

University of Alberta

*Poetics as Displaced Praxis: Perspectives of Irony
in the Poetry of Mary Melfi*

by

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Canada

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PART 1 - APPROACHES TO IRONY

This dissertation presents the analysis of Mary Melfi's poetic work, through the interpretational pairings of *A Queen Is Holding a Mummified Cat* (1981) with *The O Canada Poems* (1986); and of *A Bride in Three Acts* (1983) with *Office Politics* (1999). The interpretive proposition of each paired analysis demonstrates, respectively, the complex interaction of myths and mirroring devices for the recognition of the self in cultural displacement, and the notion of a breach in the contextual discourse that informs subjectivity in cultural displacement. Since the analysis is concerned with the 'poetics' as the manner in which language produces its meaning, it needs an approach which deals with how cultural signs come together (the semiological). Moreover, as the analysis is concerned with the effects and consequences of cultural systems of representation, or their 'politics', it will proceed along a discursive line of analysis. This combined approach will in turn show the conceptualizations of cultural representation systems as 'constitutive' processes in the construction of the displaced subject - in other words, the analysis looks at networks of meanings and of perspectives in a correlational framework of image to language, in the displaced environment.

The analysis of Melfi's texts as displaced artworks generates an analysis of the texts in their allegorical aspect, that is, the texts as substitute for the presence of a complex representational system which we will provide. The denotations and connotations of the poetic text bring in the impression of trespassing into an Other discursive world. The culturally constructed subjectivity is thus examined in its pluri-dimensional representation in interaction with the various meanings and values which contribute to a sense of

being. The problems of established values which claim an 'ethnicized' Other are marked throughout the analysis of the cultural subject vis-à-vis a dominant discourse that problematizes Otherness as a deviation from a certain norm. The texts incorporate and deploy the politics of mediatic instruments for hegemonic (cultural) domination while the poetic content demonstrates the hegemonic strategies of consensus for absorbing the Other into its economically-based discourse.

The critical poiesis represents an interconnective space where the critical reader can meet the complexity of the poetic voice in a discursive relationship concerning the economic and production mechanisms of hegemony. This critical strategy of the poiesis thus implies a struggle against a standardized production through the critical reading by the receiving audience. Hence the analysis does not propose only an interpretation of the textual content so much as the analysis of relationships between the complex meanings of the textual language, and the underlying codes and rules through which discursive practices produce their meaning(s). Melfi's poiesis follows a process of constantly shifting combinations and differentiations of meanings to reveal the ideological patterns and practices of the dominating Other (to the self) culture. In short, the critical displaced artwork manifests the signifying frameworks of our socio-cultural world through the displacement of these signifiers into the poetic text in order to bring these into relation with each other and within a socio-political discourse. This means that the critical work must first be considered as a representative system in the Canadian sphere of cultural production.

The displaced condition implies a reformulation of means to navigate in

the new area, and the texts pick up on the various sources of information and instruction for the successful navigation of the subject in the counterenvironment of displacement. In addition, the text of the displaced writer serves as a navigating tool for the de-stabilized reader/audience, as an indispensable aid to a critical understanding of the condition of Multiculturalism. In this sense, displaced literature has everything to do with the psychological condition of the Canadian imaginary. A prognostical view of the critical activity investigates the possibility of a balance between universalizing tactics and marginalization - both of which impose a traditional Anglocentric viewpoint and method of analysis. In view of this, a direct representation of a realistic process does not fall back on one specific theory, but rather it partakes of a complex interrelationship of viewpoints and theoretical insights. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates artistic techniques for challenging truth-affirming claims and the reality-representing capacities of theories, with a particular application to the physical, cultural, and discursive multiculturalism of the Canadian content. This will take place through an analysis of the representational system of meaning within the structured system of language. The analysis also disclaims any reductive interpretations of the artistic text to its mere social or psychological dimension, which would deliver the texts to flawed or insufficient systems of judgments and values.

The displaced text presents a surplus value of images which provokes the senses of absence by providing the appearance of a certain presence. The analysis looks at the meanings that occupy the in-between space, or in other words, the analysis is concerned with the critical separation between contrastive elements or discourses, in a quasi Platonist effort to separate the

image from its true form. The fictional enhancement of reality is considered from the point of view of a displaced subject who, as if lost in the 'House of Mirrors' of language and meanings, must find the means to distinguish the illusions and distortions from the 'real' self, or the (cultural) self in a recognizable reflection or interpretation. Melfi demonstrates a writing subjectivity that does not succumb to conventional imperatives. Yet the semantic and comparatist analysis demonstrates how cultural models intersect with formal procedures as consequent products of the complexity of material life. Hence the critical analysis must take on a semiological approach with a specific ability to read images and an attempt to penetrate the symbolic spaces represented in the text and outside of its bounds. Thus as the poet narrates the displaced self through the text, the reader/critic must achieve a multiple reading, consisting of a 'reading' of the poet through the multiplicity of her formative cultural systems, through the displacement of her 'reality' into the images of the text, and through the reading of the self as cultural and literary critic (the meta-displacement of the critic meets that of the poet).

The methodology uses models of open dialogical discourse at various levels of criticism to recreate an unstructured space of cultural or discursive exchange, and according to the demands of the poetic discourse. Thus the critical tools come from the texts, and cannot be imposed from any comprehensive theory. Moreover, the critical tool does not contain the text (in the manner of theory), it can only envision it in reference to something outside of itself, since the literature of displacement refers to something outside of itself. The texts will be shown as a process of passing through mimesis on the way to becoming (the self). Hence the critical text is lifted from a grammar of

unidimensionality (in canonical criticism) into a constructive rendering of its three-dimensionality in a mappable world. The nomadic writing and reading straddle complex linguistic domains, inside and outside at the same time, in such a way as to give up the idea of a reassuring foundation or finality. The displaced text does not fall into a 'protectorate of thought' within a specific category, i.e. modernism, but rather, it relies on a nomadic capacity for displacement as a competence for maintaining a renewability which would yield no traumas.

Each text presents divergent points of reference working to give a sense of the whole picture and validate the voice of Italian Canadian literature in the Canadian cultural sphere of representation. The texts are not merely constructions, but also socio-politically mediated analyses of cultural representations; in this way, they are ethnographic texts of the Other as well as of the self. They serve to explore the actual pluralistic society while (re)presenting the struggle for a sense of identity amid such defining categories as that of 'ethnicity' which intervene in a cultural sense of self that partakes of cultural extractions from an indirect access to a cultural past and from subjective meanings extracted from a sense of future. This produces an idiolectic view of language and memory leading to the reformulation of dominant codes into the subjective identity configurations. The critical activity of writing in displacement reveals other hidden meanings within the overt articulations of cultural languages. Because of a focus on the dialogic processes instead of a finalized product, the critical analysis adopts a polyphonic method to identify the creative process as a form of resistance against strategies of discursive closure. The socio-cultural specific exploration of this critical literature points to its diversity

and its freedom at this time from its grounding into an integrated theory of displacement. Moreover, the analysis of the texts demonstrates their deconstructionist processes of the critical text in unmasking the hierarchical binary oppositions in the Canadian representational structures. This is achieved through the foregrounding of discourses of power and their effects on the subject and on subjective discourses of identity (re)formation. Processes of conscious and unconscious desires in subjectivity are foregrounded as what they are: processes deriving from other processes and/or constructs of identity, through possible meanings of individuality, family and/or community. In view of all this, Melfi's texts mark ambiguity and irony as her deconstructionist strategy, yet without fitting neatly into the theoretic discourses of particular schools.

The texts argue for the right to resist unjust codifications and restrictive ideologies, and the spectacle of general consent to despotic strategies. Indeed the critical text withdraws its consent from forms of control through a deconstructionist approach which must first show processes for what they are. The critical writer is the semiotically endowed subject who feels the weight of the pressure and cannot keep from attempting to emancipate the self from it. The generation of writers to which Melfi belongs represents the first educated generation, which brings a revolution into the familiar sphere. The possibility of an education for the children appears as a strong factor of immigration¹ - the fruits of which were collected together in Pier Giorgio di Cicco's *Roman Candles* (1978), the first anthology of Italian Canadian writing. We may not always understand something consciously before we can have feelings about yet, where there is smoke there is fire - and '*vice versa*'².

¹ This immigrant ethic is relevant in the discourse of subalternity in Canada, especially for the fact that the French Canadian population was (un)developed in a strategy of maintaining the population uneducated hence maintaining its subaltern identity. This problem is made evident in Marco Micone's *Les gens du silence* which points out the lack of an emancipation ethics in the French Canadian culture.

² If one may be allowed this bit of wit: *Vice Versa* was a transcultural magazine edited by Lamberto Tassinari, from 1983-1997. It was the only cultural magazine in Canada that published in at least three languages, and it was influential for a time for its breadth of discourses about the Canadian cultural and political landscape.

The literary publications of Mary Melfi cover the last quarter of the twentieth century, from 1976 to 1999. Melfi's writings defy conventional standards of genre classification, yet notwithstanding the pervasiveness of the Post-Modernistic discourses that emerged during this period, this dissertation will not concern itself with such questions as the blurring of genre distinctions in Melfi's artistic production. In fact, an identification between Melfi's artistic production and its historical concurrences will serve a fundamental and critical function in the analysis of Melfi's work. This analysis looks at four texts from Melfi's literary output.³ The works are grouped into two analytical themes which are not disconnected from each other, but rather these themes permeate the range of Melfi's writings in various interrelational forms. The analytical grouping of the texts, rather than their chronological order of production, will determine the development of the analysis. The reason for this approach is the foregrounding of the socio-political relevance of Melfi's writing, as will be demonstrated throughout the analysis.

The two analytical groups are organized according to the following thematic criteria and subtitles: the first analysis, in part 2 titled "Myths and Mirrors: towards a recognition of the self", involves the analysis of two poetic collections: *A Queen is Holding a Mummified Cat* (1981) and *The O Canada Poems* (1986). Part 3 contains the analysis of *A Bride in Three Acts* (1983) and *Office Politics* (1999). This organizational formation examines the concept of trust, particularly in relation with subjective expectations, and corresponding to issues of socio-cultural control in the Canadian displaced environment. This analysis adopts a stratified method of reading which will follow a systematized analysis set up according to nineteen applicable sub-topics, which are explained below. The reason for this stratified approach is due to Melfi's predominant techniques of twisting irony as a kind of yarn that the critic must untwist over the complex network of Melfi's ironic strategy. In other words, the irony may appear straightforward, or it may be compounded by other elements within the same text, or by intertextual or intratextual elements. In short, Melfi's irony is a dynamic process which can claim no single, apparent point of origin

³ From a corpus of eleven published texts/collections, including poetry, drama, adult and juvenile narratives.

and hence, one cannot critically understand a text without knowing the body of work. In addition to this complex irony, the texts speak to other texts, intertextually and intratextually, and numerous discourses intersect among the texts in particular dialogic ways so that a mere linear analysis would not be able to capture and proffer a clear definition of the richness of Melfi's poetics. Moreover, this 'body' presents a self-determining and self-transformative capacity to project a sense of being that is surplus to the reductive theories of interaction between body and consciousness (soul). In this sense, the analysis follows Melfi's technique of attributing political value to form, as well as to content. The analytical discourse follows these topics:

(1) Bracketed in irony: As mentioned, the use of irony marks an essential praxis of Mary Melfi's production and as such, it does not simply bear a face value, nor is it a categorical end-in-itself. Melfi's use of irony will be examined in depth as a preliminary step, or better, as a springboard into other complex issues. Melfi's irony elicits multi-dimensional patterns of meanings which can be broken down into at least four textual levels. The first level of irony is manifested through Melfi's use of parentheses to demarcate the ironic voices of the protagonists. This artistic device of bracketing for inserting excursive remarks - specifically, remarks that dissent from the discursive theme of the 'principal' text - is the most conspicuous, and hence the most easily identified marker of ironic content. This form of ironic representation in Melfi's work is partly evocative of the function of the chorus in Classical Greek theatre, especially when the choral voice(s) imply the views of the community and/or a conventional view of society. In Melfi, this communal representation is updated to a twentieth-century Freudian interpretation of the Super ego. Yet, this bracketed irony does not put into prominence of the *dicta* of socio-cultural conventions so much as it simultaneously invokes and deflects these conventional 'truths' through Melfi's often sardonic humour. As will be evidenced throughout the analysis, Freud's theories of consciousness make up only one of a variety of informative backgrounds which are co-opted for the investigation of this extensive sub-topic. This particular level of irony is shown as a conscious manifestation of the protagonist's subjectivity-in-conflict. This technique is also exploited for

manifesting supplementary (but never superfluous) ironic statements that are collected within primary sets of parentheses. This first level of irony which is already multi-levelled in itself, will attest to the semantic complexities of the artistic work.

A second dimension of irony can be found in the incongruity between the expected results of an experienced sequence of actions, which is to say the experience of displacement, and the actual results of that experience. This second dimension presents the experience of cultural displacement as a kind of peripatetic experience, in the sense that the character is seen to suffer a kind of ironic reversal, since it will be shown that the experience of displacement does not necessarily mitigate any past conditions of fear, but instead it can carry over these fears in slightly- disguised forms, while it also suscitates new, and previously remote fears. The third dimension of irony foregrounds another incongruity: this one stands firmly between the situation being developed in the poetic narrative and the accompanying words or actions. Each textual case will look at the degree of conscious awareness or of discrepancy between the character's language and her experienced situation. This way the recognition of incongruities which pervades the writings of Melfi will be particularly evident in her poetry.

A fourth level of irony is the irony that is alluded to in the artistic text itself. Melfi makes use of this type of irony by exploiting the discursive potentialities of the text. In other words, Melfi shows the text itself as a discourse by the recuperation of marginalized voices, such as through her suggestion of 'footnotes' which perform a kind of straddling role in the text. This form of irony could be called 'paratextual irony', where the irony outside the text is discursively brought back into the principal text to bring in a knowledge that is liminally positioned and therefore not immediately visible or accessible in the main text. This liminally accessible knowledge may be utterly dependent on reader perception and receptive choices - not every reader cares to know paratextual information. Thus the text shows that a more complete knowledge is available to those concerned readers/critics. At the same time, we cannot ignore

the function of paratextual devices as means of representing forms of repression against a subject by rendering the subject as an almost invisible Other within the general discourse which supposedly represents her.

The presence or absence of irony in a text also relates to questions of the possibility of (non-Hegelian) dialectics within the textual discourse. This is to show that the irony that is too self-reflexive is not in an advantageous perceptual position for locating liberating outlets. Yet the capacity or incapacity to provide an outflow for irony means that the dialectical potential might be affected and it could also signify a loss of political consciousness in a character subject or in the textual discourse itself. This point will be specifically analyzed in Melfi's poetic collection *Office Politics*. At the same time, this dissertation will look at the ways in which irony works as an auratic background force which 'enframes' the character so that the irony itself becomes a contextual framework for the analysis. This is not to ignore the possible effectiveness of the physical background (versus the contextual background) within a narrative for enframing the character in a sort of material, rather than situational, irony. The evidence of this aspect will be made clear through the analysis of *A Bride in Three Acts*.

The analysis will also be concerned with instances where irony might be subliminally or non-subliminally exploited for controlling perspectives, possibly through an authoritative voice or even through voyeuristic forms of intermediation to impel and perhaps sway the reading of the text. These will be instances wherein the analytical mind as reader must be able to discern conventional voices of authority or knowledge which can bind meanings by pretending severely limitable images. Furthermore, exegetic processings of the ironic language can sometimes perform a regulating function in positioning the percipient reader in relation to the text: at best by affording a panoramic vantage over the text, and at worst, by wedging the analytical perspective inside spectacularized renditions of the ironic stance. Therefore irony itself contains and deploys a certain authority leading to possible knowledge(s). The impact of irony on an analytical reading is an ambiguous one for the simple fact that the apprehension of irony simultaneously dilutes and amplifies meanings inside

and outside the text. But more importantly, the perspective of the analysis is cast beyond a simplistic modernist reading of irony as a generalized opposition to official cultures, in order to bring to light the new acquired anxieties which may underlie the personal subtexts vis-à-vis a conflictive public discourse.

(2) The Mask (or, 'this site is under construction'): This subtopic examines the myths that instruct us as cultural beings, and will serve to ultimately unmask the illusions that animate the socio-cultural subject. Here, as in the theatre of Sophocles, the masks have a voice and thus they become *personae* in themselves. However, the use of masks in Melfi's works is not meant specifically to replace a subject with a familiar stereotype. Rather, it is understood as a means of representing the perceived presence of the subject through her marked points of absence from a principal discourse. Nor is the mask meant to tender an aesthetic type of performance, but instead it becomes a space of struggle, through a surrogation tactic - somewhat partaking of Georg Simmel's theories of theatrical doubling - in the face of forceful normative myths.

Melfi's texts serve to question the function of cultural myths in the contemporary displaced cultural experience, as they seek to subvert certain officially sanctioned forms of representation by establishing the failings of these constructions. Social systems in the texts are at times represented through the implicit cultural myths that sustain them. For this reason, the critic works in conjunction with the text to recall these myths in order to identify and perhaps disarm them. This can introduce a rethinking of systems in general and a rethinking especially of their role in perpetuating the omnipresent constructions of social order.⁴ An ultimate motivating factor for this investigation is a questioning of inherited knowledge, whether this knowledge is culturally specific or the manifestation of generalized dogma.

