In lines such as "Oh children, will you grow up in a world without ice / Without mice, without lichens? / […] Oh children, will you grow up?" (Atwood 2020, "Oh Children", 97), Atwood makes us ask ourselves questions about a concrete and personal – rather than abstract and faraway – future, and urges us to realize that taking action against the alteration and devastation of the natural world is a matter that concerns every one of us on a deep, organic level of our existence.

Coming back to the beginnings of this analysis, Atwood's polysemantic use of the second-person pronoun throughout *Dearly* – most notably in lines such as "I need you to be somewhere…" (2020, "Bird Soul", 36) – meaningfully correlates with her Peace Prize acceptance speech: In both, she urges readers to stop and listen, to engage with the text in a dynamic of responsibility and change, and to take action against environmental destruction: to "be somewhere" (ibid.). *Dearly* shows, in Hubert Zapf's words, how "literature acts as a transformative ecological force" (2017, 176) through texts that emphasize self-reproductive connecting patterns between writers and readers:

> Connecting patterns release creative energies, and creative energies produce new connecting patterns in a process that continually opens up spaces of imaginative participation for the reader, in which culturally occluded knowledge can be actualized, and the separated domains of mind and matter, conscious and unconscious, human and nonhuman life, can be brought together in personally enriching and collectively significant ways. (Zapf 2017, 176)

That is, arguably, how *Dearly* can be "a voice in our ears" (Atwood 2017, 24:28) – Margaret Atwood's most strongly articulated wish in her 2017 Peace Prize speech and in her incisive, moving, and enduring latest poetry collection.

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