

The Concept of “Caledonian Polysyzygy” in Kate Atkinson’s Short Story Collection *Not the End of the World*

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Abstract

*The objective of this paper is to harmonise the influences of competing national as well as cosmopolitan literary traditions as they coexist in a state of polyphony in the short story collection *Not the End of the World* (2002) by the Anglo-Scottish writer Kate Atkinson. Modern Scottish writing continues to be haunted by the heritage of Caledonian Antisyzygy, a concept proposing a conjunction of seemingly irreconcilable opposites as the dominant characteristic of Scottish identity. Another determinant of Scottish literary production is the historical sense of being an oppressed nation deprived of sovereignty and, by extension, voice, through becoming part of the United Kingdom. Within an already marginalised stateless nation, there is a doubly marginalised group of Scottish women writers, whose voices only started to be heard as late as in the 1980s. Often using the approaches of magic realism, fantasy, and the Gothic, these women, including Kate Atkinson, revise perceived history and create unique stories of their own. Far from simply substituting the authority of one dominant discourse for another, they allow for a multitude of voices to inform their work, thus invalidating the conventional antisyzygy in favour of what might more properly be called “Caledonian Polysyzygy”.*

Key words: Scottish literature, women’s writing, Kate Atkinson, Not the End of the World, magic realism, Caledonian Antisyzygy

Historical Background: The Tenets of Caledonian Antisyzygy

Oxymoron was ever the bravest figure, and we must not forget that disorderly order is order after all.

—G. Gregory Smith (1919: 5)

Scottish writing has a precarious position in the canon of English literature, much in the way that Scotland itself is positioned uneasily in the United Kingdom. The formerly independent Kingdom of Scotland lost its status as a sovereign state through overwrought political manoeuvres, “a series of bribes and blunders” (Gardiner 2004: 2), which culminated in the 1707 Act of Union. What was eventually to become the United Kingdom was long in the making, as the expansive Kingdom of England had already assimilated Wales in the 1536 Act of Union and was on its way to making a deal with Ireland, which joined with the Acts of Union of 1800. Scotland was never the only stateless nation in the somewhat forced political structure of the United Kingdom, neither was it the only countryless country with strong nationalist fractions on a long-term mission to oppose the union by whatever means necessary. However, when we think about which images are associated with Scotland in the popular imagination, what is most likely to come up is the wailing tune of “Scotland the Brave” played by a pipe band in Highland costumes, the larger-than-life figure of William Wallace heroically crying out for freedom as he is laying down his life for an independent Scotland, and, more recently, the heated discussions about a second Independence Referendum (IndyRef2), after the ever-hesitant Scottish electorate rejected independence in the previous 2014 vote.

“Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves,” (Okri in Robertson 2003: n.p.) reads a Ben Okri quotation serving as the epigraph to James Robertson’s historical novel *Joseph Knight* (2003), winner of the Saltire Scottish Book of the Year Award, which accounts for the uncomfortable and formerly not widely publicised fact that Scotland received its fair share of spoils in the British Empire’s colonial enterprise. Although the current postcolonial mood facilitates non-mainstream revisionist histories, including the exposure of the significant role that Scotsmen played in the slave trade and the plantation economy, particularly in the Caribbean, the stories that the Scottish nation has historically been feeding itself are those of Scotland as a hapless victim suffering under English oppression. “If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies,” Ben Okri continues to warn, but “if they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings” (Okri in Robertson 2003: n.p.). The sentiment of unearthing and re-examining one’s possibly sordid and shameful national or individual past and coming to terms with its implications is manifested in much contemporary writing, Scottish or otherwise. Nevertheless, a shift in perspective does not happen overnight, and Scotland’s national stories have traditionally been rooted in straightforward binary oppositions pitting against each other Scotland and England, Scots and English, Scots and Gaelic, Highlands and Lowlands, Edinburgh and Glasgow, Catholics and Protestants, Celtic and Rangers—the list goes on.