(3) Poetic composition and Surrealistic perspectives: Melfi's poetry in particular has been attributed the qualifier "Surrealistic" in style, yet this stylistic application has not been broached in a systematic analysis. Therefore this

⁴ Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* is recalled as a valuable informative source for a history of the systemic constructions of Western social order.

dissertation proposes to investigate this claim by juxtaposing Melfi's poetics with some relevant principles of the Surrealist and other avant-garde theories. The presupposed Surrealistic aspects of Melfi's poetry will be examined from the perspective of art as an effective medium for the questioning of 'given' knowledge(s). This analysis will show where and in what ways Melfi's texts engage the principles of the art movement. For example, the text of the *O Canada Poems* seeks to draw the reader/listener into the construct itself of cultural stereotypes so as to force its illusory grounding to the surface and perchance cause it to implode. One way to achieve this is through a poesis that requires an applied reading, that is, in such a way that language itself becomes the specimen to be dissected and the reader is made to see how it works.

On the other hand, *A Bride in Three Acts*, with its doubled self-representation (as both a play and a collection of poems), immediately engages the reader into the conflict being played out in the self-consciousness of the protagonist. The complete absence of didactic intervention or external directions means that in a quasi Brechtian way, the Bride's conscious expressions constitute the exclusive verbalization of the play and supply a unique, yet complex perspective into the events. The deconstructed composition of the play abruptly propels the reader/audience into the consequences of the events being developed throughout the text. Yet the beginning poems are not a foreshadowing of resolved issues, nor do they resort to hinting at what is to be revealed later on. Similarly, the beginning lines of *The O Canada Poems* already reveal, through the use of ironic language - the radically deviated expectations of the protagonist so that the notion of the text's dramatic question appears to be deflated at the outset. The reader is made to sense the 'dramatic problem' as an uncertainty which cannot be so easily dissipated. The reader's incentive for continuing the reading cannot fall back on a conventional audience curiosity regarding the protagonist's resolution of her plight. Instead the reader shares at the outset the character's intimate 'secret', making the reader an accomplice to a certain disturbing knowledge. The inevitability of the course of the plot is known *in anticipo*, suggesting the complexities and uncertainties of displaced existence as being constant and

perhaps inevitable. The desired effect brings instances in which art represents an inexorable aspect of life: that of existence itself as an almost infinitely varied process of change and transformations, with an arbitrary benefit of the faculty of free will - which are all dependent on factors outside of themselves.

Melfi's texts borrow from elements of the Absurd particularly in their representations of the ridiculousness of certain obstacles and limitations that must be confronted by anyone seeking to participate in or belong to society. The loneliness and anguish - the material, rather than metaphysical - anguish that are felt in a new cultural sphere, and the displaced subject's sense of alienation, work tangentially to create an existential poetry of displacement. Melfi's poetry also picks up Pirandellian forms of self-representation, especially in the depiction of problems of communication, even when dialogue is apparently present - this is especially evident in her novel *A Dialogue With Masks* (1985). In this way, Melfi's poetic texts can also deliberately disorient the reader at the beginning of her reading and may even cause a certain amount of hesitation. Through all of this, the reader is made to gain a sense of the normative constraints of the text analogically with the constraints of the sexual body, accompanied by an intentional undressing of surface appearances. *The O Canada Poems (OCP)* show one application of this in the representation of the subject displaced into the exoticized stripper, re-enacting the dance of seduction between the newcomer and the patrons/suitors who constitute her patriarchally inflected Canadian audience.

The texts relate a theoretical, rather than a personal, discourse of self-inquiry which is primarily driven by an interrogation of meaning(s) in relation to the notion of identity in general, and to the notion of modern identity in particular. The poetic texts achieve this by presenting moments of existence framed by and within the poems themselves, in this way proffering a certain insight into the domain of the main character, and allowing the choice to the reader of looking into these 'windows' and himself through their specular features. The poetic fracturing of language demonstrates the precarious and implicit power of language and its function in the subsumption and/or in the

articulation of a self seeking a conceivable liberation from a chronic sense of uncertainty. In order to determine the subjective orientation, the critical analysis must shift the critical focus away from fetishistic fixations on semantic content and towards a study of the strategic processes which interlope in both the discourse of the displaced subjectivity and in that of her Other. The analytical strategy will consequently investigate the notion of alterity which derives from the texts in question.

Hence, in Melfi's hands Surrealism becomes a device only, and not a representational end. Borrowing from the Surrealistic movement does not necessarily imply the presence of Dadaist elements, since our analytical subject believes in the word 'being' - even if in its negative appearance at times - and in the idea of a human creation, as opposed to Duchamp's idea of a human 'invention'. However, In Duchamp's shadow, Melfi's writings do present an idea of the 'readymade cultural personage' , with the aim of destabilizing discourses. The banal, everyday displaced subjectivity is designated as a work of art only so that it may be molded into a weapon of confrontation against the readymade discourse of the Other. The notion of the displaced subject as 'readymade' object is a feasible analogy in the sense that this subject has already been 'removed' from her vital context into a sort of museum where she is then left to be passively redefined by her Other in spite of the author's intentions. Hence the displaced subject must rename herself according to the definitive parameters of the Other culture. The representational device thus serves to show a fundamental asymmetry in the general understanding of culture and identity. Moreover, Melfi's 'readymade cultural personage' becomes a reasonable motive for assessing the dialectical potential of the texts. The search for dialectical possibilities signifies that Melfi's texts are firmly imprinted in and by their historicity, and that they use this historicity as the departure point for the displaced subject's re-emergence into culture.

A Bride in Three Acts (ABTA) depicts scenes that bring to mind the *Pittura metafisica* of Giorgio de Chirico (Italy, after 1910) with its sense of timorous solitude amid incongruous objects and decorous architectural frameworks. The

decorum that rules the scene of the wedding reception in *ABTA* is viewed with the protagonist's cynical eye which could easily, in a short-sighted vision, be associated with the Dada movement, yet it will be shown that the main character's direction is not towards a rejection of logic altogether, nor does it merely attempt to turn logic on its head in a carnivalesque way. Rather, logic and decorous behaviours are investigated through their instrumental functions in the construction of social cohesion. The socio-political implications of the artistically articulated critique constitute Melfi's texts as a definite praxis.⁵ On the other hand, a quality of experimental writing seems an adequate attribution for a literature which cannot rely on specific formulae for representing its historically and culturally specific experience. Experimental photography techniques materially illustrate the points being made in the artistic text. In the same way that the camera uses images to show their power in causing the eye to perceive reality in different ways, Melfi's experimental form of writing uses language to attain similar effects, to present unexpected viewpoints, and to construct linguistic 'close-ups' that call attention to the analogies between these and our hegemonically produced modes of thinking.⁶ Finally, the artwork as presented by Melfi necessarily partakes of Borgesian representations in the sense that they explicitly display the fictionality and contradictions of our constructions, as well as foreground the Foucauldian dictum of representations as arbitrary, and especially for our purposes, culturally and historically determined.

(4) Exogamy and other disruptions: The problematics of life in common are examined through the viewpoint of diverse forms of heterogeneous relationships, rendered especially obvious through the surface representations of a marriage relationship between a displaced subject and her groom who is consistently issued from the dominant 'Other side'. The analysis of these relationships reveals the more intimate polemical aspects of existence as these

⁵ André Breton's authoritative definition of Surrealism in his *Surrealist Manifesto* cannot be strictly applied to Melfi's technique since her art work is not based on an automatistic absence of all control by reason, nor is it informed by a disinterested play of thought on the part of the artist.

⁶ For more information on this subject, refer to the photographic innovations of W.H.F. Talbot (1800-1877), who invented the negative-to-positive process as a technique for allowing nature to speak for itself. For Man Ray (1890-1976) and the Bauhaus Constructivist Moholy-Nagy, the purpose of this technique was to show the object "represented only by the transitory shadow it casts upon the sensitized paper". See Lucie-Smith, pp. 135-144.

are perceived in the displaced subjectivity. From this point the analysis will focus outwards to identify the extraneous influences that are being exerted on the displaced subjectivity and to examine how these influences function as a means to effectuate or intensify feelings of isolation, even within physically close relationships. An especially important point to consider in these relationships is the paradox that emerges between the idea of an officialized form of relationship whose very definition presupposes a beneficial connubiality for both parties, and the obscured negative aspects of this (arranged) interaction. These problematic issues, as they are filtered through the consciousness of the displaced individual, manifest a significant relation to the 'multicultural' society being represented in the narrative or poetic text.

The problem of relationships does not however limit itself to the monogamous marriage which, it bears repeating, is critically considered in its metaphorical form. Indeed, any given relationship may undergo a variety of interruptive events which may be suffered by one or both individuals, and it is therefore relevant to bring forth and confront the societal issues being expressed in the texts since they pertain as well to the socio-political organization of Canada in particular, and the cultural forces of the North American cultural sphere in general. The dissertation will examine the ways in which the displaced subjectivity reflects the confrontations that must be dealt with within her own consciousness due to her apparently persistent condition of being an 'alien', even within her own predicated group. This predicament causes the subjectivity to stand outside her own private and/or cultural elements so that the polemic may be effectively confronted.

The concept of disruptions is not limited to immediate personal relationships. It must also be looked at from a perspective of rupture, such as that of an abrupt and irrevocable rupture from a past or present cultural reality, brought about by a substantial geo-cultural displacement, which necessarily disrupts the sense of historical (cultural) continuity in the process. This breach of continuity is especially significant in the question of a cultural conception of the self and how this conception, being itself historically bound, is reproduced in

collateral situations of alterity. To this end, the analysis will investigate the protagonists' particular symbolic *loci* of alterity in each artistic text by sifting through the irony in order to extract the discrepancies that exist between the displaced individual and her new exegetic frameworks. As the subjectivity is removed from one explanatory framework and translocated into another, she is in an ideal position for identifying the shapes and patterns that govern us in culture, thereby revealing some unexpected 'images' of ourselves as we believe ourselves to be or to behave in a multicultural society. The subjective removal,⁷ whether deliberate or not, would permit the re-interpretation of these governing factors and a more unadulterated, so to speak, assessment of actual theoretical policies.

(5) Towards the recognition of the self, or, reciprocating the self:

This section will investigate the negotiations which take place within the displaced subjectivity, usually through the performative but also often by way of the spectacular, in order to presumably encounter the self. The encounter with the self as Other and the ensuing negotiations are forcibly interpretive processes with a broad range of activity on different semantic levels of the term 'interpretation'. The activity of interpreting extends its meaning from the active performance of a role to the responsive activity of decoding something so as to make sense of it. In this actual context then, the activity of interpretation will be examined as a complex device to be used in the function of leading the subject to relevant forms of recognition. The confrontation of the subject with the revelation of a second subjectivity within herself will reveal a rebellious personality in the face of Post-Modernistic disclaimers of a 'splitting' or of a 'fragmentation' of the subject. Yet the critical analysis does accommodate, to a certain degree, the previously mentioned Freudian concept of consciousness, especially as it pertains to the partial disjuncture between the Ego (I am) and Id, and where the specter of the Super ego (I ought to) is always meaningfully present. The analytical inquiry will thus look at subjective strategies where the 'I' and the 'not I' disacknowledge these Post-Modernistic charges, bringing in instead other aspects of the concept of alterity.

⁷ The term removal is employed in the sense of distancing one's consciousness from its previous perspectival stance, rather than in the sense of disappearance.

The analysis of the displaced subject overlaps two textual frames: the inner textual frame, which is embodied by the protagonists in their realized or still to be realized roles, and the outer textual frame, which constitutes the authorial voice in various aspects of her existence. These two contextual spheres perform a constant intertextual slippage in the Pirandellian style, wherein the distinctions become blurred between illusory performances and realities. A notion of relativity is thereby invoked so that the question of multiplicity in the self is problematized beyond the impracticable issues of definition and resolution. In other words, if we derive our own individuation from a solicited Other, what are the implications that instruct our conscious or unconscious selection of an Other, in relation to the delimitative qualities of these 'preferences'? Toward this inquisitive end, it might be advantageous to examine what degrees of autonomy, of agency or of free will are exercised in determining our options when it comes to selecting subjective and/or symbolic spaces of alterity.

The personification of delimitative systems into a marital relationship is fittingly examined from a woman's perspective since the marginalized is generally feminized in a patriarchal system. An investigation into the 'spectacle of the self' requires an inquiry into the methods by which the marginalization of Other, so-called minority cultures is implemented and deployed through the stereotypization of cultural images. The analysis also entails a probing into the expressive dimensions of fantasy and expectations in order to locate the controlling power(s) being worked out behind the scenes and in the self-conscious representation. In other words, if the displaced self is represented as a spectacularized subject/object, who or what bears the look of the spectator/Other that holds powers of realization or of neutralization over the subject? The question of a spectatorial 'gaze' inevitably induces a query into the types of responses that are elicited by the recipient of this containing gaze. For instance the *OCP* engage the polemical interactivity between the immigrant protagonist, as a stripper with her stylized physical display, and her audience's behaviour, whose gaze is governed by its fetishistic (scopophilic) imaginary. The

analysis of this text and *ABTA* will take a particular look at the mechanisms employed in the framing of these subjective spaces and the consequential struggle for the recognition of an infrangible yet not 'fixed' sense of self.

A recognition of the subjective space includes a recuperation of presence in such a way that subjectival out-shoots of 'surplus' elements can be reintegrated in the quest for self-recognition. To this end, the language of poetic images serves to retrieve and restore a broader sense of self, one that is not bound by absolute or entrenched meanings. A partial goal of the analysis is the unmasking of the conventional forms of management which have so far held the vantage point over the spectacularization of the subject.⁸ The analysis will also explore the possible relationships between the poetic voice and any typical alter-egos or 'Other personae' which may be enlisted in the representational projection of the displaced self. A significant example of this representational projection in Melfi's texts is a consistent recourse to an ironic depiction of the self as "alien", in the most negative and derogatory definitions of the word. The subjective distortion is also reflected in the composition of certain texts, notably in *ABTA*, where the order of events is dis-arranged and the bride/protagonist gives the impression of being cast adrift amidst a conventional ritual in which she is both the spectator and the object of the spectacle. The process of displacement which is occurring in this text serves a simultaneous purpose of foregrounding the workings of the displaced self-consciousness while the critical consciousness of the protagonist is brought into contact with her polarized situation.

(6) Assimilation by death, or death by assimilation: There is a marked devalorization of *italianità* in Italian Canadian criticism where critical writings match the discourse of assimilation with a destructive sense of being, even presenting a sense of "self-hatred" as a generalized perspective of Italian

⁸ The work of Laura Mulvey in cinematic criticism is particularly relevant for this part of the analysis See "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in Wallis, pp. 361-374.

Canadian writing.⁹ Such statements show that criticism risks being repressed within a framework of bipolarity which is not feasible in the actualities of human conditions. Moreover, the application of these same constraints to a literature is a risky pretext which could sabotage the efforts of so-called 'ethnic minority writing' and actually stifle them into a schizophrenoid gridlock. Hence this dichotomized model - which teams up the uttermost concepts of High Modernism and Post-Modernism - is seriously flawed as a conceptual support for critical analysis. The second polemic develops from the notion of 'self-hatred' as a fundamental constitution of 'ethnic' or 'minority' writing, thereby fixing the literatures of cultural displacement in a counteractive zone of stasis. This perspective also implies that a negative sense of self is central and final to the motivations of these writings. In view of such suspect discourses of criticism, this analysis proposes to examine the works on their own terms, that is, from the critical idea that Melfi's poesis performs a strategic praxis which seeks to break loose from established criteria of criticism.

The concept of performance is crucial in this context, in the sense that performance implies not just a representation or a repetition of such. Nor is the term merely employed to denote a reaction to a specific stimulus, but rather the analysis of Melfi's writings will be undertaken *a priori* as an investigation of forms of behaviour and their capacity to lead to the actual fulfillment of claims - that is, what is sought out in the analysis is the performance in its effectually implementational form, as opposed to a performance as a finished, and finite feat. The performance-oriented approach in Melfi's writings lends itself to an anthropologically informed notion of performance as the proactive manifestation towards a restored behaviour, *by means of* the performance of a birth/death poetry. This foregrounds a dynamic movement in a continuous process against the stasis of a spurious balance between two immutable points. It also brings up concepts of provisional identities, of a connection to the idea of love-death such as will be seen in ABTA, and the various problems of existence to be addressed throughout the trajectory of the poetic works. In other words, the texts will be

⁹ In *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures*, Joseph Pivato writes: "[o]ne result of growing up with divided loyalties is a splitting of the self into inimical parts. Self-hatred is one of the markers of characters in ethnic minority writing. (195-6) See also his chapter titled "Hating the Self: John Marlyn and Frank Paci", pp. 195-217.

approached through their 'concourse' aspects - in the broad sense of the word 'concourse', as a passageway and as the non-finite compilation of diverse elements - to show that the artistic manifestation of displaced existence puts a premium on language as a space of expression for a continuous process of change. In this way, language itself is not strictly conclusive, nor does it ignore parametric boundaries, but rather, in Melfi's writing especially, language is strategically deployed as a means of negotiating one's space(s) amid the multicultural sphere and within each interpersonal and/or intercultural encounter. The question of assimilation is thus contemplated as an option, albeit a problematic one, rather than as a prescriptive goal.

