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## Melancholia as an Ecological *Entente*: Tracing the Ecocritical Significance of the Melancholic Poet Persona in Margaret Atwood's *Dearly*

### Abstract

With a close reading of Margaret Atwood's collection of poems *Dearly*, the paper aims at an alternative understanding of Freudian Melancholia to discuss its creative and fecund potential rather than seeing it as a repressive force, with a focus on its role in expediting ecological sociality. I will explore how the literary depiction of a Melancholic reaction to loss, especially in terms of the ego-loss, catalyzes an ontological and political miscegenation that helps build multispecies communities based on a shared feeling of emotional distress by subverting the savior-saved or subject-object binary vis-à-vis humans and more-than-humans.

### Keywords

Melancholia, Ecocriticism, Freud, Atwood

### Introduction

Melancholia,<sup>1</sup> according to Freud, is a pathological reaction to the loss of someone or something that was loved. The idea of loss undergirds the recent poetry collection of Margaret Atwood's *Dearly*. In what is considered "one of

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<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere, I have referred to both Melancholia and Mourning with a capital 'M' to delimit their denotations specifically within Freudian theory. It would be remiss of me not to point out that the discussion surrounding melancholia has developed vis-à-vis concerns of mental health. For more on medical perspectives on melancholia, see Parker (2010).

the worst cases of domestic violence in Canadian History” (Flood 2021), as per *The Guardian*, Nathalie Warmerdam, a house nurse in Canada, was murdered by her ex-partner Basil Borutski in 2015. Warmerdam’s brother, baritone Joshua Hopkins, went on to musically commemorate his sister by releasing the album *Songs for Murdered Sisters*, an eight-part song cycle penned by Margaret Atwood and included in *Dearly*. Interestingly, what stands out in *Dearly* is that it also consists of another song cycle called the “Plasticene Suite,” which poetically plows through the terrains of grief seemingly extraneous to the poet persona’s immediate concerns where the song cycle apprehends loss beyond the silos of human experiences and carries with shared vulnerabilities between human and more-than-human bodies. The paper aims to trace the curious isomorphic strands across two axes of loss—personal and ecological. With a close reading of Atwood’s poems in *Dearly*, I will discuss how Freudian Melancholia, rather than being an inhibitive pathological disposition, becomes an affective conduit between the personal and the ecological, thereby fostering dissident modalities of habitability.<sup>2</sup>

In his book *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben notes that one of the ancient Roman forms of punishment was the *poena cullei* or the punishment of the sack where the condemned man, with his head covered in a wolf-skin, was put in a sack with serpents, a dog and a rooster, and then thrown into a water body or defenestrated from a rock (1998, 52). The operative principle underlining the theatricality of the punishment, i.e., the literal garbing of the human in terms of the more-than-human and then decrying it as life not worthy of living and, as a consequence, not worth grieving, offers a critical insight into how the asymmetric relationship between humans and nature has been historically conceptualized. According to ecocritic Val Plumwood, such an asymmetry is pivoted upon the logic of a subject-object dualism (2002, 52), which confers the “master” identity upon humans to posit them as the center, and all things exterior to them as derivative and deficient in relation to the center (2002, 101). Such a dualism can be traced back to the European Enlightenment philosophy, especially the Cartesian philosophy of

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<sup>2</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty reads “habitability” as a foil to “sustainability” which he views as a human centric environmental discourse. On the contrary, “habitability” is concerned with collective and complex dwelling of ecological assemblages, “The question at the center of the habitability problem is not what life is or how it is managed in the interest of power but rather what makes a planet friendly to the continuous existence of complex life” (2021, 83).

a mechanistic view of nature, where the human cogito is championed as the fountainhead of reason and reasonability as the determining focal point to understanding reality. In *Dearly*, Atwood captures this subject-object dualism in terms of a culinary consumptive metaphor in the poem "Table Settings," where she writes,

So, Nature. We sit around it,  
chew it into rags  
with our artful fangs and talons.

