



Hands as markers of fragmentation

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Abstract

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Margaret Atwood is an internationally read, translated, and critiqued writer whose novels have established her as one of the most esteemed authors in English (McCombs & Palmer, 1991:1). Critical studies of her work deal mainly with notions of identity from psychoanalytical perspectives. This study has identified a gap in current critical studies on Atwood's works, namely the challenging of textual unity which is paralleled in the challenging of the traditional (single) narrative voice. The challenging of textual unity and the single narrative voice brings about the fragmentation of both. This article will focus on the role that hands play as markers of fragmentation in "The Blind Assassin" (2000). In the novel, the writing hand destabilises the narrative voice, since it is not connected to the voice of a single author. If the author of the text – the final signified – is eliminated, the text becomes fragmentary and open, inviting the reader to contribute to the creation of meaning. Hands play a significant role in foregrounding the narrator's fragmented identity, and consequently, the fragmentation of the text. We will investigate this concept in the light of Roland Barthes' notion of the scriptor, whose hand is metaphorically severed from his or her "voice". Instead of the text being a unified entity, it becomes unstable and it displays the absence of hierarchical textual levels. Based mainly on Barthes' writings, this article concludes that hands foreground the narrator's fragmented identity, which is paralleled in the fragmented text.

Opsomming

Hande as merkers van fragmentering

Margaret Atwood se werke word internasionaal gelees, vertaal en gekritiseer en haar prosa vestig haar as een van die beste skrywers in Engels (McCombs & Palmer, 1991:1). Kritiese studies oor haar werke handel hoofsaaklik oor die konsep van identiteit vanuit 'n psigoanalitiese perspektief. Hierdie studie identifiseer 'n leemte in die huidige akademiese analyses van Atwood se werk, naamlik die bevraagtekening van tekstuele eenheid wat ook manifesteer in die bevraagtekening van die enkele verhalende stem wat in die proses 'n fragmentering meebring. Hierdie artikel fokus op die rol wat hande speel as merkers van fragmentering in "The Blind Assassin" (2000). In hierdie roman destabiliseer die skrywende hand die verhalende stem, omdat dit nie gebonde is aan die stem van die enkele outeur nie. Die verwydering van die outeur – die finale betekende – het tot gevolg dat die teks fragmentaries en oop word, wat die leser uitnooi om by te dra tot betekenisvorming. Hande speel 'n beduidende rol in die beklemtoning van die gefragmenteerde identiteit van die verteller, wat weerspieël word in die gefragmenteerde teks. Die konsep van fragmentering sal ondersoek word in die lig van Roland Barthes se konsep van die "scriptor", wie se hand metafores verwyder is van sy of haar "stem". Die teks word onstabiel en toon die afwesigheid van hiërargiese tekstuele vlakke. Met Barthes se werk as basis kom hierdie artikel tot die gevolgtrekking dat hande die verteller se gefragmenteerde identiteit op die voorgrond stel, wat weerspieël word in die gefragmenteerde teks.

1. Introduction

Great is the hand that holds dominion over
Man by a scribbled name
(Thomas, 1985:215).

The Blind Assassin (2000) challenges textual unity by means of, among other things, its fragmented nature and its complicated and ambiguous narrative voice. This article will focus on the latter by looking at hands as markers of fragmentation against the background of some aspects of Roland Barthes' theory of narrative.

The fragmented structure of *The Blind Assassin* (2000) consists of an amalgamation of allusions, intratextual and intertextual references and quotations. Indeed, Reynolds and Noakes (2002:136)

point out that Atwood employs the technique of collage in *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

This fragmented nature of the text renders it “writerly” in Barthes’ definition of the term, which entails that the reader plays a large role in the construction of meaning. However, in many ways, *The Blind Assassin* (2000) paradoxically incorporates the notion of the traditional author (first-person autobiographical narrator) who is the past of his or her narrative and who believes that the hand is too slow for his or her thoughts and memories.

The protagonist, Iris, is an 83 year old widow who suffers from a heart condition and who is determined to commit her life story to paper before she passes away. In her words, “I hasten on, making my way crabwise across the paper. It’s a slow race now, between me and my heart, but I intend to get there first” (Atwood, 2000:272). She literally believes that her hand is too slow for her thoughts.

This belief contrasts with Barthes’ notion that,

[h]aving buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he¹ must emphasize this delay and indefinitely ‘polish’ his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins (1977:45).