(7) Semantics of ambivalence: First, the question of ambivalence is extracted from a definitive sense of opposition between two, or 'dual' elements of the individual (or even of a 'collective') self-consciousness. Melfi's use of irony will serve to illustrate a praxis which discerns the paradoxical nature of a specific existential dimension and responds to this paradoxically with a seemingly ambivalent, and sometimes iconoclastic, stance in the face of totalizing definitions. In fact, Melfi's different contextualizations of a same or similar phenomenon allow for varied (yet not endless) spaces of interpretation and implications of conflicting and/or unresolved meanings and conceptions. The semantics of ambivalence represent ironic constructions as artificial systems of significations, as the means for the reorganization of the self in displacement. This implies the active externalization of the subjective sense of displacement into language since it is primarily through language that we are formulated, hence language must be scrutinized and subjectively re-deployed in order for the subject to achieve a suitable reformulation. This section looks at the ways in which Melfi employs a stylized language infused with cultural semantic devices from varied linguistic sources in order to reformulate an individualized kind of existence.

(8) Seduced by power - inside the Trojan Horse: The idea of the Trojan Horse represents the Western systems of patriarchy and classism, as well as the system of hierarchies which constitutes these ideologies. Melfi's female

(immigrant) protagonists become the signifying bodies for portraying the conflicts of representation between particular cultural groups (or even between individuals) as well as for denouncing the solicitous nature of these synergistic forces. These specific conflictual moments are vividly illustrated in the *OCP*. The literary text is evidenced as a privileged zone to be transformed into an impending arena for those expressive forces that do not or will not conform to standard definitions and representations. Since the rules of conventional tragedy require this fundamental conflict (of the unconventional individual *against* society) to lead to a grievous outcome for the individual as a means of preserving the status quo - both at the individual and at the group level-, thus the literature of displacement is required to deploy innovative strategies of representation. It will achieve this sometimes by bringing possible worlds into textual existence, and sometimes by a more mimetic approach in order to expose the nature of the conflict - by these means also exposing the workings of the system - and to produce an adequate space of representation for the individual or her group.

Elements of alterity will form the focus of the analysis so that the poetic text engages a socio-political mode of inquiry into our prevailing pseudo-protectionist systems of order. The poetic text which speaks from a conflictual space of cultural displacement voices a hetero-discursive disposition through which the degrees of surrender and/or compromise are evaluated and negotiated. Again, the analysis of the *OCP* will be instrumental for a preliminary understanding of this conflict of compromise. The analytical approach once again confronts the precedents of Italian Canadian criticism which proclaims a final reification of the (female) subject,¹⁰ hence demonstrating a critical incapacity to perceive the irony of the texts. These types of criticism shortchange

¹⁰ According to Pivato, "[t]he unwritten history of Italian immigrant women is one of being disenfranchised, of being limited to a few necessary functions. ...This sad history is now being reflected in the images of confined bodies, of handicapped characters and other forms of restriction. The poetry is particularly striking because of its recurrent image of women. The verse of Montreal poet, Mary Melfi, is full of bodies that are trapped or mutilated. [!] The poem, 'The Invalid', is a surreal nightmare in which a woman's body is attached to everything but is no longer her own. Her body belongs to her mother, to her husband, to her baby and then to the hospital. This bartered and battered body appears again in Melfi's collection *A Bride in Three Acts*. The bride, the object of much attention, of much exchange, is in fact, an object. As a reified thing without personhood, the bride too is confined." In *Echo*, pp. 164-5.

the poetic text and divest it of any emancipative potential. Although a clash of culture and values is acknowledged as a real and violent influence that must be brought to the surface through artistic representations, it would be a mistake to dismiss it as a final representation of the helpless and hopeless condition of immigrant women. The analysis will thus address a variety of repressive systems that constitute obstacles against the realization of the text as a departure point towards an effective negotiation of being.

As mentioned above (in 5), the system of patriarchy is personified into a marital relationship and is offset by Melfi's forceful irony. It is from this standpoint of a potential subversion of obstructive systems that Melfi's writings are examined. It will also become evident that the female voice speaking from a marginalized space can be especially perceptive in regards to socio-political impediments. In this context, we reiterate a Surrealistic practice of writing the female body as a rhetorical standpoint. But in this analysis the female body is seen as bisecting the space of representation and becoming a mediating instrument: the female body acts as a perspective grid through which the system of patriarchy is announced at the same time that it is denounced.¹¹ A critique of patriarchy opens up a powerful framework over the imaginary of a humanity that is greater than woman alone. Yet female voices of resistance, when allowed to emerge as such, can assume a function and a role that will transcend their own marginalized condition.

Questions of meaning and language will provide the basis for examining the question of this being in an asymmetrical relationship, and Melfi's writings provide a serious critical framework for this investigation. The object of the analysis is to show that works of art are not just repositories of ideas, as some critics would have it, but that these texts reverberate in the larger context of the Canadian multicultural society. It stands to reason that the official concept of *Multiculturalism* will become a point of contention since it also constructs the image of a protectionist system for a diversified crowd. The analysis will address the question of language through its denominative and imaginative functions,

¹¹ For more information on this Surrealist practice, see Mason Klein's article "Embodying Sexuality" in Berger, pp. 139-157.

as a window into the cover-up activities of official-speak in order to offset the threat of a cultural, or at worst of an altogether existential, decontextualization. The analysis will look at the displaced text as a materialization of the decontextualized existence and as a potential space of recontextualization. From this critical standpoint, the subversive text questions the hierarchical conditions within which it exists, first by telling how the representational mechanisms of socio-political power operate and secondly, by showing how voices of resistance can avail themselves of the power of representation to reciprocate these essentially 'deformed' representations by reflecting them back onto their source. A critical analysis of the writer's response to her socio-political station will bring to light the level of socio-cultural activism that is potentially generated through the artistic works.

(9) Paradoxical spaces of silence: Issues of control constitute the core of this section which will examine through the texts those forces that work to inhibit or remove critical voices from a cultural and/or historical dimension. The representation of the bride in *ABTA* is particularly adequate for illustrating the subject's removal from space and time, as she tries to apprehend her own reality while recognizing her condition as that of an extrinsically controlled space. In the context of *OP*, Melfi exposes the tyrant-like rule of the late capitalistic/multiculturalistic oligarchy at the close of the century. In consequence to these constraining forces, Melfi's texts also reveal a resulting muted solitude which apparently displaces any notion of a possible community, at least in the conventional sense and practice of the concept. Yet, in view of Melfi's praxis of irony, the notion of the paradox becomes instrumental for transcending fatalistic (subjective or critical) perspectives. The analysis of the poetic texts will demonstrate that the artistic text plays out the paradox of *eros-thanatos* while simultaneously embodying the anguish of doubt and shaken certainties.

The analysis of the emerging paradoxes in the texts points to another preponderant paradox expressing a *tiraillement* between the conceptualization of (a presupposed) freedom and the realities of culturally displaced existence.

The question of freedom in itself assumes arbitrary meanings and functions in correspondence with the degree of the perceived discrepancies. In addition, issues of freedom (and obstruction thereof) will interface with a consideration of agency and free will in the pertinent context. For the purposes of this dissertation, an analysis of the narrative voice(s) will explore the possibilities of strategic recuperation of an adequate controlling perspective on the (cultural) self.

(10) The language of dreams and the revelation of private

dimensions: This section examines the question of expectations and the disorienting effects that are generated in the displaced subjectivity when these expectations are 'betrayed'. The resulting disorientation of the subject is played out in a dream-like supranaturalistic realm of disjunction which is manifest in Melfi's montage-like poetic articulation - i.e. in *ABTA* and the *OCP*. (The exercise of a preferred Surrealistic formula is also alluded to in her narrative works, such as *A Dialogue With Masks* (1985) and *Infertility Rites* (1991), where the protagonist voice identifies herself as an artist whose preferred genre is the collage.) The focus will be on the text itself as a visible (audible) deliberation of the conscious, as well as the subconscious mind, again through the voice of irony. To this end, that which 'remains' in Melfi's irony will be shown as providing a complementary, yet not totalizing, interpretation of the self in cultural displacement. The thematic of expectations juxtaposed with that of a resulting sense of betrayal will be critical for understanding the socio-historical actualization of the premise of Multiculturalism.

(11) From metamorphosis to metamorphosis: As previously mentioned, the (critical) displaced subject is shown to gain, through the process of displacement, a capacity to view the self as if she were her Other, thereby representing the contrastive qualities that inform our sense(s) of self and our contingent behaviours. The capacity to open up the dialectic among the 'I am', 'I was', and 'I ought to be' implies the projection of the self as the observer as well as the observed. In addition, the self-conscious ability to navigate these subjective displacements becomes a kind of metamorphological device through

which the critical subject negotiates her existence. The question of a desired metamorphosis versus an imposed one also entails the questions of freedom and free will as already mentioned in (9), and which will be elaborated throughout the analysis. In this vein, the corpus of Melfi's work represents varying degrees of metamorphological possibilities contingent on the characters' expectations and the circumstantial realities of their existences.

(12) An invitation to the ritual: The anthropological nature of the ritual requires that the drama be played out as a repeatable performance in front of an audience which preferably possesses the cultural competence to participate 'in unison' with a communal audience. The normative aspects of this ritual will be foregrounded in Melfi's poetry so that the analysis follows the course of the subject's represented consciousness through the performative demands dictated by the necessarily conflicting social rituals that are generated by the process of displacement. The notion of liminality in this analysis presents itself as the experiential reorganization of the creative imaginary, which should allow for all manners of playful (we might even say, carnivalesque) defiance of challenge toward the existing ruling structures, whether these are traditional structures in the culture of origin or are acquired through the process of displacement. Where cultural displacement has occurred, the idea of a restoration of behaviour which is the conventional outcome of ritualistic performance does not pretend a change within a same cultural realm. Indeed the condition of displacement unfolds in the performative component of the ritual (as the irony of the everyday sphere), imputing it with the dynamic capacity of the work of art itself - in its definition of an open space of transition (liminality) which idealistically de-centres the established and/or inherited structures of dominance and subordination.

The community in *ABTA* is seen within the cultural framework of a wedding reception. This particular frame of reference and the bride's subjective perception of the event are displaced into language thus providing a more distinct and localized framework for a critical apprehension of the text. The ritualistic spectacularization of the bride releases the double dimension of the

sacred and the profane with all the awe-inspiring spectacle of public ceremonies. The wedding ceremony and the following celebration in 'real' life - in the reversed chronology of the text - represent two elements of the archival dimension of the ritual requiring an act of communion to be re-inforced through its repetitive performance in the private sphere in the signifying act of breaking bread with the invited community. Yet a third ritual manifestation of this act is demonstrated in the expressed reception of the 'body of the husband' as if it were 'the body of Christ'. Thus the official ritual and its residual symbolic manifestations assume the ironic ambiguity of a ritual preparation for life and/or death. Moreover, the representation of married life itself as an extension of the ritual in the private sphere recalls the conflictual status of ritualistic experiences and possibilities of recuperating the lost dynamics of liminality in the world of the Other.

(13) Symbolic dispossession of the self: The subject's existence in a new cultural environment is perceived and expressed as a complex sequence of symbolic acts that assist in formulating the acquired sense of self. Generally, the symbolic act in itself inaugurates the new while simultaneously representing a breach with the precedent. Yet certain symbolic actions publicly present the appearance of a smooth transition while at the same time performing a counteractive function on the private level. Melfi's poetry shows the ubiquity of ritual acts, and particularly of ritual thought in social and cultural interaction, and the poetry thereby seeks to undermine the control of paradigmatic thought. Texts such as *ABTA* further defy the conventions of tragedy by presenting a crisis that has already occurred so that the betrayed premise of resolution disorients the reading at the outset. The analysis will investigate the ironic potential as counterweight for an existent subjective crisis. Symbolic dispossession of the self challenges the recognized value of symbols in its efforts to reappropriate the disoriented self - since the ritual act itself effectively performs a 're-orienting' function on subjectivity.

(14) Poetry, transgression and the erotic: The idea of transgression is applied to the analysis in direct response to the circumscribing conventions that

define social life as well as artistic production, so that the text becomes the mediating (as opposed to the mediated) space of expression, containing the requisite elements for the reconstitution of an original condition of being, and with all the attached possibilities that this entails. In other words, Melfi's poetry invokes a 'return' to the origin of the myth of creation and Adam and Eve, and reappropriates tactics of transgression in order to displace the Edenist myth and reconstitute a lineage *ex novo*. To this end Melfi's poetry takes the female sexual body from its anthropological signification and as an object of phenomenological perception (Merleau-Ponty's concept of the sexual body as a historical idea), through its signification as a cultural sign (Beauvoir's view of the female body as a historical situation), and all the way through to its psychosexual liberatory practices, as illustrated in the *OCP*.

The poetic word seeks this status of potential liberation through a suggestively transgressive exercise of language and a likewise trespassing activity in regards to conventional gender representations¹² and expectations. This transgressive praxis is intended to shake up a fundamental, and taken-for-granted obedience to established depictions of existence 'as it should be'. The liberatory potential of the texts hinges on specific techniques that will be brought to light throughout the analysis. Melfi's consideration of gender roles does not simply serve to reconstruct gender divisions nor does it fall back on the androgynistic theme of Surrealism. Rather, the aim is to show how residual myths, personified in the 'eternal bride', function to suppress underlying conflicts and divisions. And to this end, Melfi's poetry is sexually charged.

The complex understanding of self-identity takes place partly through a critical understanding of sexual being. Accordingly, this part of the analysis will revisit Georges Bataille's concepts on the topic of erotic transgression as a subversive device against a constrictive, and conscientiously Catholic, form of existence. Melfi's poetry exhibits to this effect a recognizable behaviour of self-chastisement manifested through a graphic exposure of the liabilities and

¹² I will repeat that this analysis is not intended as a feminist study of representative texts by female Italian Canadian writers, but rather these works are to be apprehended in their much larger conceptual and socio-historical contexts.

equivocations found in language and in our conventional system of images. Hence the analysis will present a re-elaboration of the female cultural body, as it is represented in the artwork - which means divesting the theory-bound female sexual and cultural body of its representational pigeon-holes, in order to reinvest the text with its subjective cultural integrity.

(15) “Reader discretion is advised”: the use of ‘coarse’ language:

The use of ‘coarse language’ in the poetic representation is considered as a communicative device to illustrate the difficulties and frustrations that are encountered by the displaced subjectivity in all its forms of being (sexual, cultural, etc.). Specifically, the representational language in the artwork will be analyzed as a strategic device which establishes its own private (personal and historical) and socio-political objectives. To this end, the analysis will conceptually engage the problems of language itself as a fundamentally paradoxical vehicle for communication and equivocation, demonstrating an affinity of the poetry with certain principles of experimental writing and the of the avant-garde movements.¹³ Hence the use of graphic language in the artwork is recognized as a subjective attempt to overcome delimitative critical assumptions which abort the signification of a text by precipitating it into premature and/or handicapping frameworks.

The poetic language is used to dramatize the sense of a present (in both senses of actuality and of existence) condition and therefore it must have causes and effects which cannot simply be contemplated as an unresolved finality in itself. However, this section will explore some of the precedents which have conditioned the tone of the artwork, and particularly the poetic allusions to the pain of disillusion and betrayal which pervade Melfi’s writing. Therefore this section of the analysis will examine the mainspring of these negative sensations so that the artwork remains grounded in its historical foundation. It will be shown that removal of the artwork from its historical actuality would severely limit the socio-political potential of the poetic language and might ultimately relegate the language to an absolute futility.

¹³ William Anselmi has already demonstrated that Italian Canadian writing stands between the avant-garde and science fiction writing in his public lectures for the Italian 599 at U of Alberta.

(16) The fear of overstepping boundaries: This part of the analysis deals with the detection of fear tactics for coercive purposes on the individual, subjective and societal levels. The concept is considered as an inducement to obedience in social behaviour and in artistic thought and expression. Fear is shown as something that is to be privately experienced and not visibly nor critically manifested. A favourite leitmotiv for this in Melfi's poetry is the image of the 'smile', wherein individuals outwardly display a continuous pretense that all is well. The figure of the bride is again used to illustrate this ritualistically-conditioned stoicism where the bride may show no signs of fear or apprehension, and where she must sustain throughout the public rites and celebration of the wedding, an image of hope and happiness with respect to her future existence. The wedding ritual also serves to illustrate the problematic ties that link the individual to a community, while the poetic language indicates an intricate artistic perception that is problematically rooted in definitive subjective networks of normativity.

The analysis illustrates the ritualistic residuals which inhabit the subjective 'I ought to' in a perennially ritualized code of behaviour which calls forth the ideals of 'success' in the form of obedience to a system, and which is often overridden by a commanding fear of failure (a failure which may even contain this 'success'). The struggle between the senses of success and failure is conceptualized in the protagonist's repeated attempts at creative reproduction, for example in the novel *Infertility Rites*, where the protagonist suffers an apparently debilitating series of miscarriages before she is finally successful in carrying her progeny to term. Characteristically, the fusion of two subjective elements for the creation of a new subjective entity deeply implicates a notion of alterity. Melfi's writings thus enable the critical reader to examine the dissonances in different intersubjective relations in order to identify the processes at work in the formation and estimation of the socio-cultural being.