Writing in 1919, G. Gregory Smith coined the term “Caledonian Antisyzygy” to describe “the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness” (Smith 1919: 4), the intrinsic ambivalence of the Scottish character which Smith regards as a major constituent element of the Scottish nation and, by extension, Scottish cultural production. “If therefore Scottish history and life are, as an old northern writer said of something else, ‘varied with a clean contrair [sic] spirit,’” Smith contends, “we need not be surprised to find that in his literature the Scot presents two aspects which appear contradictory” (Smith 1919: 4-5). Smith’s argument is supported by ample evidence in Scottish literature of the motif of duality, around which some of the most seminal Scottish writings revolve. The foundational novel of evil doppelgängers and/or schizophrenically split personalities was written by James Hogg and published anonymously under the title *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in 1824. The novel explores the arbitrary nature of Scottish Calvinism and the devastating effects that blind adherence to the principles of faith has on a young man’s gradually disintegrating mind. An even more influential book elaborating on the subject of doubles and double minds, this time not from a theological but an ethical perspective, is Robert Louis Stevenson’s universally recognised novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). The conflict between the upright citizen Dr Jekyll and his depraved alter ego Mr Hyde has become a popular trope both in Scotland and outside it to the extent that it is virtually impossible to account for all the subsequent Scottish (and non-Scottish) writings which revise, reimagine, update, and otherwise deliberately and openly draw on Stevenson’s enduring story.

While Smith regards the inherent schizoid split of the Scottish psyche as a harmless peculiarity, even a creative advantage, Hugh MacDiarmid, the leading figure of the 1920s Scottish Literary Renaissance, bemoans the lack of national unity, confidence, and awareness in Scottish writing. “Our national culture,” MacDiarmid complains, “suffers from all the ills of split personality” (MacDiarmid 1984: 90). MacDiarmid’s solution, intended to galvanise Scottish writers into raising a strong unified voice, was the invention of Synthetic Scots, an artificial version of the Scots dialect designed to become the literary language of Scotland.

Needless to state, MacDiarmid's linguistic construct was not a particular success, and nor was it a sustainable direction in which to develop an entity as multifaceted as a nation. Smith's Caledonian Antisyzygy is clearly a crudely oversimplified approach which inevitably fails to encompass any of the complexity of the world, whose reflection literature is. While not in any way diminishing the immensely important role that MacDiarmid played in the making of Scottish literature, it must be admitted that MacDiarmid's attempts at establishing a grand narrative in literature of the Scottish nation were a step backwards. Despite the obvious reductivity of Smith's concept, Smith's prerequisite was at least "that two sides of the matter have been considered" (Smith 1919: 4), whereas MacDiarmid's attitude tended to acknowledge one side only, for the sake of unity.

Moving On: Towards Caledonian Polysyzygy

Duality speaks of binary patterns of differentiation and, simultaneously, blurs the discernment between the terms of the proposed opposition.

—Monica Germanà (2010: 98-99)

It was only in the second wave of the Scottish Literary Renaissance in the 1980s that Scottish writers abandoned self-conscious theorising about what the national literature ought to look like and almost collectively discovered in themselves the courage to start creating it on the go, exploring, experimenting, and opening up new perspectives. Of course, this is not to say that there was no literature of significance in between the renaissances, but the most memorable works were more or less isolated achievements of highly diverse exceptional individuals which did not come together to establish any general tendency and hence do not bear much relevance to the subject of this paper. The second literary renaissance was not a programmatic effort either, and yet, the unprecedented simultaneous rise of a variety of impressively innovative voices, including those previously silenced, created a striking synergy and together marked the beginning of a new era in Scottish writing. Alasdair Gray—who was to become the doyen of modern Scottish literature and whose magnificent nearly six-hundred-page novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981) set the second renaissance into motion—initially expressed dismissive scepticism about the state of Scottish culture:

Think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used imaginatively by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively [...] Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves.