Atwood 2021, 78

This model of hyper separation, or what Plumwood terms "radical discontinuity" (2002, 57) within ecological relations, has buttressed and validated the rationalist identification of all entities extraneous to the human subject as objects fit for consumptive chewing and eschewing, rendering them replicable and replaceable, underpinning that not all losses are to be mourned equally. However, the Cartesian binary underpinning the somewhat familiar subject-object dualism has been troubled by the growing awareness of the Anthropocene and the advent of deep ecology, posthumanism, animal studies, and other converging theoretical discourses. Summing up the current developments, Joshua Barnett argues that the term "Anthropocene" engenders two movements of consciousness, both of which initiate the work of bereavement. On the one hand, it refers to the growing awareness of harm wrecked by *homo sapiens*, and second, and more relevant to this paper, it not only refers to the awareness but also *generates* this awareness (2019, 9; my emphasis). Barnett argues that this "coming-into-consciousness" (2019, 9) is of utmost significance in the discourse on grief as one cannot bereave what one is not aware is lost. The awareness so anticipated questions the erstwhile presumptions about the politics of loss and whom we choose to mourn. Emphasizing the shift, Barnett observes,

What we have lost is a sense of self separate from others, human and more-than-human alike, as well as the good conscience that bubbles up every time we are led to believe that we are not individually responsible for the crises the planet now faces. Ethically, this loss of identity is significant, for it shifts the way we conceptualize who and what "we" are [...] Since what the "anthropocene" says, at least in part, is that "I" cannot extricate myself from the "we," it follows that "I" also can no longer understand "my" actions as disconnected from the actions of this larger "we." Pronouns are no longer innocent (2019, 10).

Hence, as human history and planetary history coalesce in the Anthropocene, whereby the former emerges as a planetary force, there is compulsory registration of the fact that the naïve viewpoint of humanity detached from its more-than-human kin is no longer tenable. Katherine Hayles opines that posthumanism revises the atomistic human identity in favor of a “dynamic co-evolutionary spiral” (2006, 164) consisting of all ecological beings. This idea concurs with the earlier deep ecology movement pioneered by Arne Naess, where he theorizes a “[r]ejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of *the relational, total-field image*” (1973, 95; original emphasis) which results in a “biospherical net” (1973, 95). In a similar vein, Warwick Fox coins the term “transpersonal ecology” or “this-worldly realization of as expansive a sense of self as possible” (1995, 106) which leads to what he conceptualizes as a “steadfast friendliness” (1995, 256) among all beings. His theory agrees with Rosi Braidotti’s view of posthumanism, which upholds “a transversal inter-connection or an ‘assemblage’ of human and non-human actors” (2013, 45). The posthumanist turn in ecocriticism recognizes the constructedness of divisions within the continuum of life on Earth. Within this rubric of a biosocial assemblage, as the poems in *Dearly* suggest, grief processes inhere a critical valence because grief emerges, as Donna Haraway writes, as a “path to understanding entangled shared living and dying” (2016, 39). To bereave is to remember; sustained remembrance is transformative insofar as it recognizes one’s ethical responsibilities to others through the recognition of shared fragility and vulnerabilities. Judith Butler emphasizes the potential of grief for creating political communities—while experiencing loss when one is *beside oneself* with grief and undergoes something beyond one’s control, the experience issues a mode of dispossession that underscores the fundamental sociality of embodied living (2004, 28). The loss reveals that “my” fate is not initially or finally separated from “yours.” It is a tacit acknowledgment that entities are bound to one another in inexplicable ways and that each other’s unravellings unravel one another. Further emphasizing the community-building potential of grief, Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman suggest,

We are changed internally and externally by the loss in ways that we cannot predict or control and in ways that may be disorienting, surprising, or completely unexpected. Through this mourning-as transformation we are open to, continually exposed and vulnerable to, these bodies through the potential for loss and our subsequent grieving. In this understanding of mourning, we are also continually seized by unexpected responses to loss for which we can little prepare, and which continually compound through subsequent experiences with loss and grief. These responses to loss can leave

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us changed in ways we could not have imagined, and hold the possibility of leaving us more open to other bodies, to grief, and to our transcorporeal connections with all bodies (2017, 10).