(17) Strategies of contemplating the self in culture: The perception of things as they are mediated through the displaced perspective, relativizes a

position or an inclination in regards to traditional attitudes. In this context Melfi's poetry combines elements of the Pirandellian problem of a final resolution for the human personality/identity, with a Surrealistic strategy of multiplication of 'identities' for displacing any idea of fixity in the subject. Paradoxically, this artistic attitude also represents a subjective dilemma in terms of the ingrained desire for some kind of possible resolution. Yet the analysis bears in mind that, while the idea of a completed subjectivity in life is not possible until death, it is the *narrative* of ourselves that seeks a kind of finalization of identity. In other words, any consideration of identity from the viewpoint of a conclusive interpretation entails a subjective displacement into a narrative which, like it or not, must conform to at least some conventional rules of narration in order to be understood. Thus the mere activity of narrating the self is already a strategy for making the self belong, by inserting it into a conventional frame concurrently shared by two (or more) conflicting cultural attitudes in the displaced subjectivity. Yet, self-expression is in itself an acknowledged strategy for self-authentication. Therefore, the artistic text serves to exponentially develop adequate spaces of subjective presence in the face of disorienting situations.

In the displaced text, the power of art is enlisted as a possible medium towards a desired effect in the self, yet it would be impolitic to reduce the critical artistic text to this mere solipsistic function. As such Melfi's poetry is probably best defined in terms of its intentional (dys)functions, since the text refutes a pure conventionality of styles - even though it remains within a general formatting confinement -, choosing to challenge existent frameworks by debating these framing tactics and/or by reformulating them in the two interwoven situations of the artwork and the creating self, thereby displacing as well the idea of an extraneously created self. By these means, the artistic text projects outwards (to a critical public) as well as inwards (through the dramatic creation of the self) in a double process of creation. But its ability to communicate outwards necessarily depends on its possibilities of being understood and, to a certain degree, on acceptance by the community to which it is addressed. Thus the ability to communicate a subjective experience is contingent on its significance for, or within, specific communities.

Lucy Lippard¹⁴ writes on the subject of art and power:

The power of art is subversive rather than authoritarian, lying in its connection of the ability to make with the ability to see - and then in its power to make others see that they too can make something of what they see ... and so on. Potentially powerful art is almost by definition oppositional - that work which worms its way out of the prescribed channels and is seen in a fresh light...

... However, the culture that is potentially powerful is not necessarily the culture that those in cultural power think will or should be powerful. Power is generally interpreted as control - control over one's own and others' actions. ...Art is suggestive. The motions it inspires are usually *e*-motions. (345)

Lippard's observations are consistent with the present analysis insofar as the identification of an 'appositional' attitude and the transference of this attitude into the artwork. However, Lippard adds:

The real power of culture is to join individual and communal vision, to provide "examples" and "object lessons" as well as the pleasures of sensuous recognition. Ironically, those artists who try to convey their meanings directly are often accused of being propagandists, and their accessibility is thus limited to those not afraid of taking a stand. The ability to produce visions is impotent unless it's connected to a means of communication and distribution. (345-7)

By these terms, Lippard postulates a suitable formula for an understanding of Melfi's poetry insofar as it presents the praxis potential of the artistic text through an effective reorganization of language, while distinguishing the hegemonic factors that serve to delimit the range of its socio-political activity. Thus the strategies for contemplating the self in culture must be constructed from within this oppositional position, as it presents itself in the heterogeneous networks of

¹⁴ See her article "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power" in Wallis, pp. 341-358.

intersubjectivity. The artwork is the space where language is to be deployed for a potential restructuring of the processes of signification, beginning with the fundamental 'I and Thou' relationship (Buber) and possibly extending into a connotation of the 'us' and 'them'. The displaced subjectivity fluctuates between these parameters as it reconfigures itself - based on a limitable multiplicity of representations - and a corresponding language, or possibly a counterlanguage, to negotiate and represent the self as a variable form of narration within subjectively determined limits.

(18) Encounters with English language and literature: This section investigates the poetic text as the expressive space of encounter of two - or more, since both Canada and Italy are multilingual spaces - conflictual cultures. The analysis will look at linguistic and formalistic points of contention as these are evidenced in the displaced poesis. In an interrelation with the individual displacement experience, the linguistically and culturally displaced self-consciousness responds to particular stimuli in a language that displays its own linguistic, semantic and formal 'speech' (the Saussurean *parole*). The sense of displacement is disposed according to the direction of the displacing activity, hence the analysis takes these directions into account in relation to its linguistic boundaries. For example, if a displaced subject consciously or unconsciously resists learning the language of the new, 'Other' culture,¹⁵ the cultural displacement assumes an outward attitude, toward the Other culture. On the other hand, if the displaced subject, self-consciously or not, 'forgets' the language of her own traditional culture, opting instead for the language of the new, acquired culture, the displacement may take place, to a certain degree, within her cultural configuration. Of course, this sense of displacement might also be amplified, or enriched, by the diversifying effects of Multiculturalism, depending on the demographic characteristics of the location of the displacement. The cities of Montréal and Toronto demonstrate two different conceptual ideas of displacement, one French, cosmopolitan (with its view towards Europe and with Canada as a background), and the other, English, metropolitan (with its view towards Canada and the Canadian identity, and with England and the

¹⁵ See for example André Breton's refusal to learn English during his 'exile' in New York.

USA as its backgrounds).

The English language represents a contentious juncture in contrast to the French language that is used to speak in terms of home and familiarity, in a relationship which accommodates her particular Italian experience. Yet, in such diversified forms of displacement where words could easily get in one another's way, the creative subjectivity is strategically positioned for exploring the ambiguity on which language depends for its social purposes, often by rendering nothing more than an *impression* of communicative reciprocity (as Pirandello effectively demonstrated). Therefore the analytical process serves to uncover some of the diverse cultural resonances that inhabit the displaced text, due to the poet's heterogeneous formation and stance. All of these issues reverberate in the poetic text as re-created, stylized semantics through the deployment of a strategized vocabulary and syntax.

(19) The mechanics of relationships: dialogue and/or dialectics: The dialectical potential of interrelational discourses is examined through the poetic texts' various representations of dialogical interrelations, as mediated through a dominating voice of consciousness since the majority of Melfi's works contain no conventional narration *per se*. Indeed Melfi's works represent a diversity of forms through which the everyday exchanges of speech either become sublimated or edited by the mediating consciousness of the protagonist. A close examination of the various dialogical manifestations will serve to demonstrate the mechanisms of dialogues occurring within specific types of relationships, in order to reveal the dialectical nature and potential that might be present within, or absent from, these relationships. At the same time, the analysis will probe the various degrees of reciprocity occurring in each dialogical encounter. Thus the historical contemporaneity of Melfi's texts marks them as critical frameworks for understanding the ideal, as well as the real

mechanisms that identify our present Canadian multicultural experience. And since language presupposes a certain community, the analysis will also inquire into the question of possible communities as these are vicariously depicted in the artwork.

The artistic text could be said to function as a space of consciousness within which concepts of self-identity and the knowledge of self-diversity (in time) are played out. Moreover, the text is able to accommodate the antagonistic camps projected by a 'speaking' consciousness, and the critic must determine the presence and/or the degree of the dialectical relationship between these antagonistic positions. In other words, the critical analysis keeps in mind the fact that the conscience is capable of revising the vision of the self (in one's past) and to include or ignore the various facets of the self as these have appeared through time.¹⁶ What matters is the representation of subjectivities for implementing a critical look into the multiculturalist apparatus and its effects on society. In textual cases showing the failure of dialectics, the analysis will consider the discursive bases which determine the possibility and the quality of dialectical encounters. Considering all this, the analysis will assume a multi-level investigation into the problematics of dialogical relationships, as well as the relational aspects appearing in the multiple discourses of cultural displacement. The analysis will also investigate the constant and varied play between subjective being and becoming.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion on this topic, see Remo Bodei, *Destini personali. L'età della colonizzazione delle coscienze*. Feltrinelli, 2002.

**PART 2 - ANALYSIS : MYTHS AND MIRRORS - TOWARDS A
RECOGNITION OF THE SELF.
A QUEEN IS HOLDING A MUMMIFIED CAT (1981) AND *THE O
CANADA POEMS* (1986)**

2. 1 Bracketed in irony

The title of this section denotes a pervading irony in Melfi's texts, based on the fact that while collective myths are merely reflected in consistent metaphorical mirrors, mythopoeses are steadily being formulated inside the specular space of consciousness, which then contains these (re)formulated myths for provisional deployment in a future concurrent, desiring consciousness. Thus the degree of alignment between the two factors of the 'myth and the mirror' slips toward the notion of 'the myth *in* the mirror'. In view of this, the critical analysis of the texts will consider the qualitative and quantitative interactions between these two factors and according to their manifestations in Melfi's writings. This aspect of the analysis is fundamental if we are to map the subjective trajectories that may lead toward a desired 'recognition of the self in culture'. In addition to this fundamental consideration of the works, a second one reveals the illusory practices of self-recognition on which the displaced subjectivity forcibly depends for her prospective stabilization (in the sense of an equilibrating, rather than a fixing, effect) of identity. In the case of the displaced writer, the artwork becomes a particular space of negotiation not only for the recognition of the self, but also for the location of the self-as-artist within a broader sphere of operation. In other words, the displaced text reveals the nature of its own relationship with mechanisms of dominance. The identification

of these factors as they emerge through the ironic voice and/or in the ironic disposition of the text will reveal a critical polyphonic disquisition of displacement and 'minoritized' literature. A preliminary survey of the multiple elements of the poetic irony will be followed by a closer examination of Melfi's irony in the subsequent sections.

The collection *A Queen Is Holding a Mummified Cat* begins with a subjective removal away from any idea of culture (in modernity), in order to rearticulate a subject who is in, and of, nature. This poetic premise opens up a primary philosophical irony, in the consideration that if the notion of *Dasein*¹⁷ means being thrown into a historical time-space, then the condition of displacement indicates an inverse casting outside of a subjectively signifying historical time-space.¹⁷ The first poem, titled "The Transvestite" (11), reveals the transient occupation of space(s) by human beings whose traces are chiefly delineated by the element of duration, while Nature herself prevails in her paradoxically permutable fixity, and in the hands of a prevalent "God". The ironic question of the human desire for immortality is therefore cast against the image of an 'eternal' Nature - or of the artificial naturalization of a Canadian canon, against all others who are cast into the wilderness. The call to a ruling entity in this poem invokes an authority that appears as being above nature, while ironically evoking a subjectedness to, and indirect dependence on, the rules of Nature (also in relation to specific territorial spaces), for other, 'inferior' beings.

why human beings are just
the pupils of his eyes

¹⁷ The notion of *Dasein* is based on the Heideggerian model although this dissertation does not claim a discussion of Heidegger's philosophy .

or the eyes of the needles
his eunuch use to embroider his clothes

This same idea of irony continues in the next poem, "The Lobotomy" (12), with the paradox that we humans must suffer the trauma of consciousness - including the knowledge of our inevitable deaths - and such deep desires for "Eternity". The 'lobotomy' of this poem - which is also the title of the first section of four (the other three being: "The Head", "Welcome" and "On My Raft"), denotes a deprivation of sensitivity, intelligence and vitality ('vitality' in the sense of a power of enduring, or of a capacity to live and develop). In short, the 'lobotomized' state identifies the creative consciousness of the natural subject contrived by the order of civilization. At the same time, the notion of the lobotomy suggests an image of eternal bliss, apparently free of unnecessary anguish or of other precarious emotions that threaten our existential peace. The result produces an ironic (and utopistic) envy of the blissful state of innocence represented in the image of the lowliest creatures vis-à-vis our complex and constructed world:

Lobotomies were also performed
on all the animals, except mankind.
Take that slimy prince for example, the frog.
I do envy his sanity! Why with his love
for the sun and the mud that little bastard
is better off than all the kings of the world.
He is not waiting for a kiss from Ms. Eternity.

The poetry immediately indicates an intricacy of being that is performed through conscious patterns of displacements. The subject seeks "To gain favor with Eternity" through a capacity to pretend, even if only to ourselves, that we can willfully discount our mortal states. Thus this mortal human existence is

consistently confronted by the enduring human urge to produce art and other symbolic constructions of immortality. The irony is connotatively compounded by the modern desire to claim a piece of Nature and call it Nation - with all the implications of this term, and especially in terms of the construction of an 'enduring' State. In the analogous Canadian literary discourse, this also implies the efforts to produce a 'CanLit' which would claim the literary space in the modernist idea of a National literature. The pretence of this power is thus immediately cut down to size as it is viewed from another perspective which brings into confrontation a bird's eye view with the worm's eye view.

The human production of symbols demonstrates the value(s) and enduring meanings (derived from legends) that are attached to objects, and to past human lives which have been dematerialized into "ghosts" and the stuff of "legends". The poem "The Earrings of a Gypsy" (13) confronts the ironic human propensity for self-delusion through the value and power that we attribute to material symbols. In contrast to the suggestive power(s) of these overvalued inanimate objects, the human being remains "a symbol of mediocrity" because she must age and die (within a relatively brief time period). This would indicate that human existence is estimated at less than the symbols that invest it. Moreover, this human tradition of investing ourselves [from the Latin *investire*, to clothe] with the symbolic correlates with the naturistic metaphors of the first poem ("The Transvestite"):

Why the dead are God's underwear
the mountains are his dresses
and the rivers are his shoes
(11)

The critical art work intercepts these symbolic constructions through a critical deconstruction of legend-making as “an inanity” (13), that is, by exposing the shallowness or lack of real substance in our ‘given’ myths. The ironic stance carries over the voice of fury (“that makes you mad as hell” because you think \ that’s only my way of turning a legend into an inanity”.) expressed in the last lines of the poem, and counterbalancing it with a liberating (and synoptic) sense of “Futility” in the next poem, “Let’s Get to the Climax” (14).

Futility and I are multiplying.
Her left nipple is a strawberry (comedy)
and her entire right breast is made of cork
(tragedy)
I adore her because she has taken away all obstacles
(she is not an obstacle in my way by the way).
...

The irony complements a critical propensity to displace powerful and limitational concepts of culture and/or cultures so that their vulnerable conditions might be exploited for the late modern capitalist market. This displacement activity is also ironically precarious since it necessarily involves the voiding of one’s own system of beliefs in order to achieve the other, desired knowledge. The poetic activity follows a Husserlian model of phenomenology which seeks to trace a new ontology and a renewed praxis, by seeking new foundations of knowledge through the pre-categorical lifeworld, in order to then understand the relation that ties us to our being in a certain culture. (This methodology was also enunciated by Merleau-Ponty.) In terms of this analytical dissertation, the condition of displacement is activated as a befitting instrument towards an ontological re-interpretation.¹⁸ At the same time, the irony functions

¹⁸ However, the poetic allusion to an omnipotent “God” in this poem risks falling into the Cartesian vision by which, only through the intervention of God can we access the codes and the system of rules through which we can recognize the significations and knowledge of our world.

paradoxically, precisely in the analogical artistic activity where the lyrical voice in displacement seeks to 'materialize itself' into language and time/space through an 'immortalized' art work and through a conceivably sustained external perspective, through "That window [that] isn't part of a mosaic" -i.e. from outside the box of the canonical discourse. ("Look", 15)

The notion of perspective foregrounds the sense of sight and a frequent irony of looking but not seeing, or even of preferring not to look at all, because "There's something behind it I'd prefer not to see". (15) "It", that is, "that crazy window", "isn't part of a mosaic" and therefore is not obfuscated by aesthetic adornments, so that "its stains" also become visible, while the subject is still able to look through the clear, yet dirty, liminal window. This suggests a depth of perspective which would project a better idea of the whole picture. The beauty of the "stained glass" is ironically juxtaposed with the "stains" in the 'unstained' window which conveys the hard realities that can be seen *in* it and *through* it. The vision is (seemingly) reluctant to go past the physical visibility of the window, but the poem insinuates that 'it is all there', if we dare to "Look" through the aesthetics. Another level of irony is evident in the use of the term "mosaic" as the unequivocal definition of the Canadian demographic landscape. This poem identifies a subjective critical stance from the screening effect of this mosaic. "In fact there are no curtains", nor are there "paper stars" covering the window through which this subject looks. The subject in displacement is in an ideal yet ironic situation, since she has attained a capacity to see, while some things that are more difficult to look at, or things that she cannot "avoid seeing", are presented through a preliminary aesthetic perspective of institutionalized thought (the "churches with stained-glass

windows”). The poem thus relegates the idea of the multiculturalist mosaic to the realm of legends, since it too projects a fixed image of consumed historical ‘realities’. Hence the notion of the mosaic necessarily belongs to the realm of ‘timelessness’, that is, to the mythical sphere.