(Gray 2007: 243)

While Gray speaks specifically of Glasgow, his complaint could easily be extended to Scotland in general because at that time, the literary reputation of Scotland still rested chiefly on the ballads of Robert Burns, the romantic historicism of Walter Scott, and, in the twentieth century, the nationalist poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid and the solitary figure of the satirist Muriel Spark.

Gray's incredibly influential *Lanark* managed to revive and energise the hitherto somewhat stale twentieth-century Scottish writing and perhaps incidentally pointed out some

of the multiple directions in which emerging writers were to develop their imaginative work. These hitherto virtually unexplored directions involved elements of form and style, as well as content: formally avant-garde narrative experiments exploiting non-linear plots, metafiction, self-referentiality, dense allusions, and other disorienting techniques have gradually become the current standard, along with a preoccupation with unstable national and individual identities, the everyday realities of ordinary characters, the confusion of the contemporary world, alienation and existential concerns, and, above all, the omnipresent plurality of perspectives and voices. Among the newly found voices which had hardly been heard prior to the 1980s were those of Scottish women writers. There were indeed a few female authors who sought to bring balance to the hypermasculine national literary tradition by contributing with their unique perspective and thus attempting to establish a more rounded view of Scottish experience. However, this handful of pioneering women writers sit uneasily among their male peers and cannot readily be regarded as a generally accepted integral part of Scottish literary history. A telling example of this uncomfortable position of Scottish women's writing is the already-mentioned Muriel Spark, whose clinically cool intellectual satires dissect universal human issues rather than specifically women's questions.

Both products and producers of the second Scottish renaissance, a whole new generation of women writers came into prominence in the 1980s, each of them in her own way bent on consistently questioning and challenging the one-sided excessively masculine representation of Scotland. These female writers seemed to be perfectly aware of the pitfalls of the inherited split of Caledonian Antisyzygy, which operates with opposing pairs of values and fails to account for anything in between, and set forth to chart their own routes instead of succumbing to the tempting convenience of defining themselves simply in opposition to male writers. Caledonian Antisyzygy turned out to be an unpleasant yoke: not all Scottish literary production is by default rooted in oxymoron, and Scottish women's writing especially, a marginalised category within an already marginalised nation's literary tradition, does not thrive creatively on a simplistic binary worldview. Imaginative female Scottish storytellers, such as A. L. Kennedy, Janice Galloway, and Kate Atkinson, severed the ties binding them to the once-unitary obligatory definition of Scottishness and manoeuvred the many winding paths towards alternative visions of the country and hybrid identities of the nation. These and other bold female iconoclasts opened the way into contemporary Scottish literature for themselves and for a host of their successors, eventually managing to introduce a greater diversity into Scottish writing and to establish women's production as a legitimate and organic part of the body of the modern Scottish literary tradition. Consequently, current Scottish writing revolves less around monolithic authoritative narratives and aims more at "working out problems of Scottish history, identity, gender, relation to environment, and future direction, in terms of mutual respect for each other's ideals and values, and with an increasing sense of the possible synthesis of these ideals and values" (Gifford 1997: 602).

Kate Atkinson is at the forefront of those innovative writers who court an inclusive notion of the literary tradition as a Bakhtinian choir of polyphonic voices (see Bakhtin 1984). These Scottish writers have recognised Caledonian Antisyzygy as merely one of the multitude of possible organising principles of their creative work. Atkinson in particular appears to gravitate towards the historically founded binary oppositions of antisyzygy as much as she seeks to resist the pull and vigorously strives to overthrow the outdated construct. Her oeuvre may be compared to John Donne's conceit of "twin compasses", distant and distinct, yet still marking the same territory, separate, yet undeniably joined together. Atkinson represents a group of contemporary women writers who simultaneously