During grief processes, the loss, then, is twofold. There is the loss of the lost object of love and the loss of the former self, the way it used to be before the experience of loss. Such an alteration of the self, facilitated through grieving a loved one, aligns with the ego-incorporation process Freud views as Melancholia. The paper examines how Freudian Melancholia as a specific grief response opens one to trans-corporeal connections with others, specifically, more-than-human others. I will locate Melancholia as a mediating device or an entente that facilitates a mutuality of experiences and interests among human and more-than-human beings, thereby destabilizing the human-centered subject-object binary.

For my arguments, I will focus on the Freudian conceptualization of Melancholia as the discursive point of departure and draw on its contrapuntal theorizations. Freud theorizes Melancholia as a “pathological condition” (1914-1916, 243) that occurs when the “normal” reaction to loss, i.e., Mourning, does not successfully take place. During Mourning, the ego of the subject reacts to the loss of the object of love by an object de-cathexis, or a severing of all libidinal attachments from the object so that the ego becomes “free and uninhibited again” (1914-1916, 245) to move on and establish newer object cathexis, i.e., establish an affinity with successive objects. In Melancholia, the ego does not let go. Instead of displacing the free libido on other objects, the lost object is “withdrawn into the ego” (1914-1916, 249), and the Melancholic subject internalizes the object, leading to a loss of self-regard and the debilitation of the ego.

Such an orthodox opposition between the two reactions to loss has been critically re-visited with a focus on Melancholia’s positive and creative dimensions in the recent past. For David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, while Mourning lays the past to rest, a Melancholic internalization of the object of loss constitutes a “continuous engagement” (2003, 4) with the past, generating a possibility of reimagining the future. Avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of alternate meanings and new representations. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands reads Freudian Mourning as a “progressivist narrative” (2010, 337) which involves a forward movement with a systematic jettisoning of the object of love, whereas Melancholia, instead of being a failed reaction to a loss, becomes a critical way of remembering and preserving the loved entity. By its incorporative logic, Melancholia substitutes narcissistic energy for an inner attachment that is at once individualizing

and unifying. The acute awareness of one's grief can be harnessed to expose systematic marginalization and injustice that is buttressed through the false distinction between grievable and un-grievable bodies (Butler 2004, xiv), thus bringing unexpected ties of relationality to the fore. In this regard, Jonathan Flatley argues that the Melancholic concern with loss creates "mediating structures" (2008, 3) where we can "see the other persons who share our losses and are subject to the same social forces" (2008, 3), creating a "community of melancholics" (2008, 4). He calls this affective mapping or the recognition of "the historicity of one's affective experiences" (2008, 4), whereby a deliberate engagement with one's loss brings to light one's relationship to broader historical matrices of crises. With its eschewal of consolatory promises, Melancholia paves the way for immersion in loss rather than redemption.

Furthermore, such an immersion prevents any systematic occlusion of those lost and hence, brings into vision the various and variously affected participants mired in a kaleidoscopic range of violence, which, in turn, expands the process of grief work beyond the concerns of self to include those traditionally expunged from the realm of grief. The paper aims to trace how Atwood expands this participation to a multispecies level by positing the poet persona in an ecologically intimate entanglement. Taking a cue from the strands of ecocritical and Melancholia studies, I contend that Freud's theory is pivoted upon an allegedly healthy subject-object binary where the possibility of an untrammelled de-cathexis and re-cathexis affirms the "objectness" of the extra-personal and aligns with the Cartesian bifurcation of cogitating humans and complaisant nature. Under its devaluation of the ego, Melancholia destabilizes the bulwarks of identity and hence, as I will discuss regarding Atwood's poetry, has the potential to abet an enhanced cognizance of the more-than-human partners. Consequently, it innervates the affective fibers connecting trans-species co-inhabitants of the planet and evokes a political miscegenation that underlines the need for a multi-polar and multivalent reading of violence.

The essay is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will try to establish the poet persona of *Dearly* as a Freudian Melancholic individual, and in the subsequent section, I will discuss how they mediate between personal and ecological losses through affective mapping.