“The Loser” (17) presents a subjective irony motivated by the recognition of a changing subjectivity throughout the duration of her lifetime. The introspective ironic eye turns to the self and recognizes a capacity to perceive and acknowledge certain signs pertaining to the self in time, yet this semiological process may also be impeded by the inability to apprehend the self-through-time, or the diachronic self. The sense of futility referred to above is recurrently complemented with a sense of failure which is already apparent in this poem: “when failure chased me down a one-way street \ and bit me” and in the next: “(he hated them the way he hated failure all his life)”. (“The Chair 18-19) It must be noted here that the use of parentheses is characteristic of Melfi’s texts, as a device for bracketing and deploying her complex irony. The thematic expression of an overwhelming “failure” will be the object of a more detailed analysis below (2.16); but what specifically concerns us in this sub-section is the irony that, while human beings depend on the visual sense for achieving a sense of self - the subject in this particular poem is a painting collector ironically condemned to blindness -, we are also reminded that we tend to displace the other, real subjectivities into their own (often) visual, defining objects that describe only a part of their subjectivity. This necessarily calls up the divergent notions of alterity which inform human relationships, and increasingly so where cultural differences are involved. But this material indication is overlaid by an analytical ‘eye’ stipulating a necessity to critically engage our vision *through* the

actual referents in order to recognize the irony of perspectives which are continuously at play in encounters. At the same time we cannot discount ironic claims of a clear perspective of the Other while a total perspective of the self is quite impossible. The result is a subjective existence that appears to be supported by 'false' identities.

The last verses of this poem present a specific kind of irony, in the subjunctive "if":

All his life the collector had believed
if someone (even miss fortune herself)
had tried to use him with such disrespect
he'd have been able to make the bitch fall flat on
her face
and see all kinds of unpredictable colors.
(19)

This subjunctive "if" appears to carry within it an idea of success, while at the same time, it re-affirms the "failure" expressed in the previous lines. The hypothetical "if" clause which expresses imagined possibilities (in this case, possibilities in the subject's past, as remote as can be) rests on the irony of their actual impossibility. This sense of irony is then heightened exponentially through Melfi's device of parentheses which contain and simultaneously deploy the intensity of the previously expressed sense of futility ("Let's Get to the Climax", 14). The term "miss fortune" is deliberately split to convey a broader range of probabilities, from positive to negative, within the polarized meanings of "fortune" and misfortune, and simultaneously putting emphasis on its feminized identification. The full irony of the parenthetical content - that is, a further irony than the simple one contained in the word "even" - can only be grasped if the poem is read as well as heard - thereby insisting on a visual

appreciation of modern poetry.

The poem "Hospitality" (24) vividly demonstrates a scornful irony in the lyrical voice, especially in the mutual exclusion expressed by the title and the last verse:

The next time you're at my house
I'll offer you two chairs, two handsome chairs,

You may seat your ridicule
(I hate to see it cuddled up in your arms)
in either of the two
but take care
as one of them will be an electric chair.

The last verse's rejoinder to the title offers a taunting invitation, or a provocative challenge, to an unidentified id-entity. It also re-affirms the voice's authority by re-affirming the subject's possession of a knowledge which the Other is unable to detect due to the deception of appearances.¹⁹

"I watch His Love Climb Up My body" (29) brings up the ironic question:

I watch his love climb up my body.
"Is it possible to watch love climb onto its platform?"

There is no time to squabble.
It's here (like a cat muffled up inside a doctor's bag).

"Is his love giving your body back parts life took
away?
Isn't it merely taking away all your body's
belongings?"

¹⁹ It might be significant to compare this poem with Antonino Mazza's poem "Our House is in a Cosmic Ear", and especially the last verses: ... if the house \ is in the word and we, by chance, should meet, \ my house is your house, take it." [From C. Morgan Giovanni, *Italian Canadian Voices*, pp. 54-55]

There is no time to squabble. It's here.

The repressed irony of the voice, "like a cat muffled..." presents a possible space of critical thought where the subjective position might be critically examined. Yet this is a closed, 'silenced' space -dialectically contained within quotation marks - which repeatedly renders the possibility of challenge (here, in the ironic duality of "love", or in the ironic nature of human relationships themselves, where the line between give and take is difficult to gauge) into a moot point. The space of irony in this case seems to be futilely self-reflexive. Yet the voice, as part of the poetic expression, is heard and the relevance of its questions can be noted to some degree.

The following poem picks up again the question in "Your Love Has Its Advantages", through a notable visual irony:

Your love has its advantages.
It's better than a cane.
It won't sit
 inside an hourglass
 and watch its components
 fall down yonder.
 No,
 it's much too busy
 holding up
 a lightheaded girl
 whose death warrant
is being read by the eye of the world.
The world is nailed to your bedposts.

The poem, as it speaks of a "death warrant", occupies the external outline of an arrowhead shape, with the emphasis at its tip of refusal in the monosyllabic

verse: “No”. At the same time, the initial, visibly ‘advancing’ six verses convey a sense of hope and possibility, while the ‘receding’ motion of the last six verses negates the probability of those hopes and desires. The force of the irony is maintained in the following poem: “Inside a Lobster Trap”. (31)

...
and this is my husband, the fisherman,
 who’d like to sell me off as a mermaid
 but who’d break his neck to enter me.

The “fisherman” husband²⁰ is attributed power over the fate of the feminine voice located inside the trap. The biblical metaphor of the husband as (Christ) “the fisherman” carries the dogmatic echo of the (patriarchal) fisherman as, in an ironic sense, the ‘saviour’ whose doctrines should bring a new dimension to life, while it also takes life away (as a fish out of water...): that is, the possibility of gaining a presence in a new, different kind of life or culture would depend on an irony of absence: the absence of a previous form of presence in culture.

Displacement is necessarily contingent on this rule of presence/absence since it implicates (at least) two time-spaces. An ironic seam articulates the idea of entrapment with the idea of ‘gaining’ a husband and will be reformulated again in “*The O Canada Poems*, specifically with the poem “The Catch” - which will be analyzed later in this same section.

The spousal relationship as evidenced here is not of the fairy tale kind. On the contrary, it also relays an assertive warning, in “My Body’s a Helicopter” (32):

My body’s a helicopter
and I’m its driver.

²⁰ We cannot discount an allusion to the Christian, or rather Catholic, figure of Jesus as fisherman.

As long as you know where you belong, darling,
and exactly to whom you belong, darling,
you're welcome
otherwise you better bring
a parachute rather than a goodnight kiss.

The poem voices a certain jealous attitude which is iterated in the poem "Jealousy" (40). The tone of the poem also echoes the tone of Melfi's prose fiction *A Dialogue With Masks* (1985) with its ironic use of the term "darling" to cement an articulation of loyalty, while simultaneously issuing a threat of repercussions in the case of unloyal activities, and possibly, even of unloyal thoughts.

Melfi's bracketed irony does not always express the mere opposition of one meaning to a literal one in the text; in fact, it often brings in a totally different dimension to subvert the literal, or 'main' discursivity of the poem. A few significant lines of "The Spot" (37) illustrate this in varying degrees:

There's a spot on your face
(round as the lid on a garbage can).
..
The spot is bloodthirsty
and just as pragmatic as the roof over my head.
It flies out of your face and breaks up our marriage
instead of breaking up the vacuum (cleaner?)
the world is using to brush its (sanguine) teeth.

The substantial sense of parody which identifies Melfi's poetry is evident in the first two verses of this poem. In this instance, the subtle yet humourous analogy of "your face" with that of a "garbage can" deflects the horrific acceleration that follows. Melfi often relies on cliché or anticipated terms to achieve her irony,

such as with the (quasi free-associative style) pairing in this poem of “the vacuum” with “(cleaner?)”. The addition of the question mark within the bracket could signify doubt as well as a Socratic irony to make the reader or listener question his reductive “stock” thinking, and virtually penetrate an Other, multiple dimension: the choice remains within the reader’s critical involvement.

Yet the analysis of the last three verses demonstrates a variety of ironic stances which are worth examining. Specifically, the images of breaking up relate to three elements which also multiply the levels of interpretation so that the irony liberates itself from these primary layers of interpretation. For example, a primary interpretation would unite the private and secular realm of “our marriage” with a more abstract, or universal, image of “the world”, as well as with the domestic, objective space suggested by the image of a vacuum cleaner. A second interpretation recounts the author’s artistic leitmotiv in an inability to achieve successful procreation; in this sense, the body of the female voice is surrealistically²¹ united with the “vacuum” to represent the medical procedure in D&C’s for ‘cleaning out’ the body of its refuse (the miscarriage), while simultaneously referring to the consequent sense of vacuousness in the material self. The irony linking the last two lines offers yet another level of ironic interpretation: “...the vacuum (cleaner?) \ the world is using to brush its (sanguine) teeth”. The technique of ironic *enjambement* again serves to generate other levels of interpretation and meaning. In the verses presented here, an impression of oppression against the subjective body is enhanced through the reverberating shock where the horror of the word “(sanguine)” is literally inserted into the text (through the device of bracketing) and into the

²¹ The union of human being and machine is a consistent representation of the Futurists, i.e. Marinetti, and of the later Dada artists, i.e. Francis Picabia whose paintings metaphorically wed human to mechanical reproduction.

imagination which then captures an image of blood 'inserted' between the ogre-ish teeth of a hostile world. Hence the image of a beneficial and quotidian act - that of brushing one's teeth - is subverted into a²² horrific counterpart of itself through the use of parentheses which ironically brings two worlds together while maintaining their disconnected appearance.

At times, Melfi's text presents a seemingly direct irony of opposites. In the poem "A System of Lines: My Husband" (38), the first verses outline the marital relationship through the opposing self-perceptions of the husband and wife.

His self-portrait consists of
horizontal and vertical lines.
I am there as a huge circle
he is carrying on his shoulders.

The "horizontal and vertical lines" that represent the husband form the 'foundation' upon which sits the wife, who is expressed as "a huge circle" being carried (like a burden?)²³ on the grid-like ("horizontal and vertical lines") 'body'. But this apparently simple irony contains another, subversive interpretation which considers the circle as a more flexible form against the rigidity and inflexibility of the grid-like male body. A simple Freudian interpretation could be attributed to these shapes with significances of the ego (the square) and of the libido (the circle). (We should note as well the internalized polarity depicted by the oppositional terms "horizontal" and "vertical".) Besides an evident allusion to

²² I must stress the choice of writing "a" as opposed to 'its' horrific counterpart, as a means of avoiding a language that would reinforce polarized thought. In this context, irony is not viewed as the signification of two opposites, but rather as a space of possibly multiple *alternatives*; a reminder that the space of irony is viewed here as a liminal space.

²³ This image echoes the verses of another poem in this collection: "A Welfare Recipient Talks to a Manikin", where the lyrical voice designates herself as "worthless \ ... \ I'm only a beast and a burden". p. 20

the *dakîni*, the mytho-anthropological female figure personifying the female energy that gives life to the (circular orbit of the) cosmos, the “circle” figure depicts an openness to new knowledges or re-interpretations of the self - the female body opens itself out to new creation in its ability to change and adapt itself into the globular shape of pregnancy - and of her Other, while the male view appears authoritatively reductive and deprived of critical thought, while claiming an absolute knowledge:

Each time I look at it
I discover something else about him,
“I escaped such simplification
a long time ago,” he warns.

The female voice does not vocally reply to this threatening tone, opting instead for a tacitly defensive strategizing.

“Hold your tongue,” I think,
“surprise is another form of violence.”

...and so is irony a form of surprise and its explicit aim a potential violence.

The second part of the collection, assembled within the sub-title “Welcome”, begins with a delineation of the term “Welcome”²⁴ (47):

My house is more important than my hair.
Here take my hair.

...
When all my friends have plotted to execute me
(as a snowman is executed) outside their houses
my own house will remember me.

²⁴ Again, Antonino Mazza’s poem “Our House is in a Cosmic Ear” could be compared to Melfi’s, for the concept of alterity which is meant in their expression of hospitality.

My house, my country, will come and take me away.

...

The first two verses demonstrate that the invitation is not directed outwards, that is, to the Other who stands outside the metaphorical house. Instead the welcome is extended inwards, toward a possible Other entity who will come from inside the home elements (the body) and thereby serve to recuperate the sense of self which has been disoriented by displacement. The remembrance and the recuperation of the me-in-culture, we might add, will take place within reconfigured notions of “My house” and “my country”. Procreation, it seems, would bring the sheltering and comforting effects that are needed in the displaced subjectivity.²⁵ - and yet we cannot disregard the irony of failure in the shape of betrayal by “friends”. The distressful impression of being surrounded by a perfidious world can only be counterbalanced, it seems by the representative procreative expression of the self. The desire for a successful, completed procreation as it is expressed in Melfi’s texts can also be used to speak of another project of (pro)creation. The notion of motherhood can be associated with the author’s creative activity and desire for recognition, through her work, in the public sphere. This analogic stream can be verified throughout Melfi’s texts and particularly in her 1991 novel, *Infertility Rites*.

The ‘baby discourse’ brings in another irony which is at first self-reflexive: in “Appetite for Life” (49-51) “The baby is a new untameable animal, the new me” (50). There is a recognizedly persistent irony in that of impending motherhood, that wants to believe that the “new me” will finally accomplish what the parent was unable to do. (We also note a lingering sense of failure in this

²⁵ It might be interesting, from a psychoanalytical point of view, to inquire into the correlations between displacement and desires of reproduction. But any idea of such a relation is only conjecture which does not pertain to the analysis of this dissertation.

particular conceptualization of a possible reproduction of the self.) To this end, the aspiring mother will eagerly subvert her own self of sense in order to produce the so-called new self - even though she knows that the future can offer no "guarantee". (51)

It's a riddle.
I'm so neat otherwise.

I want a baby to come and clutter up my body.
It's beyond me.

...
I want a newborn to come and clutter up my life.
Why?
(49)

Ironically, it is a letting go of the self which will reinforce the sense of self.²⁶ The self-reflexiveness of the lyrical voice does not so much seek to clarify this "mystery". Rather it seems to revel in the idea of the impending "chaos inside my body, that superb \ enigma". (51) Even references to violence and terror are subdued by the subject's euphoric expressions of solicitude.

I'm worse off than a rape victim.
I will allow a tiny stranger to turn my own flesh and
blood inside out.
(50)

The use of the term "rape victim" is consistent with the reference to the newcomer as a 'violence' by a "stranger", which implies a practice of discipline of the Other by Power - also in terms of the rape of a culture. Yet the victimization is immediately deflated into the image of the willing and eager victim. In fact,

²⁶ The concept of 'letting go', incidentally, is basic to the Buddhist philosophy, yet altogether contrary to the idea of a resulting reinforcement of the sense of self. At the same time, the state of motherhood itself invokes a praxis of selflessness.

giving life brings life; it creates a reciprocal relationship between mother and child and it is in this relationship of reciprocity that the self finds a sense of continuation. So that, what first appears as a mirroring effect (mirrors are closed on one side), the reciprocity is actually a window that points to something outside of itself, that is, towards an unknowable future (as continuation, and contrary to the fundamental notion of myths). It therefore becomes evident -and relevant in the context of alterity - that the sense of continuation is achieved through an expansive process of reciprocity (versus a staticized self-reflection) which is also applicable to cultural reciprocity. Melfi's irony is more subdued in the rest of the poems in this section ("Welcome"), as if the possibility of realization of one's desires were enough to engage the self into a non- or less-threatening paradoxical state.

The irony picks up again in the last section of the collection, under the title "On My Raft" (representative of survival strategies). The title of the poem "At the End of the Road" (68) points to the ironic content of the expression, as manifested in the title of the poem which immediately follows: "An Exile" (69-75). However, the apparently conclusive declaration of these two titles leads to another, more complex question:

Here are the masks
or are they the faces?
The faeces of my own God? The God of the West?
Here, there and around my car, my nimbus, my prize,
here are the mountains named Fear.
(69)

The irony expressed in this section is proportionate with the subjective voice's anxiety at leaving a comforting private sphere. The public sphere brings on the

anxiety of uncertainty in the encounter with the Other, where the difficulty of 'recognizing' Other subjectivities 'for who they really are', results in a mis-relational situation vis-à-vis the 'outside' of the subjective space. Faces and masks cannot be distinguished: the question of which one is real, and which one is construction, indicates the problematics in the complexity of images. Both faces and masks represent images, albeit in varying degrees, yet the tone remains strongly antagonistic even in its expressions of "Fear". The ludic irony of the images is compounded in the (quasi) homonymic *rapprochement* of the words "faces" and "faeces", especially as the second term is used to refer to the subject's "own God". This particular poem plays on the reader's perceptions by apparently referring to the subject's status as "an exile..."(with a license to wait...)" towards the "God of the West", while the poem takes an ironic turn;

I'm an Easterner. God of the East, help me.
Which is the way home? I want my city back.
I want my hustle and bustle. I want my city lights.
I want my Montréal. Mother, I'm afraid of the God of
the West.
(70)

The outside world, that is, the world outside the subjective zone of familiarity, becomes the fearful space which serves to delineate subjectivity. In other words, and as precarious as this might sound, the subjectivity must travel to its outermost boundaries, in order to renegotiate its space of belonging. The poem juxtaposes the ideas of East and West, of the city-dweller (CULTURE) and the fearful mountains (NATURE), and the concepts of French and English (languages and cultures) as indexical elements for an ironic division of space. The poem points to the failure of binary systems since, as if 'automatically', things and beings must fall into one of two categories. A problem of restricted

semiotics complicates the attempt at orientation.

Look they're blinking. They're making eyes at me.
What are they saying? I'm only a city dweller.