despair of the ambivalence of their legacy and embrace it in a defyingly cheerful, even wanton manner. The spark of their creativity seems to be fuelled precisely by the very existence of conventional restrictions to challenge and old structures to tear down. Characteristically preoccupied with negotiating their private and public identities and positioning themselves variously within Scotland, Britain, and the world, these writers perceive Scottishness as a protean quality—always mutable, never stable—which enables them to navigate in and out of various identities without committing themselves to any single one. On the path of discovery of a meaningful wholeness, whose achievement is postponed indefinitely, there is no longer a single right way with a clearly set destination; rather, there are limitless possibilities opening up for exploration, with an array of diversions, wrong turns, and dead ends, all of them still equally valid in contributing to the overall picture.

While the old Scottish literary tradition was a comparatively homogeneous flow where digressions were condescendingly dismissed as mere curiosities, the new tradition that is under way manifests an incredible variety, diversity, and plurality which refuse to conform to outmoded structures of perception and presentation. Where Smith and MacDiarmid presumed to base the bulk of Scottish culture on the binary concept of *antisyzygy* as a harmonious union of seemingly irreconcilable opposites, contemporary Scottish writing should more appropriately be described as springing from *polysyzygy*, which corresponds to a Bakhtinian polyphony of a multitude of voices entering in incessantly shifting interactions and creating a harmony in their own right. In Bakhtin's terms, Scottish literature is determined by the condition of *polyglossia*, that is, the coexistence of several languages and/or dialects within a single nation, each competing for dominance against the others (Bakhtin 1981: 12). *Polyglossia* is a natural phenomenon in a plural, heterogeneous world, and where authoritative *monoglossia* happens to be achieved, it is enforced as a crude tool of the dominant discourse rather than embraced as a democratic means of promoting national unity (Bakhtin 1981: 61). What *polyglossia* is to the language, *heteroglossia* is to the world—which is another way of saying that various voices come with various perspectives and that the apparent and perceived meanings of our utterances are never stable but always shifting, depending on the circumstances (Bakhtin 1981: 271). Ultimately, Bakhtin cautions, “language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions”; rather, “it becomes ‘one's own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (Bakhtin 1981: 293-294).

A Case in Point: Kate Atkinson's Not the End of the World

In the end, it is my belief, words are the only things that can construct a world that makes sense.

—Kate Atkinson (1995: 382)

Kate Atkinson (b. 1951) is an amalgam of identities and influences which, to a greater or lesser extent, shaped the nature of her literary work, particularly her earliest attempts at largely autobiographical fiction. Born and raised in England, she left to study in Scotland, and having obtained her master's degree from the University of Dundee, she stayed to pursue a doctorate in (perhaps tellingly) American postmodern fiction. Her failure to obtain the coveted PhD devastated her, as she admits, but it also nudged her in the direction of producing creative writing of her own rather than poring over the writings of others (see

Parker 2002: 12). She embarked on her professional writing career with a short story of hers gaining a surprising win in a Women's Own competition in 1988. Living variously in Scotland and England, she started pouring out a steady stream of short stories written for magazines, and after collecting several more minor short story awards, she undertook to revise a batch of previously unpublished manuscripts and compile them in her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995), which went on to earn the prestigious Whitbread Book of the Year award. Atkinson's subsequent novels, *Human Croquet* (1997) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000), cemented her literary reputation. These were followed by a first volume of carefully organised and intricately interconnected short stories, *Not the End of the World* (2002).