**“Why can’t I let her go?”: The Melancholic Poet Persona**

At the very outset of the cycle “Songs for Murdered Sisters,” the poem “Empty Chair” begins with the poet persona’s declaration of the death of their sister, establishing that an object loss has occurred.

Who was my sister  
Is now an empty chair  
Is no longer,  
Is no longer there  
She is now emptiness  
She is now air.

Atwood 2001, 32

Freud observes that in the Mourning process, there is a “withdrawal of libido from the object and displacement of it onto a new one” (1914-1916, 249). Symptoms persisting during the interim period between the two stages, like a loss of interest in the outside world and a loss of capacity to love, account for the painful “work of mourning” (1914-1916, 245) or the emotional labor required for the subject to banish the object of love. The imagery of the empty chair could be read as a visual rendition of the resultant psychological vacuity as the poet persona labors through Mourning. Moreover, this image of a lacuna becomes a running motif, traversing the aggrieved psycho-scape of the poet persona as they weave together disparate vignettes of personal losses. In “If There Were No Emptiness,” they lament, “That room has been static for me so long:/ an emptiness a void a silence/ containing an unheard story” (Atwood 2021, 13). In “Silver Slippers,” they record a phantasmic company which further signifies a void. “I’ll skip dinner, the kind with linens/ and candles lit for two. I’ll be alone,/ sitting across from an absence” (2021, 112).

In “Dream,” they undergo the stage of Mourning that Freud terms as “clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis” (1914-1916, 244). They conjure their dead sister in a somnambulant episode—“When I sleep, you appear/ I am a child then/ And you are young [...]” (Atwood 2021, 35). Similarly, in “Enchantment,” they hallucinate wishful revisions of the past,

If this were a story  
 I was telling my sister  
 A troll from the mountain  
 Would have stolen her  
 [...]
 To find the answer;  
 I'd speak the charm

And she'd be standing there.

Atwood 2021, 33

The loss of interest in the world, which results in a painful “mood of mourning” (Freud, 1914–1916, 244), is also exemplified in the poem “Flat-line.”

The sunrise makes you wince:  
 [...]
 After a lifetime of tangling,  
 of knotted snares and lacework,  
 [...]
 you crave the end of mazes  
 and pray for a white shore,  
 an ocean with its horizon;  
 not—so much—bliss,  
 but a flat line you steer for.

Atwood 2021, 115

In the poem, the horizon is equated with a moribund flat line redolent of the image of asystole detected in an electrocardiogram, which signifies the desire for termination. From a Freudian perspective, this could be read as a desire to terminate the residual filaments of libido that keep clutching at the lost object so that the ego is released from the labors of Mourning. Cues like “tangling” and “knotted snares” suggest the taxing, convoluted demands of the work of Mourning, while the verb “steering” could be read as a teleologically focused task of discharging them in a bid to disavow the object of loss so that the ego retains its autonomy and is free to move on.

In “Betrayal,” as the poet persona encounters a covert arraignment between their lover and best friend, they say, “You’ll never close that clumsily opened door,/ *they’ll be stuck in that room forever*” (2021, 27; my emphasis),



calling into attention a prolonged re-visitation of the memories of loss. Freud notes that “[e]very single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-catheted and *detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it*” (1914-1916, 245; my emphasis). Thus, the room in “Betrayal” almost becomes the site of de-cathexis via hyper-cathexis *but not entirely* because of the adverbial qualification of “forever.” While the Freudian trajectory of Mourning is time-bound, the imagery of a door held ajar “forever” throws the temporal localization into a quandary. Therefore, it is possible to argue that hyper-cathexis in the room of memories is not geared towards disavowing the memories of loss but instead towards holding onto them, with the open door eternally facilitating traffic between the object of loss and the subject’s ego, thus rendering the work of Mourning futile. It is here, I contend, that the poet persona (deliberately?) turns from being Mournful to Melancholic.