By the same token, a semiological irony is detected in the following lines, where the subject voices her fear and anxiety in the face of this unknown space which is external to her own. In addition, the cliché phrase "Follow the yellow brick road" indicates the fantasy for luring displaced subjectivities within a Nationalist dominant discourse (that "swings to the right"):

Am I lost?
Follow the yellow brick road?
It swings to the right?
It's dark.
Red, green, yellow rules, useless, *ma mère*.
Flags ludicrous. All laws useless.
I'm alone, an exile, an expatriot, a citizen of fear.
...
Driving alone on a mountain dirt road in the West.
...
Watch out for the spooks, kid.
You're in the middle of nowhere.
(71)

The use of the French language for speaking about, or rather for *naming* the mother, generates an ironic counterpart to the elements facing the subject. The condition of cultural displacement and/or of expatriation is further reassumed, even within a same, nationalized territory. The analysis also picks up an ironic spelling of the word "expatriot" - as opposed to the usual spelling of 'expatriate'. In this context, the connotational possibilities of the authorial articulation implies a lack of nationalistic attitude - as that of being an 'ex-patriot', or one who is not

patriotic²⁷ - rather than the condition of an 'expatriate' -as simply one who is living in a foreign land. Moreover, the designation of this Other space as a "nowhere" resonates with the risk (and a nefarious desire) of falling into the (cultural?) void:

Without the sanctimonious kiss of the God of the East,
without even a mask of my ex-country to embrace

...

I'm ready to fall over a mountain cliff.

A nocturnal exercise!

Hi, bridegroom! Take me quick, my aboriginal lover.

...

No! No, I'm not ready...

(73)

An extra analogy to geophysical displacement from Italy (as the East) to Canada (as the West) is also relevant.

The loneliness and anxiety of culture escalates toward the finishing lines of this lengthy poem, where the voice stakes her claim on "Québec, *mon pays*" (74), to then loudly ironicize the spectacular - and apotheosized - notion of nationalist culture:

GODS AND COUNTRIES ON SALE
ON FIFTH FLOOR.
JAPANESE MAKE. AMERICAN MAKE.
RUSSIAN MAKE,
WATCH YOUR STEPS, LADIES AND
GENTLEMEN.
CANADIAN MAKE OUT OF STOCK.

²⁷ Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth Edition) defines a patriot as one who loves his or her country and supports its authority and interests. In contrast to this, and according to the same authority, the term expatriate ("expatriot" is not a recognized spelling) denotes someone who has withdrawn (oneself) from residence in or allegiance to one's native country. This analysis cannot ascertain a deliberate intention on the part of the author in her choice of the term "expatriot". However, it must be kept in mind that the application of the analysis is premised from the text itself.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON, CHEZ NOUS.

The complex irony in “Though Dreaming Is My Business” (79-82) also relies on a semiotic effect, particularly in the formal composition of this poem. The zig-zagging (left) margin of the poem mimics the Poe-like motion of a descending pendulum, and verbalized “as if \ I were on a swing” (80) and a sense of lunacy is portrayed by the implied rhythmic movement of a “lunatic” speech while allowing a sound defiance to come through.

I'll sit on no moon,
ladies and gentlemen,
and wave my handkerchief
in distress.
I'll sit on no plastic moon,
translucent or transparent,
on no cardboard moon,
opaque or minute,
or moon made out of dough.
I'll sit on no moon,
ladies and gentlemen,
suspended from a ceiling
in some psychiatric ward
and have the likes of you
gape at me.
You'd like to see me,
ladies and gentlemen,
sit naked on a moon
or on a huge lightbulb,
an iridescent lightbulb,
in The Queen Elisabeth Hospital's
psychiatric ward.
... (79)

The repetition of the verse “You'd like to see me” - always expressed in reference with the moon (aka *luna*, lunacy) is contained within its conditional form and its framed setting:

You'd like to see me
in that unlucky moonscape

...

You'd like to see me
pushed as if
I were on a swing,

...

You'd like to see
the queen's lunatics
push me
right out the window

...

You'd like to see
this moonfaced lady
look up at the moon
and cry,
"Hail Luna!"
You'd like to see me
take my first lunar step
towards that goddess.
You'd like to see
nighthawks,
nightingales
and loonsk
fly at me.
(80-81)

The framing arrangement of the poem serves to counterbalance the conditional discourse with forceful indicative rejoinders of the subjective voice:

I'll sit on no moon
I'm not moonstruck,
ladies and gentlemen.
I'm not hit with moon blindness.

...

You'll never catch me playing
hopscotch in a cemetery
under a full moon.
You'll never catch me tossing
a lunatic bone on any grave.
I'm lucid.

Give up.
...
or blow up the moon,
dear loonies.
What do I care?
I don't need it.
I can read,
write
and dream
better than you all.
(81-82)

These last lines dispense a certain vindication of the creative imagination in the face of such straight-jacketing tactics as the canons of the dominant Other. The irony of this poem thus claims a certain freedom in its refusal to consciously submit to a conditional discourse of power. The ironic pitch increases in the following poem "In the Crowd's Image" (83-86), written in a prose form which projects the voice at an accelerated pace through a "horror show" in which the lyrical voice is itself "the star". The nightmarish setting of this "horror show" reflects the deceiving quality of mirrors, with their capacity to severely distort and even cause the erasure of the subject:

There are mirrors in the room. In some of them I'm a dwarf, in some I'm a giant, in some I've got two pairs of heads. I see every kind of being in those mirrors except what I remember myself to be like. When was the last time I saw reality face to face? I'm too old to remember. (83)

The deceptive function of this 'hall of mirrors' is increased by an inability to see outside ("There are no windows." 83) this distorted reflection of the (absent) self. A variant metaphor suggesting the 'windows of the soul' presents the reflexivity as a Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque'. A contemporary 'carnie' atmosphere commands the poem's imagery, even with the image of "Delia, our ticket lady. ... She'll sit down in her ticket box like a buddha. It adds to the atmosphere her

sitting down like that.” (84) Yet, it is an ironic carnivalesque which points back to a dominating power, it exists only as a false appropriation by a dominant discourse to be re-deployed against the subject. In this vein, the voice assumes a ‘carnie’ pitch as a means of unleashing its particular cynicism:

They’re waiting. They’re anxious to get their money’s worth. Just like in Nero’s times. Remember the martyrs? -- by I’m a star, I’m paid well.

It’s a modern crowd. They want to participate. Let the crowd come in, Delia. Let the show begin. ... let them each have a turn to play God. My body is clay. My spirit is clay.

Let them turn me against myself. Let them turn me into what they think I should be. In the spit image of their fathers? Their mothers? Their idols? Give them a chance to turn me into an image of themselves. Give them a chance to play God.

I’m ready. Don’t be shy. Recreate me. Reconstruct me. Change me. Hurry. Use all the instruments at your disposal. Use all the horror you need. ... (85-6)

The “show” of “horror and blood” is presented as a spectacle of the body: that body over which the author seeks control and possession, while at the same time, it finds itself in the ironic position of having to ‘subject’ itself to the knowledge (and deceptive qualities) of Others. Yet the irony transcends the literal, bodily discourse to reach another dimension, which is that of the artistic, cultural consciousness.

The last poem in this collection, titled “The Birdhouse” (87) depicts a breaking away from deviating tactics and a deliberate choice of cultural memories toward a final recuperation of the ‘self in culture’ which only seems possible if it remains outside the dominant discourse.

Rather delight in the old holes in my body
than have the world create a new one, a grave one, one
by which I will recall the whole of my life to have been

a ludicrous chase
(with a saffron apron around my waist
and a songbird on my head)
a lugubrious chase
after that very world which was designed to be no
better than a nail
from the very start.

A Disneyesque image of Snow White is depicted in the bracketed irony of this segment, so that the fairy tale image is countered by deceptive realities outside the parentheses, where it is ultimately vanquished by a recall to the subject's original culture, expressed simply in the evocation of the tricolour Italian flag and its metonymic displacement onto the body:

Then use the world to nail my skull to a tree.
Paint it red, white and green.

Now I will use the blessed holes in my eyes to study
my property.

The subjective voyage through the mirrors of the Other ultimately takes an ironic turn towards a reflection of the cultural self.

This series of poems (published in the collection titled *Stages* pp. 115-129) could also be viewed as an 'ironic guide to success', since the idea of success in the displaced situation must often be re-evaluated and re-negotiated along the way. In this sense, *The O Canada Poems* cannot be viewed as a celebratory odyssey of the displaced subjectivity, but rather, as a satirical one due to its praxis of ironical exposure. The general satirical tone is inceptively evident through the expositional poem, which deliberately echoes the collection title, yet with the addition of a significant asterisk.

The O Canada Poems*

*Recount the adventures of Maria F --,
an illegal alien who begins her journey
in life with nothing at all
(an illegitimate kid abandoned in
the dirty streets of Rome itself), but
who does, in the final analysis,
end with almost everything an
ex-stripper in a Toronto joint
could have wished for (in random order):
 a) Canadian citizenship,
 b) matrimony to an aging oil baron and
 c) an unexpected career in the literary arts
in the language of the greatest word
mafioso of all times, Shakespeare himself
(117)

The use of the asterisk, which usually indicates a paratextual clarification or additional (and usually not immediately relevant) information, is re-configured so that the paratextuality - in its marginalized signification - is recuperated in and as the poetic text itself. In fact, the recovery of the text through the asterisk marker posits a poetic activity which vindicates a history through its narration - the act of 'recounting' -, while simultaneously denoting the repetition of a narrative - that of counting again a (same or similar) story, and not necessarily with the same protagonistic identifying image. This latter connotative aspect of the activity of re-counting is indicated in the partial naming of the poetic subject as "Maria F-". Blanks and initials instead of proper names are a recognized artificial means in nineteenth-century Realism for building up an illusion of reality - allegedly, to protect the privacy of the individual. This brings up the paradoxical consideration of how stories are impressed over real life (or lives). Besides the fact that Melfi's first name is Mary, the name "Maria" in this poem assumes a quasi generic quality for the fact that every Catholic female child

bears this as one of her essential names. In the specific sense of these poems however, the name could refer to an Italian 'everyone and no one' - a sort of female Ulysses. (In addition to this, the ironic meaning of the "F-", as that of the 'F word', is not lost on the reader who is already acquainted with Melfi's poetry.)

The picaresque exposition of this initial poem would suggest the successful ascension of the protagonist through society, yet this impression is counteracted by the ironic tone in the following verses and throughout the rest of the poetic text - by showing at what cost this idea of success is attained. The typically poor and dejected young *picara* is initially positioned outside any idea of belonging - and of belongings, since we are also speaking of property and poverty. The subjective absence - through the negative status of poverty - is reiterated in the prefix "ill-", in "illegitimate kid" and "illegal alien", to convey a pathologically outlawed status of the protagonist in the face of both societies through which she travels. The elevation from "the dirty streets of Rome" to the exoticizing stage of a strip joint in Toronto - where exoticism becomes the spectacle of 'baring out' - does not imply an parallel elevation of social status (even though Toronto generally represents the Canadian Wall Street); instead it merely effectuates a lateral transfer of cultural 'inferiority'²⁸ into a foreign cultural context. Yet, and in accordance with the picaresque genre,²⁹ the protagonist will travel through events that will bring a presumably desired (the ironic tone of "almost everything an \ ex-stripper... \ could have wished for" is unmistakable), reversal of fortune, listed in the poem as "a)", "b)" and "c)" but "(in random order)". Yet each acquired status carries its own ironic content: "a) Canadian

²⁸ An inferiority complex which derives from Italian existence and/or beginnings within the cultural division of Italy based on (geographic) economic markers.

²⁹ Although the picaresque originated as a novelistic genre in sixteenth-century spanish literature, a comparison could probably be made with Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) or even Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).

citizenship” deploys a nationalist, and hence a juridical, content in the idea of belonging. The next acquired status is socio-cultural, since “b) matrimony to an aging oil baron” denotes the acquisition of wealth that presumably accompanies successful assimilation. The third status indicates the attainment of a professional identity: “an unexpected career in the literary arts” denotes, besides the obvious irony of the word “unexpected” - a voice in the public sphere, yet the self-consciousness which accompanies this potentially critical voice is ‘grounded’ in the English language, that is, in the language of the Other and hence the pervasive resentment of ‘being’ through a linguistically altered sense of self, which cannot be without its significant consequences.

The last two lines present the poetic irony again through the device of ironic *enjambement*,³⁰ where the verse “in the language of the greatest word”, which at first points to an appreciation, but then is sharply overturned by the words of the next verse: “*mafioso* of all times, Shakespeare himself”. The sudden articulation of the word “*mafioso*” instills a certain apprehension, especially because of a seemingly displaced use of the term. A subtle visual irony is also detected in the poetic exposition of the subject’s new status, through the use of indentation (and possibly alluding to the historical indenture status of Italian ‘immigrants’) - which presents the new and admissible status as being ‘set in from the margin’ of the main poetic discourse. An additional irony is distinguishable in the presentation of the “aging oil baron”, which depicts the dominating Anglo-Saxon culture with the ironic anticipation of ‘his’ impending death. The ending, or a certain completion of the journey, which is required in the picaresque narrative is also rendered, “in the final analysis” even though the importance and/or meaning of each item is to be appreciated “(in random

³⁰ As already illustrated above in the analysis of *A Queen is Holding a Mummified Cat* .

order)". This compositional formula - that is, where the final subjective condition is already exposed at the beginning of the text - is also endorsed in *A Bride in Three Acts* (1983), which will be analyzed later in this dissertation. Hence the suggestion of a happy ending carries with it its own ironic content which can be traced throughout the analysis of the texts.

The first lines of the next poem "Off the Boat" (118) already announce a consistently ironic disposition or juxtaposition of the realities of poverty vis-à-vis the elusive world of the rich:

The (near starving) alien watches the very rich
walk in and out of department stores, loaded with goods.
The Canadians are looking better than good (to her).
They're strong and free - and she isn't.

The tramp watches the ladies and their shopping bags
like someone about to be executed watches the sky
or like an executioner watches
a child make the sign of the cross.

Maria watches like the sun watches,
watching nothing: simply exploding. But but
this damsel in distress doesn't wave her handkerchief.
That trick is reserved for the natives.

Besides, the ex-Roman knows full well
the just-bought dresses may be worth
a month's groceries (at least)
but they also (often) end up at the Salvation Army
ten years down the road, worthless -

and this seasoned urbanite is looking for
financial investments with better returns. Only
first she has to find a way of becoming officially
present in the land of two founding nations: Indian & Eskimo(?).

The ironic juxtapositions are repeatedly presented in a relativized form since

the marginalized viewpoint necessarily orbits around a specific centre of gravity. This practical relativization is apparent through the protagonist's bracketed expression of a viewpoint which is Other "(to her)", and which signifies the protagonist's apperceived exclusion in relation to the higher economic status of "Canadians". This economic gap, it seems, determines the "Canadian" strength and freedom against the protagonist's lack of a secure grounding. "They're strong and free - and she isn't." (Again, there is an allusion to the history of Italian immigration to Canada.) The poetic irony can be extended to the capitalistic state and its ideal of freedom which is declared by the poetic voice as a serious misconception.

But while the poetic usage of the term "Canadian" appears, at this point in the poem, to represent a secure sense of belonging for 'non-immigrant' Canadians ~ that is, for those who are not right "off the boat", or in other words, who are not first generation immigrants ~ the term is also charged with a double-edged purpose, which begins its deployment in the use of the term "natives", first as a term that denotes a kind of inclusion in contrast to the excluded, immigrant "damsel in distress", and secondly, as an ambiguously revealing term (insofar as it demonstrates a possessive 'Canadian' presence on the land), since it is only used in the Canadian language to refer to the 'indigenous' North American peoples. So that, the Canadian imaginary is already shaken by the incongruity between an expected image in the Canadian consciousness and the unsettling effects of the critical poetic language. While the protagonist speaks of "exploding", it is language itself that is exploded, causing the reader's assumptions to implode entirely by the last line of the poem, where the irony takes the form of a negation of the putative "founding"

cultures who hold power in the Canadian political sphere, namely, the English and the French (although the French, to a lesser degree) against the affirmation of a more 'authentic ownership' (so to speak, since the concepts of land property and Nationalism do not formulate these cultures) by those groups, "Indian & Eskimo (?)" - the bracketed question mark problematizes the usage of colonially attributed, as well as culturally and politically reductive, terms used to categorize indigenous groups - who have been historically negated power. By these means, the French and English cultures become re-ethnicized through their re-insertion into the space of immigrants (even if some of these were actually colonizers). Ethnicity is thus shown as a relative variable.³¹

Other ironic juxtapositions are evidenced in the second verse - yet again with an intertextual imagery, this time relating to "The Lady and the Tramp" -, where the figure of the "tramp" contrapuntally shares the poetic space with that of "the ladies", although the "tramp" is distanced again by his sense of hopefulness, paradoxically mixed with a resigned hopelessness in the following verses.³² The comparison is then amplified by the figure of the "executioner" against that of the innocent "child". Yet the poetic irony picks up another, or second, dimension in the view of the "rich" Canadians through the perspective of the poor. For example, "just-bought dresses" by the "rich", which "may be worth \ a month's groceries (at least)" to the protagonist, shows the activity of consumption from the perspective of poverty which always contains its own denotations. In this poetic context, a severe depreciation of the object must occur before it is made available to the poor 'immigrant', who must make do with, and yet must buy and pay for, the "worthless" discards of the established

³¹ This is also illustrated in Marco Micone's "*Les gens du silence*".