For Barthes, hands are thus important in establishing the “voice” behind the (traditional) text, since the hand is directly linked to the author’s thoughts and feelings. The hand is therefore regarded as a transparent vehicle for conveying thought. However, in *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the hand that records the narrative is announced through the device of personification and as such takes on a symbolic role akin to that of the narrator. The hand is independent of the author, as in automatic writing, which also involves a removal between the hand that writes and the mind that thinks. The novel

1 According to Barthes (1977), the modern scriptor succeeds the traditional author. However, in Barthes’ mind, the scriptor is still a male writer. Nowhere in his essay does he include the possibility that the scriptor could be a woman. By rendering Iris, the gender inspecific reader, and Sabrina “scriptor”, Atwood’s writing points to a gap that exists in Barthes’ theory.

calls attention to the writing hand, which adds a strong metatextual element, constantly reminding the reader of the writerly nature of the text.

In *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the writerly and fragmented nature of the text is paralleled in the fragmented identity of the narrator, and therefore the hand that records the narrative refers to more than one voice. Iris explains as follows: "Laura was my left hand and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It's a left-handed book. That's why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it" (Atwood, 2000:627). This quotation could be related to Barthes' notion of the removal of the author by means of a collaborative form of writing. *The Blind Assassin* (2000) as a collaborative effort effectively deconstructs the notion of a single author who speaks with one voice. Although it becomes clear eventually that Iris and not Laura is the author of the novel *The Blind Assassin* [1947], Laura is inscribed so clearly on the identity of Iris, that she could be said to collaborate indirectly in the writing of this novel. At the same time, the potential reader of Iris' memoirs, Sabrina, Iris herself as an old woman "re-reading" her past, and the reader of Atwood's novel all collaborate in the writing of *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

Against this background, the following questions arise: Firstly, what role do hands play in marking the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator in *The Blind Assassin* (2000)? Secondly, how is the fragmented identity of the narrator paralleled in the fragmentary structure of the novel?

In order to answer the above questions, Barthes' notion of the author will be investigated in an attempt to establish possible affinities between "hand" and "voice". The role that hands play in marking the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator will be analysed. The characteristics of Barthes' notion of the writerly text will be investigated. The fragmented structure of the novel will be analysed, with the view to establish the manner in which the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator is paralleled in her narrative.

2. The affinities between "hand" and "voice"

In his influential essay "The death of the author", Barthes (1977:142) is of the opinion that the traditional author is anxious to unite his person and his work through diaries and memoirs. This explains why the voice is of a single person, "confiding" in the reader. This author entrusts the hand to write as quickly as possible what is in the head, and he subsequently views the hand as too slow for his thoughts

and passions. A strong connection thus exists between the hand and the voice of the single author. However, in *The Blind Assassin* (2000), more than one voice is pointed at by the hand that records the memoir.

2.1 Hands as markers of Iris' fragmented subjectivity

Hands play a key role in the construction of meaning in *The Blind Assassin* (2000) as almost every key stage in the novel is marked by hands. For example, the novel starts with the foregrounding of Laura's hands in white gloves when she commits suicide by driving off a bridge. Iris views this act as a "Pontius Pilate gesture" (Atwood, 2000:4) meaning that Laura has washed her hands of her. Another key incident in Iris' life is when her mother died and she was left on her father's hands like "some kind of a smear" (Atwood, 2000:470). When married to Richard, she sees herself in the sculptures whose handless arms powerlessly melt into their torsos. Iris feels responsible for her sister's controversial relationship with Richard: after Laura's death, she discovers a photograph in which his hands are tinted red, indicating that Laura views this relationship as rape. Iris often describes her sister and herself as being one another's left hand. Finally, in her last words, she places herself and her narrative in Sabrina's hands (Atwood, 2000:637).

These images, incidents and perceptions are influential in causing Iris' fragmented subjectivity. According to Deery (1997:4), the fragmentation of women's bodies and identities relates to an epistemological and hence ontological subordination. Women's "edges" are uncertain because their self-definition is uncertain. She adds that the women in Atwood's novels often experience uncertainty, and see themselves as fragmented. They therefore fear self-integration, they fear being stretched and losing shape altogether. This tendency to diffuse is thus not regarded an advantage, because it indicates a lack of power. However, it could be argued that the amalgamated voice of Iris and Laura assures them a stronger oppositional position, as can be seen in the far-reaching effects of the publication of *The Blind Assassin* [1947] under the name of Laura. The exposure of a relationship between the author and an unnamed man in the novel is taken by Richard to be a malicious attempt by Laura to hurt him by revealing her love for Alex Thomas (and her hatred towards him, Richard). After the publication of the book, Richard's political career is ruined, both because of his extra-marital relationship with Laura, and her association with the communist Alex Thomas. Richard subsequently

commits suicide (the book is found by his body) and Winifred blames Iris for his death and for destroying Richard's memories of Laura. This, however, is seen through the subjective and fragmentary perspective of Iris who relates the events, and also interprets them, retrospectively. This destabilises the credibility of the narrator and involves the reader in the writerly process.

