

A Language is Everything you do: the Reflective Self in an Autobiographical Narrative

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Abstract

Life does not offer itself to us, as it were, as a pre-formulated story: it has to be made into stories if we are to experience it in any but the most basic and instinctive manner. And through narratives in interaction we develop the capacity for self-interpretation. Unsurprisingly, narratives make up a large proportion of every language in use. Scholarly interest in the processes of narrative has burgeoned in recent years across a wide variety of disciplines.

The study of literary narratives has a particular importance. Unlike those of everyday interaction, these are highly crafted stories, in which the vagueness, inconsistencies, and arbitrary repetitions and truncations of daily language in use are either absent or used for specific communicative purposes. In this paper, we bring together three complementary points of view to explicate a literary text, Margaret Atwoods' novel *Surfacing*, which takes the form of an autobiography narrated by an unnamed female. The discussion combines literary approaches to autobiography with linguistic perspectives on first-person narratives. These two approaches are brought to focus on the development of the self in narrative, using the social-psychological concept of Reflective Self Function, which is a person's capacity to apprehend and understand the motives for and influences on his or her own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

One cannot attribute psychological characteristics to a fictional character. Nevertheless, the concept of RSF helps to reveal the motivations underlying the behaviour of the narrator, who initially suffers from post-traumatic stress. As she reflects on the experiences she has been through, she gradually discovers herself as a full human being who has attained reflective knowledge about herself, others, and her place in society. In particular, she understands her personal responsibility for what happens to her.

Introduction: narrative and the self

Since Descartes, the commonsense Western view of the self has been of an independent subject existing in the world. The world contains other individual selves as well as various objects and processes, which the self strives to know and understand, and this knowledge to a large extent determines how the individual behaves as an inhabitant of the world. In recent times, however,

phenomenologists have proposed a radically different view, in which selfhood is achieved through being in the world and in particular through being with others (Heidegger, 1977; Stewart, 1995). The self, in other words, exists in its interactions with the physical and social worlds, interactions that are almost entirely unconscious and unreflective; what is known as "everyday coping":

[T]o be human is to engage in the life process of coming to an understanding (everyday coping), a process that paradigmatically occurs in conversation. (Stewart, 1995, p.30)

Through conversation, the self is presented and interpreted:

[The being-in-the-world] is what, in its social activity, it interprets itself to be. Humans do not already have some specific nature ... Human being is essentially self-interpreting. (Dreyfus, quoted in Stewart, 1995, p. 28)

A central role in self-interpretation through interaction is played by narrative (Taylor, 1989). It is the means by which we impose order upon the chaotic sense-impressions of life:

If narrative is taken in its minimalist sense as a representation of at least two events with a temporal ordering between them ... then maintaining awareness of time and space entails creating a minimalist narrative from the continuous ubiquitous multimodal barrage of sensation. (Tversky, 2004, p. 380)

Building upon this fundamental sense of the space-time dimensionality of events, we are also able to make sense of complexes of events that happen to us, by imputing to them causal relations and consequences, including emotional consequences. Unsurprisingly, then, everyday conversations consist to a very large extent of telling and listening to stories.

Scholarly interest in the processes of narrative has burgeoned in recent years across a wide variety of disciplines: Lamarque (2004, p. 406) writes of "the enthusiasm for narrative that has been evident among philosophers, literary theorists, psychologists and anthropologists for 30 years" (and, we should add, linguists). The telling of stories, once valued primarily as an artistic activity—the preserve of raconteurs, folk narrators, novelists, and the like—has come to be seen as central to understanding human beings. Even taking into account recent cautions (e.g., Vice,

2003; Lamarque, 2004) against over-valuing the role of narrative in defining the self, it is manifest that narratives provide a significant window into the multi-stranded processes of the human striving for coherence and meaning in life.