Atkinson acts as a perfect example of the workings of Caledonian Antisyzygy, which, among other oppositions, draws a strict and historically hostile line between the English, associated with all that is cosmopolitan, cultured, and sophisticated, and the Scottish, to which the opposing qualities of the parochial, primitive, and vulgar are ascribed. Caledonian Antisyzygy operates within the context of the centre-versus-margin dichotomy, where England assumes the central position of pride and power, while Scotland, the repressed other, is pushed to the margins, and there is no chance whatsoever of the two extremes meeting halfway. The revised and updated concept of Caledonian Polysyzygy proposes a balancing act in which the two competing parties, or any clashing contradictions for the matter, cease to wage the inherently irresolvable power struggle and recognise their chance to move on to become mutually complementary instead of contradictory qualities. Indeed, there is a richness of still untapped creative potential waiting to be discovered by those who choose to work towards harmonising English and Scottish influences (as well as other dualities), perhaps, like Kate Atkinson, coming from the English centre but writing from the Scottish margins with a keen awareness of the broader British, European, and, ultimately, global milieu.

At present, Douglas Gifford argues, "in academic and media discussion, the growing number of what could be termed Anglo-Scots (or vice versa) are treated as a natural part of the country's production" (Gifford 2007: 251); that is, writers not necessarily born or residing in Scotland may qualify as Scottish by virtue of interest, affection, or similar affiliation. Nevertheless, the criteria for inclusion remain blurry and embarrassing omissions may occur, as was the case with Kate Atkinson, then the recent recipient of the Saltire Award for the best Scottish book for her novel *Case Histories* (2005), who initially failed to be listed on the Books from Scotland website when it was launched the same year under the auspices of the Scottish Publishers Association (see Crumey 2007: 40-41). As to Atkinson's view on the matter, in her life and above all in her work, she moves smoothly between identities, admitting to finding Englishness "lacking" (Parker 2002: 18), yet hesitant to substitute one fixed identity for another, always in the process of creating complex identities out of the various materials available to her, yet never settling for a single finished product which would restrict her growth.

In the range of her admirably varied and strikingly original literary work, Atkinson gives the impression of someone relentlessly engaged in a highly dynamic and creatively productive conversation with herself, transcending each and any of her books. Despite her readily recognisable quirky writing style, this versatile writer refrains from weighing down her playfully experimental fiction with any homogeneous pattern or clearly distinguishable structure that would boil down to predictability. Displaying an obvious delight in elusiveness and sheer joy in fictional games, her stories and novels are rife with unlimited possibilities,

unexpected twists, and characteristically open endings, which furnish some explanations but ultimately pose more questions than they answer. Atkinson's polyphonic creations present a considerable challenge to those readers who prefer tight coherence, strict linearity, and neatly tied ends. The practice of polysyzygy admittedly lends itself more appropriately to short stories rather than novels, which shows particularly in the case of *Emotionally Weird*, a novel called by Nick Rennison "a ragbag of disconnected exercises in style", albeit exercises performed "with wit and energy" (Rennison 2005: 14). In contrast, her condensed short fiction, "with its focus on the quotidian", builds its gems of insights on "the tradition of Anton Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield," as Parker observes, "but infuses this tradition with pace and humour" (Parker 2002: 17).

The volume *Not the End of the World* does not suffer from any of the possible excesses following from favouring the aesthetic form over the content; quite the contrary, the seemingly disparate stories contained in the collection are closely interconnected through a shared organising principle and recurrent themes, motifs, and characters. As a whole, the collection draws loosely on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, ancient mythology and Greek philosophy, modern literary classics and contemporary popular culture. The most visually prominent device binding together the twelve stories that are included is black-and-white reproductions of woodcuts and engravings depicting scenes from classical myths, which are used to preface each story along with a quotation taken from one or other of the various above-mentioned sources. A conspicuous structural link is provided by two framing stories, one opening the volume and the other concluding it, which feature the same main characters and are uniformly introduced by (Latin) verses from Ovid.