2.2 The double

Iris' fragmented identity is closely related to the notion of the double. Her sister Laura often acts as her double, which foreshadows the death of Iris. Traditionally, to meet one's double is considered an ominous sign, signifying one's imminent death (Haralambus & Kritsotakis, 2004).

The notion of the double is emphasised by the fact that Laura wears Iris' clothes, uses her perfume and enters Iris' bedroom without knocking: their familiarity is such that ownership of objects and typical courtesies and personal space dissolve. Iris is aware of the fluid boundaries between them: "Seeing her from behind gave me a peculiar sensation, as if I were watching myself" (Atwood, 2000: 477).

Their relationship as doubles is repeated in their visit to the family graveyard when Iris recognises themselves in the two angel-shaped memorials. The first angel stands with her head bowed to the side in an attitude of mourning; one hand is placed tenderly on the shoulder of the second angel. The second kneels and leans against the other's thigh, cradling a sheaf of lilies. Laura asserts that the angels are meant to be them. The angels indeed foreshadow their future roles: Iris mourns for her past, and Laura's association with innocence and spirituality. Laura is said to "write like an angel" (Atwood, 2000:608), but Iris notes that angels do not write much: "They record sins and the names of the damned and the saved, or they appear as disembodied hands and scribble warnings on walls" (Atwood, 2000:608). Both Iris and Laura appear as "disembodied hands" on each other's photograph of the Button-factory picnic. The image of the hands reinforces the notion of collaborative writing.

2.3 Double and authorship

According to Atwood, "... the real name of someone – their I, their ego – is very much attached to the kind of language they find themselves embedded within ... you are your narrative" (quoted in Reynolds & Noakes, 2002:15). As a child Iris observes that unlike

Laura, she does not own a letter. Laura had the “L”, the one that began her name, and to which a rhyme is attached:

L is for Lily,
So pure and so white;
It opens by day,
And it closes by night (Atwood, 2000:110).

Iris laments the fact that she never had such a letter: “*I – is for Iris – because I was everybody’s letter*” (Atwood, 2000:110). According to Barthes (1974:68), this letter signifies one’s identity as plural, rather than singular, since the letter “I” has an infinite number of signifieds.² Despite Iris’ disappointment, this letter empowers her to speak with more than one voice.

Iris’ diffused identity (which includes the double) has ramifications on notions of authorship and the text – especially regarding the author as individual and autonomous. Writing her memoirs, Iris personifies the air emitted by the air conditioner “as if a hand of cool air lies gently on my shoulder” (Atwood, 2000:82) – as if Laura guides her narrative from beyond the grave, co-authoring her text.

Iris notes that for Laura’s reading audience she is only an appendage: “Laura’s odd, extra hand, attached to no body – the hand that passed her on, to the world, to them” (Atwood, 2000:350-351). They do not know that Iris, and not Laura, wrote the novel. To name Laura as the author would thus be false. Iris explains:

But on second thought ... I can’t say that Laura didn’t write a word. Technically that’s accurate, but in another sense – what Laura would have called the spiritual sense – you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers (Atwood, 2000:626).

Iris’ writing is a “fist”, because it hits back at Richard and Winifred. After reading *The Blind Assassin* [1947], Richard commits suicide. As Iris’ double, Laura shares her life and they “write” each other’s story. As doubles, they share authorship of the text. Left hands often perform sinister deeds, and so does their narrative.

2 In S/Z Barthes (1974:95) adds that “... the lack of a name creates a serious deflation of the realistic illusion: the Proustian I is not of itself a name ... because it is undermined, troubled by disturbances of age, it loses its biographical tense ...”

Disembodied hands in the photograph that Iris and Laura share point to the ambiguous identity of the narrator, and therefore to the impossibility of establishing proprietary rights of authorship and memories. In Laura's photograph, Iris' detached blue hand creeps towards Laura and Alex. However, in a description of the second photograph, the third person narration is used, which changes into the first person narration. The proper noun is omitted, which renders the possibility of identifying the person in the photograph impossible. Because the hand in this photograph is "resting" and because the colour is not mentioned, the reader can only attempt to establish the identity of the subject by what is absent. Iris seems to be the narrator of *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and the subject in the photograph. However, ambiguity is created when the narrator states "It's the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down" (Atwood, 2000:631). As Iris is writing her narrative, this hand seems to belong to her. Laura would then be the subject in the photograph, but she died before the narrative is written, how could she know that Iris will "set things down"?

Throughout the novel, the act of writing signifies the transgression of identities. For example, Laura forges Iris' handwriting for her sick notes. Iris reprimands Laura by insisting on the personal nature of one's handwriting and that the reproduction thereof is a criminal offence. Ironically, Iris "borrows" Laura's signature and publishes the novel *The Blind Assassin* [1947] in Laura's name.