The study of narrative: the role of literature

Life does not offer itself to us, as it were, as a pre-formulated story: it has to be made into a story (or rather a whole series of stories) if we are to experience it in any but the most basic and instinctive manner. The stories we tell ourselves thus provide a critical insight for anyone attempting to develop insights into the human condition, from the clinical psychologist to the social historian.

Narratives are, in the most basic sense of the term, works of art and, like all art, they are not constructed *ex nihilo*. Each of us finds him- or herself willy-nilly playing parts in the narratives of others; in other words, we perforce adopt the various social roles allocated to us by those with whom we interact. Others' stories impinge upon our own. What is true of the individual is also true of the community (or, in the modern world, a number of communities) in which we participate. The community, too, has its collective stories: its history and myths that give it a sense of identity and distinctness from other communities. Collective narratives provide source materials for researchers in anthropology, social psychology, sociology, and community history, and, at a more abstract level in the grand narratives of disciplines such as historical theory and theology.

Against this background, the study of literary narratives takes on a particular importance. Unlike those of everyday interaction, these are highly crafted stories, in which the vagueness, inconsistencies, and arbitrary repetitions and truncations of daily language in use are either absent or used for specific communicative purposes. They exemplify the use of language in an idealized form. This idealization is not, it should be stressed, that of much traditional linguistics [cf., for example, Chomsky, 1968]. This sort of "scientific" idealization treats language as abstract knowledge rather than actual usage, and deals in what may best be described, using a contemporary metaphor, as "virtual" language (Garner, 2004, p. 162). The idealization of the

language of literature is the artistic refinement of linguistic possibilities for maximally effective, and real, communication. This is not meant to imply that the language will necessarily appear refined, literary, or mannered. Many good writers produce what appears to be artless prose, or utterly naturalistic dialogue—but that in fact requires considerable skill and crafting. Idealization is a form of essentializing or distilling, stripping language to its clearest exemplars.

The fact that an author of a literary narrative idealizes or distils the properties of every day language means that an analysis of that narrative draws upon an understanding of the use of language in all narratives. Conversely, insights into the linguistic systems, processes, and structures of any given language, such as English, needs to be significantly informed by the study of their idealized use in literature. The divorce of linguistics from the study of literature, which occurred when theoretical linguistics superseded philology as the predominant disciplinary approach to the study of language, has impoverished both linguistic and literary analysis (cf. Goodman, 1973).

Because of the centrality and multifaceted nature of narrative in human life, approaching the study of it from a single disciplinary perspective will yield fewer insights than a broader, cross-disciplinary approach. In this paper, we bring together three complementary points of view to explicate a literary text. The text we have chosen is *Surfacing*, by Margaret Atwood, which takes the form of an autobiography narrated by an unnamed female "I"(although, as we shall see, the extent to which the content is autobiographical is disputable). Our discussion combines literary approaches to autobiography with linguistic perspectives on first-person narratives. These two approaches are brought to focus on the development of the self in narrative, using the social-psychological concept of Reflective Self Function.

Narrative and the literary autobiography

Autobiography has much in common with the first-person narratives that are such a large part of our everyday conversations. This is because it serves fundamentally the same functions of both reliving and reconstructing- interpreting the narrator's own life events. If they are similar in kind, however, conversational narrative and autobiography differ in degree. What the former provides

could be likened to snapshots or thumbnail sketches; the latter is an attempt to make sense of a whole life through a carefully selected series of such sketches:

Every autobiography—even when it limits itself to pure narrative—is a self-interpretation ... the past can never be evoked except with respect to a present. (Starobinski, 1980, p. 74)

While the painter captures only a moment of external appearance, the autobiographer strains towards a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny. Gusdorf (1980, p.35)

Surfacing belongs to what Liz Stanley (1992, p. 12) calls "realist autobiographies", which describe

not "lives of the great", but common lives ... of the mass of ordinary people but which are nonetheless extraordinarily interesting

The narrator is indeed ordinary: a mediocre illustrator of children's books, who visits the remote island home of her childhood, in the wilderness of northern Quebec, to try to find out what happened to her father, who vanished mysteriously. It is, in other words, an idealized instance of the sort of "guess what happened to me" stories that form the stuff of much daily conversation. It is also particularly salient to our own interest in the relationship between linguistic and literary analysis, as it deals explicitly with the ways in which language can be used to recall, to reconstruct, and to falsify human experience.