³² This means that the *rapprochement* of the two entities through the spaghetti-eating scene is not possible in Melfi's version.

Canadians. The irony is extended to a consideration of idiosyncratic consumption - the "very rich...loaded with goods" -, which further posits the relative irony of access to material goods.

A third level of irony in this poem is presented in the fairy-tale image of the protagonist as a "damsel in distress" (in juxtaposition with the "natives"). The fairy tale image is a relevant factor in the formation of the Western female imaginary, and it is a consistent point of reference in Melfi's poetry, as will be evidenced throughout this analysis. "But but \ this damsel in distress doesn't wave her handkerchief" so that this fairy tale shakes up the Proppian formula towards a (typically Westernized or rather, Hollywoodized') happy ending. In fact, the reversal of the fairy tale's typical image (of the damsel in distress waving her handkerchief), with the repeated "But but" again serves to implode the reader's expectations and assumptions. The question of a possible heroic 'return' to a desired presence, "first she has to find a way of becoming officially \ present...", ironically manifests the protagonist's absence from the socio-cultural sphere; this irony through omission thus re-embodies the absence of the protagonist.

The desired subjective presence first takes place through the visual, since the prerogative of the image cannot be underestimated in the Western imaginary. To this end, the following poem "The Stripper" (119) discharges the irony of the burlesque.

Maria and the Pope once stared at each other.
She almost fell in love (with the sacred city).

But she also had to eat.

She became a stripper in a Toronto joint.

But Maria knew how the Pope
felt about those in 'her' profession.

She would often strip off her smile.
Poor girl.

Unhappiness has no sex appeal.
She almost lost her job.

The performance of the 'exotic dancer' contains the irony that Maria must go against her religious and moral formation values, which indicates that the idea of success demands the forgetting of some of our formative values, or at least, of turning a 'blind eye' to the meanings extracted from her past subjective, cultural experience, at least until she finds a relatively secure footing in the adoptive culture.³³ The performative activity toward a sense of belonging thus contrives the spectacularizational displacement of subjectivity into a capitalistic³⁴ exchange activity, where the image of the exoticized body is consumed by a certain mass basic instinct, in a sort of anthropological means of exchange for basic means of survival. The ironic contrast of two realities is maintained and manifested here by the performer's forced show of happiness, through the thematic image of her performative "smile". Appearances are most important to the judging Other and hence they necessitate a certain 'dance of deception' for survival while the struggle for a subjective presence remains under wraps, so to

³³ There is also the possibility that Melfi is making trivial banalization of Alexander Pope (*The Rape of the Lock*) as a means of mocking epics and making particular reference to her own educational formation in English literature. This notion could be taken as a follow-up to her derisive references to Shakespeare (read: et al.) .

³⁴ A reminder that Toronto represents the geographical as well the financial centre of Canada. This has been elaborated in a paper which I presented at the Bologna conference in 1999. See in "Rhetorics of Irony and Politics of Liberation: The Poetry of Mary Melfi" .

speak.³⁵

As "The Striptease" (120) is then played out, the poetic language maintains a strategy of irony ranging from subtle self-references to biting satire:

Maria was asked to wear nothing but wings.
But wouldn't you know it -

an all-round Canadian drunk
came on stage during one of her acts and broke them.

Angels did not come and help her out.
They were having their own problems with upward mobility.

But the audience did get its money's worth.
Maria had a good pair of tits,

maple leaves tattooed on both of them.

The sense of helplessness expressed in the third verse - due to the narcissistic behaviour of the "angels" - harks back to the "damsel in distress" who "doesn't wave her handkerchief" because "[t]hat trick is reserved for the natives". These combined verses articulate a subjective alienation which finds its outlet in its strategies of irony. In this particular poem, the protagonist's irony assumes the form of a specular provocation, where the body is modified to 'appropriately' reflect the solicited attitude, while at the same time, the language in the poetic performance reveals a strong subjective indignation. In this way, image and word are consistently at odds with each other, and the ironic twists -or better yet, the DNA structure of her poetics - demonstrate that, what the mind has

³⁵ In an article titled "We like to Watch", in the November 2, 2002 issue of *MacLean's* magazine (pp.28-30), Brian D. Johnson speaks of "Canada's observational culture", which also posits Toronto particularly as the concentration of the Canadian cultural vision. The comments in this article conspicuously, and ironically, ignore the multicultural aspects of the population in its elaboration of a national "cultural vision".

assumed can be turned over. In other words, our assumed meanings are constantly disrupted and reconfigured through this language of irony, forcing a return to our initial presumptions, or the 'taken for granted', to rework the meaning (or meanings) of 'being' Canadian in general, and particularly as this pertains to the culturally displaced, who must demonstrate their desire to belong by initiating techniques of assimilation - within prescribed frameworks of representation.

The derisive irony of "The Forecast" (121) expresses a relatively clear apprehension:

While Maria gracefully falls
into the arms of another man (a John?)

and unburdens herself
of all that is insanely colorless and cheap

Canada falls into another economic low.

Once again the image is undermined by the irony of the word, wherein the image of the woman's salvation through the male figure is undermined by a poetic language suggesting this process (of assimilation) as a 'fall from grace'. Yet the reference to the male figure as "a John" - an obvious allusion to a prostitute's client or even, to a toilet - serves to discredit the discourse of male superiority, while at the same time, the protagonist speaks of unburdening herself of her undesirable elements through him; thus in this instance, it is the poetic image that undermines the language. The subjective "unburdening", or cultural voiding, parallels and anticipates the fall of Canada "into another economic low", suggesting this "fall" as a recurring, and even habitual, activity,

but more importantly, the resulting loss is experienced on a broader scale where notions of cultural identity are assimilated into a national economic reality.

The cultural tug of identity is played out in the space of memory, as demonstrated in the poem "The Ex" (122). In the first verse, the syntax of the national anthem (*O Canada*) is used to speak of an other, nostalgized allegiance and identity, in that of "(O Roma)", manifesting a tactic of assimilation, or dissimulation, by ironic invocation as a spell, or a chant of the loss:

Maria sometimes misses her ex-lover
stationed in another part of the world
like she sometimes misses parts of her childhood (O Roma).

Enjoys his memory like a sweater on a chilly day
or the best Broadway show of the year.

But let's be frank: the Italian stud is really washed
out of her life (the way coffee stains are washed
out of one's clothes by professionals).

The idea of intimacy with the man repels her
like the idea of walking on solid waste.

She blames this on the distance between them
the way one would blame a beast

for doing what comes most natural to it.

Memories of childhood are further displacement by their referential designation of an existential space which does not correspond to the subject's actual, reconfigured state. This also signifies that in such subjective conditions of displacement, a Proustian formula of involuntary recall is checked by the

absence of corresponding referents in actuality; in this case the framing activity of memory is not allowed its regular re-negotiation activity and hence memories remain as a series of frozen images or elusive sensations. In fact, memory becomes a spectacular, rather than a specular, space which ominously resonates (like “the best Broadway show of the year”) with a process of spectacularization of realities. The reference to the “Broadway show” would also suggest an accompanying disposition of ‘suspension of disbelief’ in the nostalgic approach, yet the suspension of disbelief does not admit irony; it can only offer a temporary forgetfulness of the present.

The ironic tension between a sense of need and the sensation of repulsion begins its articulation in the third stanza, where the declaration that “the Italian stud is really washed \ out of her life” undeniably resonates with the American sound/image of Jane Russell singing: ‘Im going to wash that man right out of my hair” (which conjures up the mythological Medusa). The tensional activity works to re-negotiate the subjective orbit of reference, yet this re-negotiation is not achieved without a certain cynicism audible in the bracketed speech: “(the way coffee stains are washed \ out of one’s clothes by professionals).” This whole third verse contains a deep cynicism in the sub-textual discourse which actually negates the possibility of the articulation. “The idea of intimacy” with ‘being’ occluded by the effects of “distance” points to a rhetoric of displacement which suggests that the idea of distance generates its own framework for the containment of forms of disruptions against subjectivity.

The extensive irony of “The Proposition” (123) begins with the term’s implication of a dialogue which, as this poem shows, does not attain any form of

materialization beyond the expression of itself.

Maria takes a Greyhound bus to Ottawa.
She would do anything to change her status
(and become officially Canadian).

The PM is not in (for aliens).
To top it all she falls down
the steps of Parliament, sightseeing.

A guy from Calgary takes a picture (of her).

She would have made the PM a proposition
(a real man in his right mind
could not have refused).

But only in Canada, a just bureaucracy
(if not a just society)
could such a (Wop?) trick fail to work. Pity.

The cultural tension of the previous poem manifests its consequences in this poem which is laden with the irony of failed communication and representation, and its disastrous effects on the subjective image. The pressure on the displaced subject to belong to the new cultural society is expressed with a typically bracketed irony, in having to “(...become officially Canadian)”, but attempts to open a dialogue at the (federal) national level fall on deaf ears. Access to any real dialogue with the policy-makers appears non-existent and moreover, the attempt is interdicted so that the failure of dialogue is forcibly sublimated by prescriptive images. The failure of representation is reflected through the use of parentheses which represent a relative boundary between presence and absence: “The PM is not in (for aliens).” In other words, the parentheses frame the ironic content in the meaning of presence: the PM *is* in, but he’s *not* in “(for aliens)”, so that *representation* is shown to be a relative thing, depending on which side one is looking from. But more specifically,

representations lies within the parentheses, and within irony itself.

Consequently, those voices which could bring in an Other, different viewpoint are silenced by the tactical absence of an interlocutor and the status quo is preserved while the failure brings on a personally disastrous effect on the subject whose 'fall' (a repetitive image from "The Forecast", above) is captured in the frozen aesthetical moment of the 'photographic' image.

Images of cultural stereotypes come to a face-off in the rest of the poem, first through an ironic intertextuality with the movie *The Godfather*. "She would have made the PM a proposition \ (a real man in his right mind \ could not have refused)", where the connotational meanings and implications of this stereotypical image are immediately disabled through a conditional syntax which reveals their impossible realization. The ironic intertextuality is then extended to the cliché phrase from the advertising sphere in a parodic yet implanted reference to the country's British identity. The words "But only in Canada... Pity.", are a well-known stock phrase (from the Red Rose Tea commercials on television) in the public Anglo Canadian imaginary, and are meant to appeal to a so-called majority³⁶ (British, or of British descent) identity - versus the "(Wop?)" , 'without passport/papers', meaning without juridical right of presence - and connotating a negative presence in the new context. Yet the words "But only in Canada" and "Pity" literally frame other lives, thus another discourse, which contains the idealized, "just society" within the utopist irony of the bracketing device, while the external reality presents itself as a disconnected state with the impossibility

³⁶ The use of the term 'majority' is understood in this analysis in the sense of the hegemonic majority, that is, which legitimizes itself through hegemonic control and not in the sense of demographic number. However, an analysis of the strategies behind this commercial, and its meanings for the 'other' cultural communities of Canada, might bring out some significant information for cultural studies. In addition, the reader should refer to Anselmi and Gouliamos' *Evasive Margins* for their discussion on "dominant minorities".

of a dialectical intercourse. The final expression, “Pity.” is thereby charged with a plural meaning: an initial resonance would appear to sum up this failure with a dismissive finality, yet the framed content re-invests the final word with a sardonic tone to deflate the superior tone of the voice in the commercial (of which significant traces would have remained in the Canadian public imaginary). The intertextual activity of the term “Pity” with the religious reference of *pietas*, points to its subtraction through the parodized enunciation, and from the multiculturalist language that stereotypes ‘ethnocultural’ groups.

The resulting signification of this asymmetrical relationship is captured in the title and the first line of the next poem, *The Catch* (124):

Maria finally gets it:
a good catch (and/or love).

The irony in the first verse echoes the sense of entrapment which was elicited in “Inside a Lobster Trap” as seen above (*QHMC*, 31). But the irony in this poem is deployed by a single word, the “catch”, which is deployed in several senses:³⁷ first, as something caught, i.e. a large *catch* of fish; secondly, as something that checks or holds immovable, i.e. a safety *catch*; as one worth catching, especially, as a spouse; and as a concealed difficulty or complication, i.e. there must be a *catch*. The last lines of the poem recapitulate the ironic contents of the title in relation to the body of the poem and to the idea of a *Catch-22*³⁸ :

Love: like manna.
It comes to one’s rescue

³⁷ These definitions are taken directly from the *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition.

³⁸ The popularized term of *Catch-22* derives from Joseph Heller’s novel of the same name, which depicts the impossibility of reaching one’s goal by being caught in a loop of endlessly self-reflecting impediments.

when one least expects it.

Love: like a set of China plates,
important to take it for granted at times.

Love: like manure.
Nothing is wasted, let alone arguments.

Love and marriage for Maria
(an illegal alien, alias Donna Prima)
is a far cry from being exploited and/or deported.

In other words, “[I]ove and marriage” (the metaphorical assimilation through the spousal relationship) are the ironic bait being proffered to the “illegal alien” as the means to avoiding alternative, and threatening potentialities of “being exploited and/or deported”. The irony in this poem merely anticipates the candid and transparent sarcasm of the poem “Canada Day” (125) which immediately follows:

Maria hands her past to the judge.
She hopes he can correct it for her.

But mistakes cannot so easily be erased
(even from one’s own memory)

so what does the lady expect from the man -
instant miracles (whipped eh?)?

The *persona non grata* assures the citizenship judge
she really has a (real) husband (made rich in Canada).

Reluctantly, the big prick (unmistakably Canadian
establishment) revises his opinion of the good and beautiful Maria.

He dismisses her fucked-up past
(and sexual indiscretions with Canadian citizens)

and correctly re-classifies her assets:
(her future) non-Italian.

Maria/Mary unmistakably belongs where she is:
the land of un-missed opportunity
if only because the fortune hunter knows how to love
(O Canada).

The self-negating admission of guilt which begins this poem articulates the ironic absurdity of nationalistic requirements on the displaced subjectivity - *as if* the "citizenship judge" could "correct her past". The apparatus of admission into the national identity pits the subjective past - considered as "mistakes" and as "fucked-up" - against a categorically "non-Italian" future, yet the idea of this future is perceived within the recurringly ironic perspective of parentheses. At the other side of this polarized view is the "good and beautiful Maria" who must justify her presence in the new country through her behavioural performance, but with a re-adjustment of her "assets" - a word which, in its definition of advantage or resource values, also indicates a vision from a past to a future. The reference to a well-known commercial product namely, Miracle Whip Salad Dressing, serves to support the irony of failed expectations: "so what does the lady expect from the man - \ instant miracles (whipped eh?)?" The simple addition of the bracketed expression "(whipped eh?)", as well as connotating abundance or fluff, serves to displace the constructed paradigm, re-placing within it the "eh?" of the stereotyped (uncultured) Anglo Canadian, so that the problematic is ironically defused through its own carnivalized image. The relationship to Bakhtin's carnivalesque is only nominally fundamental due to the fact that Melfi's poetic praxis re-strategizes this theory into an immediate modern reality.

The use of the Latin "*persona non grata*" to speak of the protagonist adds another level of irony as an adopted phrase by modern language, usually used

to speak of non-desirable persons, is employed here to refer to Maria, an “ex-Roman”, who is required to justify her right to “citizenship”. The following verse demonstrates once again Melfi’s technique of ironic *enjambement* yet this time, the ironic split occurs within a bracketed space:

Reluctantly, the big prick (unmistakably Canadian establishment) revises his opinion of the good and beautiful Maria.

So that, a cynicism that is already deployed toward a general “unmistakably Canadian” sphere, becomes harnessed into a particular critique of the “establishment” only in the following line. Thus the split space of irony simultaneously performs a disjuncture and a reorganization of meanings through a subversive poetic composition. (Think of it as a flying twist in a trapeze act.) The inherent irony of the following verses marks the resistance of the displaced voice against a censoring rhetoric of guilt: “He dismisses her fucked-up past” and “and correctly re-classifies her assets”. The resulting linguistically slashed identity “Maria/Mary” can be viewed as a naturalized space of hybridity, or as the connotation of a required ‘progression’ from one identity to the other - that is, from “Maria” to “Mary”, meaning that one identity must be repressed for the subject to be able to “unmistakably belong” in “the land of un-missed opportunity.” The bottom line, it seems, is the displaced subject’s capacity to know the ropes and her ability and will to play the game: “if only because the fortune hunter knows how to love”. The final line, slightly displaced (indented) from the margin, denies the antiphonal possibilities of the national anthem by circumscribing the words “(O Canada)” within a final parenthetical space where the words only ricochet on themselves - while echoing the title “Canada Day” from the modified perspective by the end of the poem.

The following poem, "The Statute of Liberty" (126), links the notion of the American Dream with that of a "statute", or precept, of (an Enlightened) liberty to the general history of displacement into North America, through the representation of the "The Statue of Liberty" (ergo, Ellis Island) as a symbol of hope in displacement.

The Statue of Liberty
has been saving immigrants (and Canadians) for decades.

It hands out mysteries and magic
to hungry multitudes in dire need of success stories.

It gives Maria, an ex-stripper (and ex-alien)
a needed sense of direction: south, warmth;
a honeymoon with palm trees (Italian style).