The ambiguity of authorship entails the removal of the final signified – the explanation of the text. Not only is the narrative voice ambiguous, it is also fallible. At the age of 83, Iris narrates what she remembers, but also what she imagines. According to Williams (1997:173), the passage of time often renders one's accounts of events imperfect. Some details will be exaggerated while others will be left out. Events will be twisted to resemble what the narrator would have liked to expect. Iris reconstructs the events of her life, and therefore, also reconstructs her identity. Her narrative will also alter the identity of her granddaughter, Sabrina. By reading Iris' memoirs, Sabrina will no longer be who she thinks she is, as she is not related to Richard or Winifred. Sabrina will be free to reinvent herself at will – to clean her hands of the Griffens as Laura did when she drove off the bridge.

The divide between Iris' narrating hand and "self" is evident in her notion of herself as a "bodiless hand, scrawling across a wall" (Atwood, 2000:626). She regards her narrative as a memorial and a

wall. The image of the wall is used to contrast her former powerless self (“there was nothing behind me but a wall” [Atwood, 2000:277]) and her present octogenarian self, actively scrawling across the wall. Writing therefore signifies an empowering activity. Iris’ last sentence to Sabrina is: “But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read the last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be” (Atwood, 2000:637). This quotation reinforces the fluidity between Iris’ identity and the text; both are in Sabrina’s hands.

3. The fragmentation of the text and the self

According to Rao (1993:80), Atwood’s novels often foreground the relativism involved in the construction of reality and the coherent subject. Her texts exemplify the undermining of traditional notions of textual unity, which is reflected in her challenging notions of the unified subject. The subject as conceived by liberal humanism – unified and coherent – is replaced by a portrayal of subjectivity as double, multiple, fragmented (Rao, 1993:165).

The following passage, where Iris describes her wedding picture referring to herself in the third person, illustrates the narrator’s fragmented subjectivity clearly:

I say ‘her’, because I don’t recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word. I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person. I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, if she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember. I have the better view – I can see her clearly, most of the time. But even if she knew enough to look, she can’t see me at all (Atwood, 2000:292).

This passage not only emphasises the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator, but also points to the separation between hand and voice, between the focalisation through the memories of the narrating (read writing) self and the focalisation through the self that “creates” these memories.

This self-reflexive narrative is an important element in the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator as she constantly draws attention to the act of writing from her position in the narrative present. From the outset she questions her motives for recording her story when she asks:

For whom am I writing this? For myself? I think not. I have no picture of myself reading it over at a later time, later time having

become problematical. For some stranger, in the future, after I'm dead? I have no such ambition, or no such hope. Perhaps I write for no one. Perhaps for the same person children are writing for, when they scrawl their names in the snow (Atwood, 2000:53).

As the narrative progresses she returns to this thought when she muses on the motive for writing, tries to understand the compulsion she feels to record her life, and questions the truthfulness of her narration:

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it (Atwood, 2000:345).

She follows this with "Impossible, of course," which once again focuses attention on the unreliability of the narrator through the self-reflexivity of the narration. Apart from the obvious metatextual element in these comments, which constantly reminds the reader of the writerly nature of the text, they also point to the problematic position of the author.

3.1 The death of the first-person narrator as author?

In order to determine to what extent *The Blind Assassin* (2000) challenges textual unity, Barthes' theory of the "death of the author" (1977) will now be investigated. Barthes (1974:6) views the writerly text as an ideal text in which

[t]he networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning, it is reversible, we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable ... nothing exists outside the text ...

This "writerly" text renders the reader a co-producer of meaning: the goal of the writerly text "... is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterised by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between owner and customer, between its author and its reader ..." (Barthes, 1974:4).

Barthes questions the view of the author as the source of all textual meaning, and invites the possibility of multiple and fluid meanings beyond the unity of binary oppositions such as the signifier and the signified. If the “final signified”, the author, is negated, alternative meanings can be created. Dissolving the unity of the signifier and the signified also entails the possibility for alternative identities. This possibility, however, is denied by traditional notions that favour the term “work” as a closed entity with definite meaning assigned by the author – it can be read, but not written (Barthes, 1974:4). By contrast, a “text” is open, unstable and “writerly”.³ Sarup (1993:33) agrees when asserting that such a text is in flux, since signifiers keep transforming into signifieds, and vice versa, and therefore, one can never arrive at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself.

The first characteristic of a “writerly” text is a literary work that is no longer treated as a stable entity. Since the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is arbitrary, meaning will be unstable. The reader must now shift from the role of passive consumer to that of active producer. The reader as producer of meaning entails a plurality of meaning, “an inexhaustible tissue or galaxy of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes, through which the critic may cut his own errant path” (Eagleton, 1996:138).