The extent to which it represents or at least reflects Atwood's own autobiography is debatable. A 1984 documentary shows the island on which Atwood spends her summer holidays, and the presenter comments,

This was the setting of her book, *Surfacing*, and where she spent most of her childhood. ... there is much of her in that book: a love of canoes, of wild unspoiled places, and perhaps more. (*Atwood and Family*, National Film Board of Canada, 1995)

The writer clearly drew extensively upon her personal knowledge and experience of the region, and some of the details of place and events appear to be almost certainly taken from life. But this

is not Atwood's autobiography, unlike the purely autobiographical literary texts by Alice James, Virginia Woolf, Vera Brittain and Sylvia Plath that Linda Anderson (1997) analyses. Atwood clearly states that in *Surfacing* the female narrator is not to be identified with the author, and that "the reader should regard everything my heroine says as the utterance of a fictional character" (Sandler, 1992, p. 44). She remarked in another interview:

We have a ... romantic notion on this side of the Atlantic about what an author is ... The writer is seen as "expressing" herself; therefore, her books must be autobiographical. (Oates, 1990, p. 72)

In fact, important though the question may be to an understanding of the author's life and perhaps her *oeuvre*, it is not central to our present purposes. *Surfacing* has the form and other characteristics of a personal life narrative that justify analysing it as such.

Narrative and self-interpretation

Various psychological perspectives have been suggested for examining the relationship between narratives and the interpretation (or construction) of the self. One simple but revealing approach uses the concept of Reflective Self Function, or RSF (Fonagy et al., 1991). RSF is a person's capacity to apprehend and understand the motives for and influences on his or her own behaviour (Personal RSF) or the behaviour of others (Social RSF). In RSF research, participants are asked to relate various life experiences, and their narratives are rated on a continuous scale according to the evidence they reveal of the participants' RSF. In a low-scoring narrative, the speaker retails events and people's actions without attempting to attribute them to underlying causes or internal or external influences. In a high-scoring narrative, the speaker talks about and attempts to explain unconscious desires, emotions and ideas in an attempt to make sense of past or present behaviour; in particular he or she makes reference to how relationships affect one another. Compare, for example, the two following extracts from a corpus of interviews with elderly people in a dementia research project (Simm et al., 2002). They come from extended narratives that were rated, respectively, at the highest and lowest levels by the research team. (In the excerpts, the interviewer's words are in italics; omissions from the transcript are shown as [...]; and // represents a short pause in the narrative.)

Example 1: High Personal RSF

So when you look back at your life, what do you think about?

Well, the war came [...] And, I was glad I was the age I was, because it //I didn't see the fear of it // And I didn't have any mother or father killed, or brothers or sisters. And, ah, that age—I can't remember, I think I was 11 or something—you're very callous because you don't see how awful it is that people you know have died, and I was // I remember when the war came on, and we got bombed in, in London, off // just near London there. And there was this // you know Shirley Temple, well there was this girl further down the road, I hated her. Everyone was always going on about how pretty she was. And her house got bombed, and she and all her family got killed. I was so happy!

Oh, no

I never thought it! Now I can see how awful, but I was only a little kid, that's how I felt. And so, I thought well, you know, be honest, they're gone. So you know how awful it was.

Example 2: Low Personal RSF

What would you say is the most memorable thing in your life so far?

That I've accomplished? A bloody lot of things.

What's something that comes to mind?