Individually, each of the dozen stories is densely interspersed with numerous more or less veiled allusions and references to virtually any source imaginable. In the aptly named piece "Dissonance", for example, the dissonant relationships within a family are reinforced by the ridiculously incongruous cultural (and uncultured) tastes of the incompatible family members. The prodigious daughter Rebecca, a listener to Mozart and Coldplay, sneers condescendingly at the unintellectual conclusion of a student essay on *Romeo and Juliet*, which calls the play "a sheer, big waste of love", while Simon, her unkempt sloth of a brother, has Korn's nu metal *Life Is Peachy* album booming on the stereo to accompany the violent punches he deals to his opponent in the Tekken 3 PlayStation game (Atkinson 2003: 103, 97). Later, at dinner with their mother's boyfriend Beardy Brian, there is talk about how the ancient youngsters had it better in that they could "channel all that testosterone, Spartan youth, Achilles, Herakles", while Simon drifts into chivalrous fantasies featuring Buffy, the Vampire Slayer (Atkinson 2003: 107-108). For her masterful application of polysyzygy in practice, Helen Falconer dubs Atkinson "a playful as well as erudite goddess of the pen" (Falconer 2002: 28), whereas Hilary Mantel comments that Atkinson "is not so much standing on the shoulders of giants, as darting between their legs and waving her own agenda and talking all the time, with a voice that is entirely her own" (Mantel 1996: 23-24).

Another unifying feature shared by the stories in the volume is their mode of representation, which mixes the mimetic and the non-mimetic in varying proportions, and generally falls into the category of magic realism, though Atkinson's writing eschews conventional labels and the idiosyncratic author herself would probably not choose to confine her everything-goes style by pinning it down with a particular word. As Maggie Ann Bowers reminds us, the working terms magic (or magical) realism notoriously resist a simple definition, not only because "they are oxymorons describing the forced relationship of irreconcilable terms", but because it is precisely "the inherent inclusion of contradictory

elements that has made and sustained the usefulness and popularity of the concepts to which the terms refer” (Bowers 2004: 1). Although the oxymoron (aka antisyzygy) contained in the very phrase “magic realism” on the face of it “suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy” (Slemon 1995: 409), what is both more accurate and more relevant to the concept is “the propensity of magical realist text to admit a plurality of worlds”, which makes magic realism “a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic” (Zamora and Faris 1995: 5-6). In *Not the End of the World*, Atkinson contrives to create an unlikely polyphony of gritty realism and playful fantasy, which alternates between a delightful dream and an apocalyptic nightmare. She juxtaposes a plurality of radically different and frequently disturbing worlds, manifesting, as Rennison puts it, her “daring willingness to let her imagination take her into territory where so many other contemporary writers would fear to tread” (Rennison 2005: 14).

Speaking of transgressing into disturbing territories, Atkinson’s decisively dark strain of magic realism is strongly underpinned with elements of the Gothic as a powerful tool of subversion, which has long been a popular mode of Scottish writers in general and has been taken up by Scottish women writers in particular, whose double bind—of being a silenced group within an already oppressed nation—makes them doubly inclined to adopt the strategy of disrupting the dominant discourse. Mary Eagleton points out the underlying agenda of female fantastic writing in that “non-realist forms permit the woman writer to express the contradictions, fantasies or desires that the demands of realism silence” since, in the end, “to query the truth, coherence and resolution of realism is to undermine the symbolic order” (Eagleton 1991: 253). The stories in Atkinson’s collection constantly return to the theme of exploring the multiple conflicting identities and roles of women, which are neither fixed nor finite, and hence there is a never-ending process of questioning traditional assumptions and formulating and refining alternative definitions, only to discard them when they prove inadequate and start anew. By layering different versions of “reality” one upon another and pitting competing identities against each other, Atkinson does not resolve and write off existing contradictions; rather, she engages the opposing concepts in creative dialectics. Atkinson’s identities in progress do not converge to create a new monolithic tradition; after all, as Cairns Craig contends, “traditions are not the unitary voice of an organic whole but the dialectic engagement between opposing value systems which define each other precisely by their intertwined oppositions” (Craig 1999: 32-33). What Atkinson’s Gothic-flavoured dialectics achieves is, in Germanà’s words, “the exposure of conflicting voices underneath the surface of official culture/history and the collapse of a logocentric approach to history” (Germanà 2011: 5).