The second characteristic of the “writerly” text is shifting textual levels without a definite beginning and end. It has no sequences that cannot be reversed, no hierarchy of textual levels to dictate meaning to the reader. According to Barthes (1975:36), the “writerly” text encourages “circular memory” on the reader’s part and the impossibility of looking at the text in isolation. Also, all literary texts are woven out of other literary texts and not merely “influenced” by other texts. In a more radical sense, one can say that every word, every phrase, is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the particular work. This text is intertextual and opposes the notion of “originality”, because a specific piece of writing is perceived as having no clearly defined boundaries as it spills over constantly into the works around it, generating different perspectives that dwindle to a vanishing point.

3 Barthes explains the difference between “work” and “text” in “From work to text” in *Image-Music-Text: Roland Barthes* (1977), and defines the *readerly text* as a “product” as opposed to a “production” like the writerly text. The *writerly text* is not a “thing”, because it is a perpetual present (Barthes, 1974:5).

Subsequently, intertextuality opposes the notion of the author as the only textual authority, as it is language that speaks in literature and not the author: “there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the *reader*, not, as was hitherto said, the author” (Barthes, 1977:148).

The three characteristics of the writerly text as identified by Eagleton – the text in flux, the absence of hierarchical textual levels, and intertextuality – resist totalising systems and cause the text to be fragmentary.⁴

If one considers McHale’s notion of the *dominant* of Modernist texts, one soon realises that this “dominant” contributes to the writerly nature of Atwood’s texts. The *dominant* is defined as the focussing component of a work, and it is that which guarantees the integrity of the structure (McHale, 1987:6). The dominant of Modernist fiction is epistemological, since it foregrounds questions of the nature of knowledge and one’s relationship with the world. *The Blind Assassin* (2000) foregrounds epistemological themes identified by McHale (1987:9) as the accessibility of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on knowledge by different minds. The devices of multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalisation of narrative evidence through a single centre of consciousness and the transferring of epistemological difficulties of characters to its readers (McHale, 1987:9) all contribute to the fragmented nature of *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

The Blind Assassin (2000) becomes polemical when the death of the author also becomes the death of the first-person narrator. Through her fragmented subjectivity, Iris is established as scriptor rather than author of her own story as she imbues her “memories” with a new life, bearing what Barthes (1977:148) calls “this immense dictionary from which [s]he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred”.

4 The notion of fragmentation is not unique to Postmodernism, which entails a critique of the idea of originality and correspondingly emphasises parody and pastiche. There is a significant difference between notions of fragmentation in Postmodernism and those in Romanticism and Modernism: fragmentation in Postmodernism does not depend on the possibility of an original “unity” which has been lost. The Modernists by contrast, tend to figure fragmentation in terms of the loss of an original integrity. Postmodern fragmentation entails a dissemination, which involves a sense of scattering of origins, identity, centre and presence.

In this role of scriptor, the narrator in *The Blind Assassin* (2000) constantly returns to the hand as marker of her fragmented subjectivity. This is particularly evident in self-reflexive passages such as the following where she announces her return to the writing of her story after a period in which the events in the narrative present of the frame narration were in the spotlight:

To the task at hand. At hand is appropriate: sometimes it seems to me that it's only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken on a life of its own, and will keep on going even if severed from the rest of me ... Certainly it has been writing down a number of things it wouldn't be allowed to if subject to my better judgement (Atwood, 2000:457).

Distancing herself from her hand in this fashion emphasises the narrator as scriptor, who does not record a story as a traditional author or even a first-person narrator would do, but who rather participates in the creation of her own story and in the process laying down the strings of words for the as yet unnamed scriptor, who is to imbue the text with life once again. And yet, she never loses sight of the indeterminacy of this text: "I look back over what I've written and I know it's wrong, not because of what I've set down, but because of what I've omitted. What isn't there has a presence, like the absence of light. ... The living bird is not its labelled bones" (Atwood, 2000:484).

4. *The Blind Assassin* (2000) as a "writerly" text

According to Reynolds and Noakes (2002:136), one could describe the narrative method Atwood employs in *The Blind Assassin* (2000) as collage, a word of French origin that literally means *sticking* or *pasting things on*. It denotes a literary work that contains a mixture of allusions, references and quotations.

In figurative arts, a collage consists of fractured planes as opposed to continuous volumes. It rejects traditional mimetic concepts of ordered and unified pictorial spaces. In its place are new representations of the world as a dynamic interplay of time and space. Cubism often draws on the artist's memory, as opposed to a referent in "reality", and entails a multiplicity of viewpoints and discontinuity. Cubism is a Modernist statement, emphasising the flat plane of the canvas, and as such self-reflectively draws attention to its surface.