Oh well, we had a couple of businesses. We had a dry cleaning business, and // we were the first ones that had a // had a shop in, ah, in Main Rd // no, that was the first shop we had. [...] And then we ah // oh that's right, we rented it there // ah yes, I was the first one to have a shop in High St. You know where High St is?

It's the one over—

Yeah, well that's now very busy, but ah, there was nothing there. And we brought this ah, shop //I've forgotten how much we paid... it was a hell of a lot of money back then [...] Yeah that was probably the // one of the biggest things. And then we had // we had a shop in Green Rd, and one in White St, and one in Brown St [...] Well that's it. What else do you want to know?

Well, what else, aside from business, have you accomplished, or is there something that sticks out in your mind that you may have done?

Um, I don't know // I was a good golfer. I played a lot of golf. And I was a good golfer // anything I did, I did it well. I never half did anything. I think that's // I don't know whether, that was the nuns when we started // when we were at school. You had to do the very best you could. That was it. You always did your best.

The RSF ratings derived from personal narratives have been shown to correlate with other social-psychological attributes (Fonagy et al, 1991), and have potential to help in the early diagnosis of

pathological states, such as dementia, that result in the breakdown of interpersonal relationships and hence of the normal processes of self-interpretation.

It would, of course, be a misapplication of the framework to attempt to attribute psychological characteristics to a fictional narrator. Nevertheless, one of the characteristics we value in good literature is an author's ability to reveal, through the sort of idealization mentioned above, the motivations underlying human behaviour. In the case of an autobiographical narrative, this is achieved through reflecting on the narrator's own real (as in genuine autobiography) or putative (as in first-person fiction) experiences. The concept of RSF provides a useful analytical framework by enabling the analyst to focus on the elements within a narrative by means of which that ability is realized.

In *Surfacing*, the narrator's personal RSF lies towards the middle of the scale: she is trying to reflect on her own motivations. She is, however, prevented from doing so in beginning of the book by the continuing effects of a trauma that overshadows the life events and renders the attempt to construct an autobiography almost impossible for her:

there had been an accident and I came apart... I was nothing but a head...At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me (pp. 99, 100, 102).

The retailing of any personal narratives involves a tension between two processes of self-interpretation (Ochs and Capps, 2001). On the one hand, there is the desire to relive the reality of the experiences that gave impetus to the narrative and, on the other hand, there is the need to interpret those experiences. Interpretation, however, requires a degree of abstraction and detachment that detract from the immediacy of the experiences.

Part of the power of *Surfacing* is that the experience that instigated the autobiography and which constitutes its theme, was traumatic. Caruth (1995, p. 89) defines trauma as

a response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not full grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena.

A traumatic experience, despite (or perhaps because of) its intensity, does not become part of an existing mental schema, because to do so would stretch the schema beyond breaking point. It is not, in other words, integrated into the self: it may be suppressed, and not register in the conscious memory; or, if it does, it may remain as a separate order of experience, constantly threatening to shatter the coherence of the self. Coming to terms with trauma requires a long time and the therapeutic help, often including professional assistance.

It is evident early in the text that the narrator is suffering from what in clinical terms would be called post-traumatic stress. The motivation, the literary impetus, for telling the story is to come to terms with the traumatic event, to make sense of it and to integrate it into a reconstructed self. But retelling the story inevitably re-activates the harrowing experience which the teller is unwilling and, at first unable, to go through again.

The trauma of the past renders her unable to interpret herself in the present: "I realised I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time" (Atwood, 1979, p. 99; all subsequent page references are to this edition). Joe, her lover, misinterprets her emotional detachment during their first sexual encounter as her effort to be "cool":

What impressed him was the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I was feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't. (p. 22)

Her way of coping with any negative feelings is to replace one kind of pain with another:

I'll start crying, that would be horrible ... I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the knife-hard pain up the side of my face. Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts, invent a different pain. I'm all right. (pp. 6-7)