With the combined power of the many formerly marginal voices that build up the polysyzygy resonating in the short story volume, Atkinson invalidates the perceived history of women by exposing facets of the female identity that are deeply unsettling, if not outright unspeakable. Atkinson’s texts notably bear a grudge against the traditional nuclear family (see Parker 2002: 18), which they tend to present as a deeply dysfunctional unit, or rather a random collection of obviously incompatible individuals who came together for inexplicable reasons. Several stories in *Not the End of the World* experiment with alternative “family” patterns, most remarkably the unflinchingly fierce piece entitled “The Cat Lover”, which is set against the backdrop of a dystopian England and plays with the stereotype of a lonely woman whose sole company is provided by her beloved cats. The story’s protagonist, Heidi, is consumed by her desire to have a baby, but her job in a male geriatric ward renders the idea

of men off-putting to her. She finds an unexpected means to fulfil her desire when a haggard tomcat accompanies her on her way and does not let go, so she takes him home and feeds him up to the size of an adult tiger. Gordon the cat smoothly assumes the status of Heidi's boyfriend, which fills the woman with a peculiarly Gothic combination of terror mingled with pleasure:

He slept with Heidi now, not on top of the bed like a normal cat, but beneath the covers, his body rolling against hers in the dead of night, fur against skin, claws entangled in hair. His breath was meaty and warm against her cheek, his whiskers as itchy as a witch's broom. He was a dead weight, heavier than any man she had ever shared a bed with. Yet there was something comforting about falling asleep with her fingers entwined in the long fur of his belly, her breathing counterpointed by his rumbling purr, as noisy as a goods train rocking through the night.

(Atkinson 2003: 236)

The story concludes with Heidi finding her furry boyfriend gone into a snowstorm and herself pregnant with kittens—much to the horror of the ultrasound technician and to the genuine delight of the expectant mother.

“The Cat Lover”, a tale that gives the titular phrase a wholly new meaning, may be disturbing for some readers and vexing for others: in her review, Jennie A. Camp puzzles over “why we must now sit with such a troubling image. Gordon has metamorphosed, yes, but to what end beyond mere shock value?” (Camp 2004: 25D). In fact, the story does not need to be seen simply as a self-serving exercise in superficial shock tactics; instead, it can be embraced as a piece that is an appropriate fit for the mosaic of polysyzygy, which allows all voices—no matter how fanciful, aberrant, and inconsequential in the grand scheme of things—to speak out and be heard without discrimination. “The Cat Lover” may bring to mind the classic fairy tale of the deceitful Puss in Boots, albeit revised and reimagined for an adult audience, which is in keeping with the penchant of numerous late-twentieth-century women writers for “a reworking of fairy tale and myth that moves against the traditional boundaries of these genres” with an awareness that “the traditional folk narrative structures of fairy tales and myths frequently restrict and proscribe the female role” (Tolan 2009: 275).

A similarly folklore-inspired story in Atkinson's collection, “Tunnel of Fish”, appropriates the local material of Scottish legends revolving around selkies—sea creatures capable of assuming human form and mating with mortals. On the surface, “Tunnel of Fish” recounts the struggles of a single mother with her presumably autistic young son Eddie, whose sole obsession is the ocean world and whose appearance is described in terms of “a large fish without enemies”, his still human “mouth hanging open all the time like a particularly dull-witted amphibian, not to mention the thick lenses of his spectacles that made his eyes bulge like a haddock's” (Atkinson 2003: 47). Eddie's name not only rhymes with selkie (if imperfectly) but also like a selkie, Eddie is irresistibly drawn to the ocean, represented by the Deep Sea World, whose creatures are his “loyal subjects” hailing him ceremoniously as “Eddie, King of the Fish” (Atkinson 2003: 64). The deceptively uneventful story records Eddie's primeval longings to “unevolve” down to the stage of the fish along with his mother's anxious thoughts about the failures of her past and the lack of promises for her future. Among her rambling digressions and disjointed memories, what stands out is the flashback of Eddie's conception on a holiday on Crete, which she explains away as a drug-induced hallucination. The stark image shows her being dragged from a boat down to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, where she was ushered into a fantastic underwater palace