Erica Wagner (2002:147) agrees that *The Blind Assassin* (2000) shares Cubist concerns since it suggests that fiction may be just that – fiction, and it might have no relation to “reality”.

4.1 Cubist concerns: a collage

The Blind Assassin (2000) contains two distinct and alternating texts. Both of these texts in turn consist of two distinct levels. The first text consists of a frame narrative in which Iris is scripting her story in the narrative present. At this level we find the elderly narrator struggling with the trials of old age on the one hand and with the trial of committing her story to paper before she dies. The reader is brought back to this frame at intervals when the narrator comments on the act of writing in a metatextual manner as a first-person narrator. The second level of this text consists of the interspersing analepses in which the frame-narrator narrates the events of her life in retrospect. This level often slips into third-person narration as the frame-narrator as scriptor imbues her past with meaning or at least with interpretation.

The second text consists of the embedded novel, *The Blind Assassin* [1947], which contains a third-person frame narrative in the present interspersed with newspaper articles that provide something of an impersonal “historical” backdrop to Iris’ narrative in the other text. The third-person narrative makes it difficult to establish the proprietary rights of the text, particularly since this narrative level consists of an almost voyeuristic camera-eye focalisation that follows a woman and her lover. This narrative frames nested science-fiction narratives (with the primary one being that concerning the blind assassin). The nested narratives fragment the coherence of the “picture plane” (the textual body), because meaning is formed intertextually. Meanings and references in the narratives constantly spill over into each other. Hence they resist final closure.

According to McHale (1987:190) the Postmodern split text includes the format of the newspaper page, where two or more texts are arranged in parallel. Atwood’s “split text” is disseminated through the novel: two main narratives are alternated throughout the novel, and are abruptly cut off, after which the other narrative begins. McHale (1987:191) adds that questions about the relationship between the two texts always exist, since the split or fragmented text foregrounds the order of reading. The reader must handle the gatherings or fragments, shuffle them, and put them together to arrive at textual meaning.

The layered narrative creates non-linearity vis-à-vis the linearity of many Realist texts. Textual non-linearity entails that the reader moves back and forth between the narrative layers in order to achieve clarity. The reader is free to read the scattered fragments of the science fiction novel linearly in order to obtain a unified, continuous text. Alternatively, the fragmented first-person narrative can be read as a unified text. On the other hand, the reader may read the novel as it is presented, in a linear fashion as a collage made up of various texts.⁵

Different modes of reading will arrive at the creation of different meanings: if one reads *The Blind Assassin* [1947] in isolation, one could simply interpret it as fictitious. However, another layer of meaning is added to this text if read in conjunction with the frame story. Only then does the reader realise that Iris and Alex trace their relationship in this narrative. Iris explains her own life not only in her narrative, but also with the help of newspaper clippings, letters, all contained in the steamer trunk. Boundaries between reality and fiction threaten to dissolve when the reader realises that the book's content is exactly the content of the steamer trunk. What the reader reads is what Sabrina will read when she returns from her journey. This layered narrative activates the role of the reader as scriptor, which entails the death of the author.

4.2 The dynamic interplay of time and space

The various narratives included within the frame narration provide the reader with multiple viewpoints of a single event, which fragment the "picture plane". An example of multiple viewpoints is the various angles from which the Button-factory picnic is described. Iris keeps the photograph that the newspaper editor, Elwood Murray, takes of the Button-factory picnic in a brown envelope. She describes the black and white photograph, which depicts Alex Thomas and herself under an apple tree. Iris wears a white blouse and skirt; Alex a light-coloured hat that angles down on his head.

The embedded narrative in *The Blind Assassin* [1947] also contains a picnic in which the unnamed woman and her lover participate. It is

5 As Barthes (1975:10-11), points out in *The Pleasure of the Text*, reading does not have to be linear and the readers are free to enter and leave the text wherever they want. This "cutting" is called *tmesis*, and is the source of the pleasure of the text. More responsibility is thus placed on the readers, making them active agents in the process of creating meaning.

during this picnic that the man starts to outline the beginnings of the science-fiction story. The reader knows that the lovers are characters in this embedded novel, but is tempted to inscribe their identities onto Iris and Alex. These lovers are also having a picnic under an apple tree: like Alex, the man wears a pale blue shirt and like Iris, the woman wears a white skirt. This repetition foregrounds the act of reading since the reader is forced to non-linearly re-read⁶ certain passages in order to create meaning. It is only in retrospect that the reader realises that the lover in *The Blind Assassin* [1947] could be based on the character Alex in the frame narration, and the woman on Iris. Against the background of Barthes' writings it is particularly important not to assume that the nested novel of *The Blind Assassin* [1947] has a mimetic relationship with the frame narration. The fact that the lover is never explicitly identified as Alex nor the mistress as Iris, highlights the writerly nature of the text.