As manifestations of the trauma that she dares not revisit in her narrative, her reactions are beyond her understanding; she does not know what motivates her behaviour. As the story progresses, she moves closer to reliving the incident that traumatized her, and she tries harder to fathom her motivations. Her personal RSF rises:

I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like to wear you watched others and memorized it. But the only thing there was the fear that I wasn't alive: a negative ... they've discovered that rats prefer any sensation to none. (p. 105)

Unlike her Personal RSF, the narrator's Social RSF is close to the high end of the scale: she seems to possess a keen ability to understand other people's motives, thoughts, and feelings. Although she initially thinks that her companions, David and Anna, have a good marriage, she soon perceives that this is an illusion. David is a shallow and rather nasty character, who thinks that his student years in New York automatically define him as a political activist concerning the America-Canada relationship. He fails to be funny by imitating Daffy Duck and Woody Woodpecker, regularly insults Anna and makes her cry, and sleeps with other women. The narrator is able to interpret him in a way that she herself cannot herself:

I could see into him ... He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him: it would take such a time to unearth him, scrape down to where he was true. (p. 46)

She perceives that Anna, on the other hand, remains trapped in the patriarchal voice of judgement represented by the mirror she uses to apply her make-up every morning. She also sleeps with other men, but only because "if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere" (p. 147-8). The couple is locked into a hidden war, slowly stripping off each other's humanity and turning each other into robots: "the dead can defend themselves, to be half dead is worse. They did it to each other ... without knowing." (p. 160)

Joe, her housemate and lover, is also a mediocre artist who shares her mistrust for language. Soon he wants to marry her but she refuses. In the end, she uses him as an impregnator when she wants to replace her aborted baby, but he misjudges the whole situation:

He still ... thinks he has won, act of his flesh a rope noosed around my neck, leash, he will lead me back to the city and tie me to fences, doorknobs. (p. 157)

Although she believes that he possesses the purity of an animal, the question of whether she will go back to him or not remains unanswered throughout the book.

The "I" has an astute awareness of not only individuals, but social situations as a whole. David and Anna are, in a way, products of their social environment. Her sensitivity to the underlying causes of others' behaviour (Social RSF) gradually becomes a means of beginning to plumb the depths of her own motivations (Personal RSF). This is exemplified in her reaction to the pointless, violent act of killing a heron:

It was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied around its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye ... Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim? ... To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only reaction they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. (pp. 109-110)

She feels that all nature is infected by consumerism and the unequal power structures that seem to stem from the "civilization" of the city. When she finds that this meaningless, heartless act was performed by a group of visitors who are not Americans, as she first thought, but Canadians like her, she becomes aware that evil is much closer to home. She initially abdicates all personal responsibility for their crime by refusing to accept that she is one of them: 'It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans' (p. 123). But later on she worries about being assimilated, failing to keep her own sense of morality;

If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them ... you speak their language, a language is everything you do. (p. 123)

Life, memory and the self

Not only ... can the autobiographer lie, but the "autobiographical form" can cloak the freest fictive invention: "pseudo-memoirs" and "pseudo-biographies" exploit the possibilities of narrating purely imaginary tales in the first person. (Starobinski, 1980, p. 75)

The traumatized memory occasionally makes the narrator unreliable concerning personal history, but this very unreliability is a part of her autobiographical present. Although she does not narrate "purely imaginary tales", the author confirms that she is partly unreliable:

The reader who endorses the character suddenly finds out that she's been telling horrible lies. The reader ought to be more cautious. (Atwood in Sandler, 1992, p. 44)

Memory is, however, the only means connecting the past and the present selves, to make sense of the present life in terms of the past. Yet memory is inherently unreliable, as the present self who revisits and retells the past events is a different self from the one who experienced them then : 'I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt' (p. 67). This is especially true, of course, in the case of the narrator here, who is suffering trauma. It is not surprising that she gives numerous false descriptions of her past (e.g., pp. 17, 23, 28, 41, 81-2) before her true story is revealed (p. 137).