With the collapse of the boundary between the object and the subject, Freud writes, “the ego is altered by identification” (1914-1916, 249) as the shadow of the object engulfs the ego. “I am dying here./ Love on a skewer,/ a heart in flames” (Atwood 2021, 28), they say in “Frida Kahlo [...]” after confessing at the onset of the poem that, “You faded so long ago/ but here [...]/ you are everywhere” (2021, 28). In this context, “dying” could be read as a symbolic death of the hitherto uninhibited ego, which no longer enjoys ontological independence for having introjected the loved object, transforming it into something ubiquitous and indispensable. Additionally, both “skewer” and “flames” are tools that connote mutilation and disfigurement, suggesting an alteration of the ego and further establishing the poet persona as a Freudian Melancholic. In a significant bout of Melancholic preservation of loss, they end the poem “Blizzard” where they articulate their mother’s death with the refrain,

Why can’t I let go of her?  
Why can’t I let her go?

Atwood 2021, 7

### **Remembrance, Defamiliarisation, Responsivity**

Having established the poet persona as a Freudian Melancholic, I will now explore how Atwood subverts the inhibitive conceptualization of Melancholia on its head to alternatively ideate it as a radical and agentic means to interact with more-than-human participants. To pursue this end, I will re-

course to Jonathan Flatley's concept of affective mapping, which consists of two steps—self-estrangement of one's emotional life and reflection and analysis.

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands notes that Melancholia lends a presentness to loss, foregrounding “the fact that we are constituted by prohibition, power, and violence—[which] is central to our ethical and political relationships with others in the constant meditation on the lost object” (2010, 341). Therefore, what Freud views as narcissistic object-choice could also be read as an active remembering or a deliberate avowal of grief. This view leads to understanding the infrastructural relational tenets of multiple manifestations of various (and variously experienced) losses. In the poem “Souvenirs,” on the formal level, there is a centralization of the verb “remember.” It starkly contrasts the previously discussed labors of Mourning, where the poet persona had attempted to steer forth and move away from the messy, tangled lacework of grief.

But who is to remember what?  
 [...]
 and you can remember that I once  
 remembered: I remembered  
 something for you  
 [...]
 Remember me.

Atwood 2021, 10

Herein begins the primary step of affective mapping—defamiliarizing their emotional self. Flatley sees self-estrangement as a “decisive ferment” (2008, 6) that allows a significant transformation in being able to treat oneself as an object—“One must be self-consciously alienated from one's emotional life for it to become historical datum” (2008, 6). I will consider two poems here.

“Winter Vacations”

How quickly we are skimming through time,  
 Leaving behind us  
 a trail of muffin crumbs  
 and wet towels and hotel soaps  
 like white stones in the forest  
 [...]

we're travelling faster than light  
[...]  
We know we've been here already.  
Or were we? Will we ever be?  
Will we ever be again?

Atwood 2021, 106-107

"Flatline"

Ears are superfluous:  
What are they for, those alien pink flaps? Skull fungus.  
The body, once your accomplice, is now your trap.

Atwood 2021, 115

"Winter Vacations" conveys a deliberate reflection on flash consumption and disposal as a modality of living that stems from a self-assuredness of the ego. It is hard to miss the tenor of analysis as the poet persona concludes, "We are travelling faster than light" (Atwood 2021, 106). The latter part of the poem problematizes this self-assuredness as it self-consciously takes the form of a questionnaire wherein the array of self-directed probing alienates the emotional equilibrium and destabilizes the foundations of their very being—"Will we ever *be* again?" (2021, 107; my emphasis). This destabilization coincides with Freudian "ego loss" (1914-1916, 249). As a result, once the acme of perfection, the human body is reduced to a data-like alien mass in "Flatline." In such a self-estrangement, there is a shoring of anthropocentric excesses whereby the hitherto outward-looking gaze turns inwards, undercutting the internal-external binary. In the poem "Disenchanted Corpse," there is a turn towards the posthuman via a reflection on the defamiliarised self, which exemplifies the second step of affective mapping.

But if you're now disenchanted,  
who enchanted you, back then?  
What magus or sorceress cast over you  
the net of words, the charm?  
Placed the scroll in your golem's  
mouth of mud?