and experienced Eddie's father's "colossal, roaring presence of which she seemed only to catch fragments—the disgusting smell of fish and whale fat, the fronds of seaweed entangled in his great beard, his seed like pearls, gushing into the blue water—" (Atkinson 2003: 64).

Accordingly, Atkinson's curious story illustrates Germanà's point that "the Scottish supernatural does not belong in a transcendent other world, but challenges the stable boundaries of seen and unseen, real and imagined, same and other; [...] pointing to the uncanny coalescence of the unfamiliar within the familiar" (Germanà 2010: 2). Atkinson, as a typical representative of the specifically Scottish vein of Gothic fiction—characterised by acute attention to the small-scale details of mental conflict rather than overt action, by elements of the grotesque, bold playfulness, and mordant humour, even perverse exuberance in the face of annihilation—manifests in her work "the sustained tension between psychological and supernatural readings" and an "emphasis on the quest for knowledge and self-discovery", which Germanà names among the key features of Scottish fantastic writing (Germanà 2010: 25).

Atkinson's very versatility may obscure what Sandra Meyer identifies as "the underlying connection between the different works, namely the literary presentation of unstable identities in contemporary society" (Meyer 2010: 443); however, on closer inspection, Atkinson's tales of illegitimate offspring, mysterious doubles and twins, shifting family constellations, and difficult relationships with oneself and others certainly bear evidence of the author's preoccupation with complex identities in a disorienting world. Atkinson's inquiry into the nature of identity and dissection of its constituting elements are best shown in the companion pieces which frame the collection and meaningfully complement each other as well as the remaining stories in the volume, which they embrace literally as much as figuratively. In the opening story, "Charlene and Trudi Go Shopping", a war is raging outside while the two eponymous women engage in the most trivial pursuit: strolling in a shopping mall and looking for the perfect gift for Charlene's mother. The reality threatening from the outside encroaches on the deceptively safe and dreamlike microcosm inside the shopping mall when a fire breaks out in the haberdashery. Quite unaffected by the apocalypse surrounding them, the women continue as they were; only Trudi acknowledges the fire by a remark to the effect that she should have bought the belt she had her eye on because now it would be burnt. Trudi demonstrates that when the world seems to be falling apart, one may choose to oppose it by holding on to the small things that bring comfort, such as the company of, and conversation with, a fellow human being.

The communion of the two young women gains a symbolic resonance in the concluding story, slightly ironically entitled "Pleasureland", where Charlene and Trudi hide in a flat that is gradually falling into darkness, cut off from power, water, supplies, and the rest of the world, which is apparently coming to its end. Defying the odds, Charlene remains calm and confident in her belief that "nothing dies", as the two of them exchange stories—perhaps the material of the collection—and when Charlene cannot think of any more stories to tell, it is Trudi who comforts her companion with the final words of the volume: "Don't worry, it's not the end of the world" (Atkinson 2003: 332). In Atkinson's fictional world, Charlene and Trudi do not fear death but are terrified of silence, hence their incessant stream of words, even when the stories stop and are reduced to self-indulgent lists cataloguing exquisite coffees, cocktails, and other assorted luxuries from the pleasureland of the living, which is now slipping out of their grasp. As long as the voices flow in their polyphonic symphony, though, the storytellers are safe, and so is the world, which began with the word

and, as Atkinson writes elsewhere, endures through the word, since “words are the only things that can construct a world that makes sense” (Atkinson 1995: 382).

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