The narrator suffers from what Pierre Janet called "dissociated traumatic memory":

When a subject does not remember a trauma its "memory" is contained in an alternative stream of consciousness which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness, e.g., during traumatic re-enactments. (cited in van der Hart & van der Kolk, 1995, p. 168)

In *Surfacing*, the narrator's trauma is intensified by the fact that she was deprived of choice in the matter of the abortion. Her powerlessness was disguised by her married lover with the voice of reason: "I know it's tough, he said, but it's better this way" (p. 82). The only resort open to her is to seize back her freedom of choice through recreating the past. Her alternative stream of consciousness substitutes her abortion with a wedding, the white, shabby, surgery room with a post office, the surgeon with a magistrate, and her married lover, who did not want to jeopardize his marriage for her, with a loving husband. As she admits to herself, "I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could" (p. 137). The best version of the past she can fabricate is to present herself as a young divorcee whose child lives with her ex-husband.

Through all of this overlay of fabricated memory, the true memory does at last begin to surface. The moment of witnessing a new, present traumatic scene triggers the old, suppressed memory. The narrator decides to look for her father in the lake, convinced by now that he is dead:

I balanced and plunged ... the water seemed to have thickened ... it was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest lever where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred, but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. (p. 136)

The moment she witnesses her father's body at the bottom of the lake, trapped in the underwater vegetation by the cord of his heavy camera her traumatic memory resurfaces. There are parallels between the water of the lake and the narrator's amniotic fluid, her father's corpse and her aborted foetus, whose huge jelly eyes and fins at this early stage of pregnancy bear resemblance to a fish. Once the true memory is released, it enters into her autobiography:

I never saw it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them ... I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished. (p. 137)

Her past is now becoming accessible to the interpretative processes of the narrative, opening up the possibility for the "I" to cure herself. Her first step towards a catharsis is to get pregnant again, as a way of replacing the life that she killed inside her. With a new foetus growing inside, she established her ability to bring together nature and society. She allows her animal-body to surface, the body which is often hidden under artificial layers of humanity, the body of instincts and feelings. The water of the lake is the means by which she will wash away her deceiving covering of clothing and reveal her purified animal body:

My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water ... the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it ... dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I deep my head beneath the water, washing my eyes ... when I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floating on the surface, a cloth decoy. (p. 172)

Having been cut off for so long by her trauma from experiencing life directly, she is now able to open herself up to such experiences again. The true autobiographical narrative can now begin, as the interpretation and reconstruction of the past through retelling the story depends upon the capacity to relive it in that retelling. But, in the first flush of the rebirth of feeling, the narrator is tempted to turn her back on her humanness. She will give birth the next time as a wild animal:

I will do it myself ... on leaves, dry leaves ... the baby will skip out as easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord ... it will be covered with shining fur, a god. (p. 156)

Language and the self in *Surfacing*

According to Janet Varner Gunn (1982), autobiography comes into being as the language of reflective selfhood:

The autobiographical perspective has ... to do with taking oneself up and bringing oneself to language. (p. 16)

In *Surfacing*, before diving into the past, surfacing, and experiencing spiritual rebirth, the narrator was torn apart by language:

My hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm. Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole. (p. 140)

She feels uncomfortable using human language because of its limited vocabulary:

It was language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine...the Eskimoes have fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love (p. 100).

She mistrusts language, the only means available to her for expressing her thoughts and feelings. In Atwood's words, "one of her problems is that none of the languages with which she has been provided seems to be adequate or accessible. And I think the push is towards a third language, if you like, or another language" (Davidson, 1992, pp. 91-2).

The ultimate rejection of her humanity will be to renounce language for herself and her child: "I will never teach it any words" (p. 156). This would mean not only the cessation of the narrative, which cannot exist aside from language; it would also mean the cessation of the self. For language is not something that we possess and use, like a tool; in Gadamer's words, we inhabit language (1989, p. 443).