Atwood 2021, 117

In most literate societies, nature is seen to be silent in that the status of being a speaking subject is guarded as an exclusively human prerogative (Manes 1996, 15). The poem problematizes this superior exclusivity of human speech-acts by tracing them to a magician's charm, a function of mere happenstance, to undercut the logocentrism myth that has led to a sustained devaluation of non-human ecological inhabitants. In the poem, the speaking human has but a "mouth of mud," leveled as part of an ecological spectrum rather than apart from it.

It is precisely through this Melancholic diminution in their self-regard, which leads to a skewered ego, that the poet persona's preoccupations with loss give way to a protean amoeba-like conceptualization of the self that turns away from a concealed egotism. In "Ghost Cat," there is an assimilation of consciousnesses—"Cats suffer from dementia too. Did you know that?" (Atwood 2021, 4). The interrogative clause could be read as an impact of self-estrangement where the poet persona perceives alternate modes of interaction afresh.

She'd writhe around on the sidewalk  
 for chance pedestrians, whisker their trousers,  
 [...]
 though not when she started losing  
 what might have been her mind. She'd prowl the night  
 [...]
 So witless and erased. O, who?  
 Clawing at the bedroom door  
 shut tight against her. *Let me in,*  
*enclose me, tell me who I was.*  
 No good. No purring. No contentment. Out  
 into the darkened cave of the dining room,  
 then in, then out, forlorn.  
 And when I go that way, grow fur, start howling,  
 scratch at your airwaves:  
 no matter who I claim I am  
 or how I love you, turn the key. Bar the window.

Atwood 2021, 4

The poem undermines the injunctions of speciation and becomes a porous site of interactions inhabited by grieving individuals. On the formal level, the italicized focal point of the cat is de-italicized towards the end, where the feline "*I*" is mapped with the 'I' of the poet persona, eschewing

classification in favor of conviviality. On the thematic level, using affective cues like “writhe” and “forlorn”, the poet persona disrupts the Cartesian framework of non-human beings as a machine<sup>3</sup> by foregrounding a possible continuum of affective experiences. However, such a continuum does not guarantee simplistic domesticated kinships among individuals but retains heterogeneity of their subjectivities. For example, in “Short Takes on Wolves,” Atwood writes,

A wolf is in pain  
[...]  
You want to see the wolf  
or demand your money back,  
but the wolf doesn't want to see you.

Atwood 2021, 78

Here, the decentering of the poet persona's spectatorial external vantage point in favor of the wolf's gaze denounces the romantic infantilization of the more-than-human and facilitates what Elizabeth Behnke notes as a shared inter-animality which emerges “from the lived experiences of interspecies sociality” (1999, 100). The erstwhile object of gaze becomes the gazing actant, creating space for a lateral relationship of co-participants. Interestingly, by dint of laterality, the wolf *refuses* to employ its gaze, which impairs the possibility of an appropriation of its pain by the poet persona. Atwood's concern in this poem aligns with what Claire Jean Kim terms a “multi-optic vision” or a mode of seeing that recognizes the disparate nature of justice claims of different and differently subordinated beings without privileging any one presumptively (2015, 19).<sup>4</sup> Hence, while the Melancholic poet persona can begin to identify with the grieving other, they cannot supplant the wolf's experiences with their own which would have led to an inadvertent paternalistic eco-activism. They can, however, locate a relationality of grief, creating a scope for *responsivity* rather than *responsibility*.

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<sup>3</sup> Descartes sees nonhuman animals as “automata” (1960, 80).

<sup>4</sup> Aided by the Melancholic diminution of self-regard, multi-optic vision enables “moving from one vantage point to another, inhabiting them in turn [...]” to “grapple with the existence and interconnectedness of multiple group experiences of oppression” (Kim 2015, 19-20). Kim notes that such a vision evokes “seeing and recognising” (182) struggles of other subordinated groups, which could be argued to foment the formation of a Melancholic community.