The reader then encounters another perspective on the Button-factory picnic (Atwood, 2000:217), where Iris is reminiscing the past in the narrative present. This description disrupts reading, because the reader has to page back to the previous picnic, in order to establish whether it is the Button-factory picnic, or in fact, a different one.

A different perspective on the Button-factory picnic is provided by Iris in her description of the photograph taken for the local newspaper. The photo, however, exists as a copy of the picnic, and as such it is a disconnected signifier which has no longer an origin in reality. The truthfulness of the photo is thus as unconnected to reality as Iris' (fallible) memories of it.

The signifier is further removed from its origin in reality when the police make a poster from the copy of the Button-factory picnic in order to identify Alex (Atwood, 2000:263). (He is suspected of burning down the Button-factory owned by Iris' father.) The sides of the photograph, however, have been cut off in order to eliminate Iris and Laura's images. The Button-factory photograph is mentioned again when Iris reminisces on the moment Laura presents her with the photograph: Laura has made two copies from the original

6 Barthes (1974:15-16) asserts that reading must be plural, without "order of entrance". The signifier will then have a shifting nature since it draws the text out of its internal chronology. Rereading contests the claim that the first reading is a primary reading. Rereading adds to the writerly nature of the text, because it is not a passive consumption, but a "play" of meaning.

negatives. One of them she gives to Iris, the other one she keeps for herself. Laura crops her own image off Iris' photograph "because that's what you (Iris) want to remember" (Atwood, 2000:269). At this stage, Laura who is in love with Alex, knows that Iris is too.

The photograph is mentioned again when Iris discovers it among Laura's notebooks after her death. This time, Iris' image has been cut off, and both Alex and Laura are tinted a light yellow, whereas Iris' hand, the only part of her body still visible in the picture, is tinted blue (Atwood, 2000:610).

Yet another description of a photograph can be found in the epilogue of *The Blind Assassin* (Atwood, 2000:631). A third of the photograph has been cropped and in the lower left corner, a hand, severed at the wrist, is visible. According to the narrator, it "is the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture, whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down" (Atwood, 2000:631). The reader is therefore forced to speculate on the identity of the subject in the photograph. To assume that this hand is Iris' would be to provide the text with closure of significance. However, this leaves the narrative with unresolved questions: why is this hand severed? Who is "the other one?" In Barthes' (1974:x) words "... the final closure of the modern text is suspension".

The above perspectives on the picnic(s) contribute to the fragmentation of the text and discontinuous reading. In the descriptions of the picnic(s), photographs of the picnic(s) and copies of the original photograph, Atwood seems to provide a parody of the Postmodern foregrounding of the notion of mimesis⁷. These perspectives provide a very good example of the essence of this article, namely the writerly nature of the text(s) as well as the hand(s) as marker of fragmentation.

4.3 Reality versus fiction

By recording her memoirs, Iris "paints" a self-portrait. Her narrative act renders her subject as well as object, as she is both the author of her text, and a "character" in it. Her reality is fictionalised by her

7 A good example of a parody of mimesis is provided in Peter Ackroyd's *English Music*. Chapter six provides a parody of detective novels, such as Sherlock Holmes, and foregrounds the "cleverness" of the detective who finds clues against all odds. As Iris, Timothy lives only in the narrative; for instance, the reality of his father who has disappeared is turned into fiction with the title "The Case of the Disappearing Father" (Ackroyd, 1992:121).

reconstruction of it in the form of the memoir. She fictively represents herself as someone Sabrina might like, because the picture Sabrina has of her is unfavourably painted by Winifred. Thus, she is scriptor of her own writerly text just as she anticipates Sabrina to become the scriptor of what she is writing in the narrative present, and just as we as readers are the scriptors of this fragmented text.

The notion of “the death of the author” is highlighted, but it also questions the notion of representation when the boundaries between fiction and reality become feint. *The Blind Assassin* (2000) is a Russian doll narrative⁸, written by Margaret Atwood, but contains a novel (*The Blind Assassin* [1947]) published in Laura’s name. The purported author of this novel literally dies after driving off a bridge. Metaphorically, the author of *The Blind Assassin* (2000) dies because of the writerly nature of the text in which the reader plays a large role in constructing meaning.

Iris is aware of the feint line between reality and fiction when she initially, attempts to write for nobody in particular, in order to arrive at the “truth”. However, every text is built upon a potential audience and includes an image of whom it is written for. Every work encodes within itself an “implied reader” (Eagleton, 1996:84). Iris asserts that the moment one writes for an audience, “truth” is compromised:

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it (Atwood, 2000:345).