The unnamed narrator decides at length, however, against this course of action. She sees the ghosts of both her mother and her father, and she makes a decision: "To prefer life, I owe them that ... I re-enter my own time." (pp. 182, 185) She realizes, too, that she needs to teach her child to speak if it is to be a self: "word furrows potential already in its proto-brain, untravelled paths" (p. 185). In the end, rejecting the course of turning into an animal and sinking into a pre-linguistic state, she emerges with a new personal and social reflective self.

Atwood uses three different kinds of language to construct the autobiographical narrative: conversational, lyrical, and poetic. Early on in the story, when she talks with Anna about marriage, she uses everyday conversational language:

"How do you manage it?" I said ...
"Being married. How do you keep it together?"
She glanced at me quickly as though she was suspicious. "We tell a lot of jokes."
"No but really," I said. If there was a secret trick I wanted to learn it ... She said ... it was like skiing, you couldn't see in advance what would happen but you had to let go ... For me it hadn't been like skiing, it was more like jumping off a cliff ... in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom. (pp. 41-2)

Behind the simplicity of the sentences, there is great tension as the narrator tries to reformulate and thus relive her past experience. The reader later realizes that this a false memory, but even false memory can bring an insight into the truth.

It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it. (p. 137)

The language here is emotional and lyrical; Atwood's fictional character finally confesses the truth to her reader/audience. The long first sentence of the quoted passage, separated with commas where she tries to catch her breath, demonstrates her pain. The tension increases as she continues talking as if "to an invisible microphone suspended above her head"(p. 41): "Since then I'd carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumour, a black pearl"(p. 138). The dramatic metaphors for her abortion are a catharsis, and bring an enormous sense of relief, and with it a sharply increased personal Reflective Self Function. She has also re-entered

society, for by resurrecting her language she has re-engaged with the interpersonal. In the words of Stephen Spender,

One of the things that the most abysmal confessions prove is the incapacity of even the most outcast creature to be alone ...the essence of the confession is that the one who feels outcast pleads with humanity' to be 'brought back into the wholeness of people and of things'. (1980, p. 120)

Atwood's language is at times highly poetic. Poetry is language and the uncomfortable edges of meaning, and her writing is most poetic when she narrates the struggle between the linguistic and the pre-linguistic self. While the narrator is living like an animal in the forest and refusing to use human language, she identifies with a nature that has no words but is full of pulses and rhythms. The boundaries between plants, animals and humans are fluid: "the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks" (p. 175). Her mother's ghost is the incarnation of a jay, her father's of a wolf, her lover Joe has a furry back like a bear's, and her newly conceived foetus is a plant-animal. This blurring is reflected in language:

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning
I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground
I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and
grow, I am a place (p. 175)

Having abandoned language and with it interpersonal communication, the narrator nevertheless desperately needs to express herself. She tries to use her body to 'talk': "face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bathmat stuck with leaves and twigs" (p. 184). This body is no different from a tree, a deer skeleton or a rock. Atwood's sentences are segmented, their rhythm expresses breathlessness and there is no punctuation. It is a language approximating to kinetic expression.

Conclusion

In this paper we discussed the language of autobiographical narrative in Margaret Atwood's literary text *Surfacing*. In addition we used the social-psychological concept of Reflective Self

Function in order to explore how much the narrator, who initially suffers from post-traumatic stress, develops as a human being. The narrative of *Surfacing* does not end like a fairy-tale. The narrator may not live happily ever after ("We will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully" [p. 186]), but she has attained reflective knowledge about herself, about human nature, and about her place in society and her personal responsibility for what happens to her:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing.
I have to... give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing
I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth
would have been (p. 185).

Her narration has enabled her finally to confront and come to terms with her traumatic memory. She has attained a self worthy of a name:

He calls my name, then pauses, "Are you here?" Echo: here, here?" (p. 186).

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