The idea of responsivity facilitated through affective mapping is similar to the ecological framework of ethics heralded by Arne Naess, whereby “care flows naturally if the ‘self’ is widened and deepened” (Qtd. in Fox, 1995, 218). Furthermore, such care is facilitated not through a moral exhortation but an inclination. He formulates this relational ontology as Self Realisation, where there is a movement “along a scale from selfishness to Selfishness, that is, broadening and deepening the self” (Fox 1995, 72). Self Realization repudiates the regimenting injunctions of environmental moralism in favor of intuitive cooperation with ecological members. In the poem “Princess Clothing,” the conceptualization and representation of animals as what Rosi Braidotti theorizes as “zoo proletariat” (2013, 70), exploited for hard labor in a human-run machine industry, is rebutted through an unusual juxtaposition of femicide and extermination of silkworms in the sericulture industry.

That is where it comes from, silk;  
 Those seven veils the silkworms keep spinning,  
 Hoping they will be butterflies.  
 Then they get boiled and then unscrolled.  
 It's what you hope too, right?  
 That beyond death, there's flight?  
 [...]  
 It won't be like that  
 Not quite.

Atwood 2021, 19

In the poem, the Melancholic remembrance becomes catalytic in aligning the pathos of violence associated with the murder of women with the mass killing of silkworms. The poet persona suggests a Naessean Ecological Selfishness wherein micro and macro losses are posited as affectively analogous, and hence, opens the possibility of an alternate basis of ecological alliance. Rosanne Kennedy's idea of “multidirectional eco-memory” becomes pertinent here. She sees memory not as a zero-sum game in which personal memory is preserved at the cost of obscuring memories of extraneous atrocities but instead places “memories of dispossession of particular human animal populations in complex, nuanced relation to memories of the suffering, slaughter, and endangerment of non-human animal populations” (2017, 269). Kennedy formulated an “expanded multispecies frame of remembrance” (2017, 268) which, I argue, is crucial in the actualization of affective mapping. For instance, due to the parallel reflection on the death of women

and silkworms, the latter's routinized extermination is dissociated from the impunity of banal industrialization, which aids and abets forgetting and moving on and, thus, it takes on a socio-political significance which in turn evokes questions of accountability.<sup>5</sup> The compartmentalization of memory regarding human and more-than-human violence vitiates the magnitude of violence meted out to more-than-human stakeholders of nature. In the poem, memories are de-compartmentalized as Melancholic remembrances bleed into the juxtaposition of multi-polar deaths, preventing the dissimulation of ecological violence's cruelty.

Similarly, affective parallels are drawn between the poet persona grappling with their mother's death in "Blizzard" and a mother whale grieving her child who dies by consuming toxic plastic in the sea in "Whales." While in "Blizzard," the poet persona feels that their mother is "making her way down/ one more white river" (Atwood 2021, 7). The mother whale carries her dead child in the "square blue sea" (2021, 89). The taxonomic similarity vis-à-vis water imageries reflect a fluidic congruity in how both losses are poetically apprehended along an ecological continuum, piercing the subject-object binary. Also, the epithet of "big and sad" (2021, 89) associated twice with the mother whale draws attention away from instrumental environmental activism to focus on the interiority of the whale instead, shedding light on the variously diffused subjectivities across ecology and the imbricated affective manifestations of the same.

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that while Naess' theory of Ecological Selfishness enjoins an ecological unanimity that transcends embodiment and appears on a metaphysical level, Atwood ensures an emphasis on the materialities of deaths in the form of the sustained focus on the corpses—of the baby whale and the poet persona's mother. There is a rejection of nature's abstraction to shed light on the physicality of the consequences of violence instead. In the poems, the focus on corporeality reveals the similitude and salencies of heterodox experiences of different individuals. Atwood details the peculiarities and the particularities of the whale's death in concrete terms—consumption of "toxic plastic" and perhaps "paper and glass and tin" (2021, 89), which categorically differ from the empirical conditions

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Jacques Derrida critiques the purported incommensurate nature of human and nonhuman deaths wherein the death of the latter is garbed in an organized invisibility, which evokes no legal or moral reprisal. He notes "the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal [...]" (2002, 394) leads to a global scale forgetting of the violence which Atwood seems to avow and enlarge through the poet persona's Melancholic (expanded) frame of remembrance.