She realises that this is impossible and that her narrative has a confessional nature that will absolve her from her past. Iris is aware of this contradiction, which highlights the self-reflexive element of

8 The technique of the Russian doll worlds is also used by Ackroyd in *English Music* (1992). Ackroyd is the author of *English Music*, in which Timothy, his father and A. Smallwood are characters. Another layer is added when A. Smallwood becomes a character created by an unknown author. However, A. Smallwood is the author of “The Case of the Disappearing Father”, in which Timothy is a fictional character. Moreover, Timothy thinks that A. Smallwood is Sherlock Holmes, the character created by Arthur Conan Doyle. Similarly, Felipe Alfau is the author of *Locos* (1988), in which the character, Felipe Alfau writes “Locos” and searches for characters for his novel. There are four levels of reality: Alfau that writes about the character Alfau, the character that writes about characters, such as Gaston Bejerano, and Gaston Bejerano that writes a chapter, containing fourth-order reality characters.

her narrative. It also points to the fragmentation between the narrating hand (recording the “truth”) and the “self”, who is conscious of the impossibility of truth.

Iris also remarks that human beings write in order to memorialise themselves, “to assert one’s existence, like dogs peeing on fire hydrants” a “... simple claim to existence, like scribbling your initials on a washroom wall... Getting the blood off your hands” (Atwood, 2000:603). Iris asserts that the narrative she leaves for Sabrina to read holds the promise of confession without penance (Atwood, 2000:603), and suggests that she wants Sabrina to be her witness, her ideal reader⁹. Iris realises that this jeopardises the truth of her narrative and therefore she attempts to be objective by writing to “nobody in particular” (Atwood, 2000:345), not even herself. The closer Iris gets to the end of her narrative (and also her life) the more frequently she addresses Sabrina directly. As long as she produces narrative discourse, Iris lives. When she dies, her discourse ends. Life is equated with discourse, and death with the end of discourse. The death of the author quite clearly marks the limits of representation (McHale, 1987:228-229). Iris knows she will die when she reaches the end of her narrative, which is why she arranges to lock her narrative away in the steamer trunk¹⁰ where it will remain until Sabrina returns from her travels. However, there is no indication that she will actually return – this uncertainty or ambiguity further strengthens the writerly nature of the text as a whole.

Although it has been established that Iris writes for Sabrina, the ontological boundary between reader and character threatens to dissolve when Iris uses the second person pronoun *you* to refer to her narratee. According to McHale (1987:223), *you* is a fluid construct, since it is an empty linguistic sign whose reference changes with every change of speaker in a discourse; *you* can be singular/plural, or male/female. The reader reads the contents of the trunk (intended for Sabrina) – an act of reading, which dissolves the boundaries between fiction and reality. McHale (1987:224) also

9 According to Cuddon (1991:439), every author wants an *ideal reader*. This reader is the imaginary person who, the writer hopes, will understand completely the author’s experience and intention.

10 The steamer trunk contains items that mark the most important changes of Iris’ identity: before she got married it held her trousseau, later when she divorced Richard, it contained her and Aimee’s clothes. In her old age, it contains her narrative.

states that the second person functions as an invitation to the reader to project him or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*. Although the *you* seems to refer to Sabrina, it nevertheless retains a connotation of direct appeal to the reader in a metatextual manner, that seems to grope beyond the boundaries of the text into the reader's own scripting present and by doing so, the reader is born at the cost of the death of the author.

5. Conclusion

Atwood's preoccupation with challenging traditional notions of selfhood is reflected in her parallel preoccupation with undermining the coherence of the text itself. As a result, *The Blind Assassin* (2000) has a fragmented nature, as well as an ambiguous narrative voice. Hands are markers of the fragmentation of the text and the self. This fragmentation renders the text writerly, which entails the death of the author. *The Blind Assassin* (2000), however, incorporates the notion of the traditional author who believes the hand to be too slow for conveying thoughts. On the surface, this belief seems to contradict Barthes' notion of the scribe, whose hand is cut off from his or her voice. But instead of establishing the authorial voice behind the text, the hand in *The Blind Assassin* (2000) marks the ambiguous narrative voice of the scribe, borne by the text. Instead of pointing to the author of the narrative, the author disappears behind the narrating hand. The scribe's hand is indeed cut off from the voice – the self. In Iris' words "it is only my hand writing, not the rest of me: my hand has taken a life of its own ..." and "certainly its been writing down a number of things it wouldn't be allowed to if subject to my better judgement" (Atwood, 2000:457). The disembodied hand becomes a scapegoat, conveying thought and emotion and by so doing protects the already fragmented "self" of the narrator, since "hands have no tears to flow" (Thomas, 1985: 215). Iris, the author, dies by projecting herself onto her writing, and her previous self is lost forever the moment Sabrina reads it. Iris dies of a heart complication, and when she dies, discourse stops. But "writing" will begin when Sabrina – and other readers – starts reading Iris' memoirs, the book itself.

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