of the other death in “Blizzard,” and thereby draw attention to the divergent historical conditions of the production of loss(es). In “Fatal Light Awareness,” a thrush crashes against a glass window of a high-rise building—“their feathers are falling—/ warm, *not like snow*/ though melting away” (2021, 74; my emphasis). The poet persona bears witness to the tactility of the agony of the bird’s ebbing breath and warmth and effects a staunch de-metaphorisation of its death. Hence, the palpability of violence simultaneously draws attention to the immediacy of existential entanglements and subverts the purported universality of the experiences of the human lifeworld. In the range of poems, while Melancholia does engender an affective ecological continuum, there is a departure from reading nature and its non-human stakeholders as a “symbolic substitute of the human predicament” (Baishya 2020, 48). As a result, I argue that the community of Melancholics is not a site for affirmation of selfsameness but emerges as a site for an ethical reflection upon the shared inheritances and precarity of ecological co-participants.

Similarly, in the poem “Bird Soul,” the poet persona exemplifies their Melancholic fixation on loss and directly addresses her dead sister, likening her to a bird. They ask, “If birds are human souls/ What bird are you?” (Atwood 2021, 36). In effect, the resistance to new object cathexis or a sustained meditation on her loss opens the possibility of treading into the *literality* of an avian death as explored in “Feather.” Here, they dwell upon the visceral singularities of the bird’s experiences, including “torn skin,” “wrecked wings,” and “dried blood” (2021, 73), to ultimately extend an emotional overture toward what the bird might have *felt* in its last moments of life as she registers the “fading panic” (2021,73) of the bird. Unable to maintain its impassable form, the skewered ego of the Melancholic poet persona facilitates a transit from self to Self which is evinced on the formal level as well. “Feathers” opens with the literal image of feathers falling. In “Bird Soul,” the short and pointed typographical columnar arrangement of the poem visually evocates the downward thanatotic trajectory of the feathers (and the sister), thus creating a chaotic interface between personal and extra-personal, subject and object, drawing multiple lineaments of loss as part of an intertwined tapestry of violence (and by extension, resilience), suggesting a responsive community of Melancholics.



### Conclusion: "We are a dying symphony"

Atwood ends "Coda," the last poem in "Songs for Murdered Sisters," with "You are here with me..." (2021, 39). The trailing ellipses suggest the interminability of Freudian Mourning and reiterate the impingement of Melancholia, which Freud conceptualizes as an "open wound" (1914-1916, 253).<sup>6</sup> However, in *Dearly*, Melancholia shifts its semantic shape whereby it is precisely the woundedness of the ego that pushes the poet persona's thinking into a novel and unanticipated direction of locating their situatedness in an affectively charged assemblage—to reflect upon "how part of everything" (Atwood 2021, 114) they are. To hark back to the theoretical springboard of the essay, Descartes notes that it is only "feeble minds" (1960, 82) that proffer, "we have nothing to hope for or fear, more than flies and ants" (1960, 82). So, when Atwood writes, "We are a dying symphony" (2021, 74) in her reference to the multi-species death in the poem "Fatal Light Awareness," it is worth pondering upon the musicological tenets of the term "symphony" itself to locate her defiance to the Cartesian solitude. An orchestral composition involving multiple movements and many instruments, the term's etymology arises from the Greek word *sumphonia*, indicating agreement, concord, or harmony<sup>7</sup>, not unlike an *entente*, which connotes a preemption of any form of unyielding exceptionalism—anthropocentric or otherwise. Melancholia emerges as a critical impetus that extricates the ego immured in insularity to rediscover and respond to kinships with other beings along an ecological spectrum and reflect upon underlying entangled filaments of love and loss.

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Massumi observes that "to affect and be affected is to be open to the world, to be active in it and be patient for its return activity" (2015, ix). He reads it for its transversal nature which he likens to "passing of a threshold" (2015, 4). Freud's idea of Melancholia as an open wound shies from a self-regulated alleviation (which would be Mourning) and carries a possibility of contamination and miscegenation which, I argue, seems to echo the transversal potential of Affect and has the potential to expand into planetary ecological relations.

<sup>7</sup> The word arises from "old French *symphonie*, via Latin from Greek *sumphōnia*, from *sumphōnos* 'harmonious', from *sun-* 'together' + *phōnē* 'sound'" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.).

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