The Statue of Liberty is European in origin but just
as (North) American as this girl's about to become:

a short story writer in the language of Shakespeare & Co.

The "immigrants (and Canadians)", through their syntactic rapprochement, are shown to share into the mythicized American Dream yet they are simultaneously excluded from each other by the use of the bracketing device. The ironic portence of the brackets in this verse places the Canadian identity almost as a second thought, and through its suggestive ideological *rapprochement* to the USA and/or to a North American identity. The poetic irony picks up several paradoxa, primarily in the recognition of the European origin of the iconic figure of the monument, but a deeper irony plays on the idea of the "needed sense of direction: south, warmth". As the history of Italian immigration generally derives from an economic, social and political asymmetry between

the Northern and Southern regions of Italy, the direction of intramural migration has traditionally taken place from South to North. However, displacement into the Canadian context appears to redirect the aspiration southwards (after a lateral transfer), while anything that alludes to the subject's 'other' identity - "(and ex-alien)", "(Italian style)" - is contained within its parenthetical space and reconfigured into a realm of fantasy. The voice of displacement is forced to adopt the English language in order to be understood, yet the articulation of "Shakespeare & Co." is charged with a cynicism that is partly revealed in the following poem, titled "Camouflage" (127).

The Statue of Liberty
beckons Maria to follow her lead
and have her face re-done,

but her native-born plastic surgeon
insists it is highly un-ethical
for immigrants to match their natural surroundings
(that trick is reserved for the frogs).

The terms of the word "camouflage" imply the activity of concealing one's 'faults' in order to blend in with, or disappear into, the "natural surroundings" of the Other, as a sort of assimilation by hybridity; a connotation of this is the desire to subsume the original identity into the image of an accepted standard which, on the whole, is already a problematic issue. Yet the poetic activity itself performs subversively - like Penelope's nocturnal un-weavings - to de-articulate the falseness of identity that is required for survival on the surface. Thus through the poetic text, the notion of invisibility can also be played out on different levels and to varying degrees. The cynical allusion to the "frogs" seems to recognize a French Canadian identity contained within its own cultural biosphere.

“The Alien” (128) status of the subject is represented as a double figure of irony in displacement:

Maria promises herself
when she returns home from her (world) trip
she will write a short play on the theme:

immigration is like an alien with two heads.
Only in a comedy is the alien a good egg.

The paradox of theory and praxis is integrated into this representation of the immigrant. In other words, irony is an inherent part of displacement yet it can only be performed in a way that will not disturb a status quo. The final poem of the collection, “The Costume” iterates a sense of futility (accompanied by a ironically impotent “smile”), even as it reinforces the multiplied senses of images and their meanings.

Maria’s smile is fixed on a childhood memory:
a doll in native costume.

Its synthetic threads
seem to hold it in the air.

She throws it in the air.
It breaks -

no matter -
her soul was not in it.

Mimesis itself occurs through a series of ironic displacements. Until the sense of siege within the mimetic irony incites the subject towards another irony - that of seeking the ‘real’ self through the fragile artificiality of memory.

2. 2 THE MASK, THE MYTH AND THE MIRROR: de-masking the illusion

Each one of these three elements is correlated to a particular aspect of continuity and/or discontinuity in the temporal spectrum: for example, the *mask* aims at obstructing a personal past with a (re)fashioned future - hence, discontinuity for continuity. The *mirror* holds the possibility of refracting, thus actualizing, selective moments in a subjective present - hence, it shows a (disruptive or connective) point in a continuous sequence of formation. As for *myth*, as a constant which has been released from its temporal (and historical) boundaries, it retains its capacity for continuous influence on human realities. Moreover, these three elements of mask, myth and mirror all pertain to the continuous production of illusions through strategic practices of creations, or constructions, which stipulate the guiding principles for a specific subjectivity, often within the formative principles of a specific culture. Moreover, the realization of cultural displacement is marked by a duplicate subjective disalignment, first as a sensed disorientation with regard to the normative principles of the Other culture in which the subject is now moving; and secondly, as a sense of distancing from the self in the culture of origin.

The initial poems of *AQHMC*, "The Transvestite" and "The Lobotomy" (11, 12), present other angles of continuity and of illusion-making through time, with the "transvestite" denoting a severed connection to, as well as a permanent alteration from a past, while actualizing a future mode: in other words, the "transvestite" is the Janus figure which simultaneously contains and deploys past and future in a present outward appearance. The lobotomized personality also connotes the reality of a personal past yet this past has been displaced by an absent, or better yet, a censored present, through the severance of the connective fibers to the subjective sensitivity, intelligence and vitality of its past. As for the body of the poems, a paradoxical problem of modernity appears in the human desire to bring order over an essentially unruly (by our definitions) Nature and the inability to apprehend the sense of "Eternity" attributed to Nature

- and "God".⁷⁶

...

Why with the rain washing his clothes,
with the snow dyeing them for Him,
and with the earthquakes ready to give Him
a new change of underwear at a moment's notice

why human beings are just
the pupils of his eyes
or the eyes of the needles
his eunuchs use to embroider his clothes.
("The Transvestite")

The sense of disalignment, due to physical and mythical displacements, thus recalls the original exile from all possibilities of "Eternity" - except through the continuous process of love and death. If we give credence to the narrative of the Genesis, it signifies that we have been precipitated not only into spatial, but also into temporal dimensions that are largely controlled by hegemonic historical contexts. Hence, the concepts of love and death - perceived as the only real forms of continuity- are necessarily imprinted by their historical contexts.

To gain favor with Eternity
I will feed the little tart half my brain.
I will pretend that neurosurgeon is sick
and my brain is medicine.

With half my brain missing
I'm bound to give up reading the obituaries
(voraciously).

⁷⁶ Adorno in *Minima Moralia* reminds us that the entire Western culture rests on a certain non-truth, that is, on the Christian dogma of the divinity of one man. Moreover, traditional theology cannot be restored as such since, if it is taken literally, and not symbolically as it should be, it falls back into mythology. Hence a certain subjective disposition towards illusion is essential for theological continuity.

("The Lobotomy")

Since the varied and unceasing artistic activity of representation is implemented by (culturally, and later, subjectively as well) distinct means of specular constructions, displacement compels a redistribution of knowledges which is not accomplished without detrimental consequences to a historical identity paradigm.

The preceding schematization of Melfi's irony sets the stage for a further examination into sustaining illusions in the construction of symbols. For example, the poem "The Earrings of a Gypsy" (*AQHMC*, 13) announces the delusive exercise of the visual as the means to recreate a needed (albeit, virtual) sense of grounding that the subject might have lost through the activity of displacement. In reference to cultural identity, a critical displacement promotes an ability to discern the illusions of given symbols that are meant to identify a cultural status within the group as well as outside of it.

Here's the symbol you've been waiting for: earrings!
Or is the symbol the old woman who is wearing the
earrings?

The earrings are surely not the golden fleece or
anything like it.

There's no legend behind them.

Ghosts have their own legends but an old woman
who is wearing golden earrings to attract attention
knows nothing about that.

The earrings rub against her shoulder blades
(unnecessarily exposed like the roots of an oak tree)
and that's obscene because she's too old
for that kind of love story.

An exercise in defamiliarization constitutes a critical deconstruction of the nature of constructions. The “old woman” of the poem will likely be automatically identified by the reader as the “gypsy” of the title. And this basic assumption might be strong enough to sustain the reading of the entire poem, even though the initial line emits a derisive disclaimer of the distorted process of associations. Yet, can it truly be ascertained that the “old woman” of the poem is a gypsy, when the title posits the earrings themselves as protagonists of the poem - and only suggests “a gypsy” as a determinative association. At any rate, we are presented with the ‘image’ of a gypsy, upon which every ensuing interpretation is contingent. Moreover, the old woman in this poem is divested of the gypsy’s presupposedly authoritative (in the sense of her clairvoyant abilities) voice, as the poetic voice cuts through the image to reveal, or mask, the “gypsy” image as nothing more than “an old woman”, a mere being held together by her own (material) symbols of cohesion. The critical voice intervenes with this ludic proposition: “Allow me to play hula-hoop with those earrings. \ I’m the devil.” The standpoint of the devil’s advocate incites an inquiry into the attributed importance of “legends”, or stories, in the construction of mythologies and/or tradition, and suggesting by extension, an adhesion to the legends of the Other, which might not correspond to the actual reality of the displaced subject, until the culturally displaced subject learns to formulate a legend of her own by which to find a proper grounding in her new historical presence. Perhaps for this reason, the need for traditional legends may produce in displacement an initial anxiety in the lack of meaning since it appears that artifices (or artificial, in the broadest sense of the word, symbols) that lack a “legend” or story for the displaced subject can have no meaning for that subject. We (as historical individual cultures) invest ourselves with stories (legends, proverbs, anecdotes, etc.) and meanings so that we may feel not only human, but part of a greater, living human community moving towards the (unknown) future. This would imply that *what* we are and *where* we come from, is more than *who* we are. A further implication is the desire for a particularized tradition (in the form of a desired adhesion to an ensemble of legends) which must come at a cost at the individual level. However the sensitive capacity to see these

forms of cultural articulation (articulation, in the sense of an act of giving utterance or expression, as well as the action of joining or interrelating) for what they are also risks a dialectical impasse.

Those hooks which attach one part of her body to
the other
are more expensive than the market allows her body
to go for these days
(unlike the hooks in a butcher's shop which count
for nothing).
I wish she were famous for her cooking but that's
not the case.

She's just a symbol of mediocrity -
and that makes you mad as hell because you think
that's only my way of turning a legend into an inanity.

Thus the subject's predicament also masks a possible impasse between her actual reality and her desire for plausible markers of identity. While a critical apperception of delusive constructions arbitrates the displaced consciousness, the *critical voice comes up against the force of the hegemonically consumed delusions of the non-critical Other.*

In the prose segment titled "The Invalid" (21-22), an interpretation is possible in the bodily framework of the patient, where the personal past formulates a present history which threatens to destroy the illusion of a future that is not personally manageable.

My heart and my womb have been properly attached to my body. My ex-husband's heart, my mother's heart and an entire dead baby whose mother I knew as a schoolgirl have also been properly attached to my body. They're resting on the table beside my hospital bed in their proper glass bottles. (21)

From a critical standpoint of delusive constructions, the “glass bottles” are suggestive of the modernistic compulsion to divide (and conquer) through classificatory and preservative methods - that is, not in the sense of preserving authenticity, but rather in the sense of preserving the classificatory methods themselves.

A cord (with the colorings of a coral snake) attaches all the glass bottles to each other. Part of this cord is wrapped around my neck. In an attempt to pull the cord’s head out of its electric socket I’d choke.

Doctors and nurses throng by my bed. ...

One day...[t]hey’ll shoot down my multi-colored bottles and then play spin-the-bottle on my bed. I’ve seen more than compassion on the charlatans’ jocular faces.

Three women, three insignificant victims, three specimens of infertility, of hope and of *rigor mortis* are also in the room with me. They’re beautifully bandaged in foreign flags.

There’s a mirror on the wall. It magnifies everything. There’s a microscope hanging down from the ceiling like a house plant: a wandering Jew.

The “mirror on the wall magnifies” the fragility of being as it is simultaneously eulogized, in “beautifully bandaged in foreign flags”. At the same time, the patient (reduced to a statistical “data” sequence) is connected to “a machine which rests with the head nurse in the other room. Each time she glances up from her Harlequin romantic illusions to check the data on the machine - dead or alive (a flashing olive light or a flashing violet light respectively) - she rings a bell.” The “wires” speed up a definition of the patient as tangible “data” about the cultural subject, so that this information, unknown to the patient herself, is assessed and (re)acted upon by scientifically substantiated, and spurious methods of knowledge about the Other. The displaced subject finds herself bracketed within the so-called knowledge of the Other, by means of these incomplete communicative methods of information. A dialogue is not yet possible - there is only the illusion of a real dialectical connection since the

channel is unidirectional and not interactive - due to the incontestable status of the "patient" in relation to the accredited medical personnel.

"By the Swamp" (35) brings a reactive critical perception of the displaced subject in relation to general illusions. The poem begins with the lines:

You uproot a few reeds.
Decorations, you declare.
Just reeds, I answer.

You hit me with them.
I throw you into the swamp.

These verses offer two opposing perspective in the confrontation of delusional interpretations by two subjects. As the Other voice upholds the illusive quality of the object, the poetic voice rejects the offer of the illusion and *names* the object for what it is, in its unadulterated form. The dialectical attempt initiates a struggle which does not bring an immediate resolution, but rather it increases the level of problematics contained in these practices, and as seen in the last verses of the poem:

We argue.
What's a decoration?
A bruise, a reed or a parting?

In other words, ideas and concepts that contain multiple meanings and interpretations do not automatically resonate in identical way in individual realities, although they appear to bring into being collective meanings and corresponding effects which are seldom questioned - except by an external critical perspective. On the other hand, the myth of home, as a place to which one may return at will, is as essential to the displaced subjectivity as the hero is to the mythical subject, as evidenced in the poem "Welcome" (47):

My house is more important than my hair.
Here take my hair. Make a harp out of it.
My own delicious house remains over my bald head.

When all my friends have plotted to execute me
(as a snowman is executed) outside their houses
my own house will remember me.
My house, my country, will come and take me away.

Once outside their crazy borders
with or without a wig, my house, my hero,
will let my body pass through it like a comb.

The surrender of one's hair, and the subsequent donning of the wig recalls the poem "The Invalid" - "I can't adjust the wig on my head" (22) - so that the imposed appearance which seemed necessary under the scrutiny of the scientific "machine" can be willfully discarded in the mythicized and reinforcing presence of a home element. The protection offered by the "house" is synonymous with the body itself, as the holder and/or dispenser of cultural markers through its functions of myth-making and/or myth-breaking. Hence the notion of the myth is always present in the background and ready to come out to rescue a sense of tradition. The reconfigured "hero", within the reassuring boundaries of "my house", would possibly allow a proper functioning of the subject in the displaced state.

The ultimate situation of "An Exile" (69-75) clearly posits the cognitive dilemma of subjective displacement in the first few lines:

Here are the masks
or are they the faces?

The encounter with the unfamiliar world of the Other is depicted as a confrontation with "mountains named Fear". The encounter assumes its

confrontational bearing, heightening the level of anxiety in the subject who feels that she might “easily slip into their void”. The difficulty of telling apart the illusion from its ‘real’ (or even, ‘truthful’) counterpart is compounded by a sense of loss of even the smallest nourishing traces of the subject’s (by now) ‘ex’-origin:

Without the sanctimonious kiss of the God of the East,
without even a mask of my ex-country to embrace
with only a puerile fondness for mother death
and the wheel of my car
I’m ready to fall over a mountain cliff.

(73)

‘Letting go’ is only a momentary consideration which is instantly reversed by the sense of fear. Yet, the fear is eventually attenuated through a confrontation with the “mountain” and on its own terms. From this standpoint, a contingent knowledge develops in the context of displacement but only through autonomous denial (thereby refusing obtrusive forms of deception):

I envy the mounter climbers.
A mountain is a mountain is a woman perhaps
to impregnate.
To force birth out of - a kingdom of dignity and
stardom!
There’s no God of the West. No God of the East.
No black magic, no wars, no words to speak of
when climbing. The world.

(73)

Although respect for the power of the mountain underlies this metaphorical alpinistic practice - implying the conquest and a ‘claiming’ of the mountain -, an analogous respect for the female body is invoked to intercept tautological constructions of its being and desires. Moreover, the ominous image of the

“mountain” is joined to the statement “*ma mère est morte*”⁷⁷ so that the presence of “death” becomes a motivating factor and thus the woman reflected in the immediate landscape relates a auspicious vision of the future. (This analogical reflection will appear again in *A Bride in Three Acts* where the metaphor will be expanded in its specific context.) Fear in itself cannot generate life, and hence it must be relegated to its mythical state, and its reflection must be removed from its determinative mirror stance - if the subject is to find such a concept as that of “home”: “I wish upon a star I were home” (75).

“Mirror Mirror on the Wall” (77-78) expresses the force of the specular and spectacular illusion being presented in the ‘containing’ refraction.

...

I hate to see that container,
that colossal can,
combing its hair,
copper wire,
but I’d never hate to see flamingos.
Whose fault is that?

The question is: is the illusion always more pleasant than reality? And must that one illusion, that of the idealized female self, always struggle against a reality: that of the abuse of patriarchal force, which itself must be relegated to the realm of practices that are based on illusive configurations? The female body, by its constituent morphologism, already contains its own capacity for a grounding of its own particular reality - if she succeeds in (re)producing that reality.

If a horde of men
were to break through my mirror
holding television cameras in their hands
ready to knock me down

⁷⁷ The French “*mère*” is homonymically commensurate with the term *la mer*, the sea; so that the foreboding image of the mountain stands as the opposite to the potentially redeeming powers of “*la mer*” in this alternative reading of the phrase “*ma mère est morte*”.

or electrocute me
I'd attempt
to protect at all costs
what I behold in the mirror
(rustproof like a fairyland's staircase).
Because it's not empty it's fragile.'

Yet the "horror show" described in the prose poem "In the Crowd's Image" (83-86) brings back a nightmarish uncertainty in the question of identity. A preliminary, partial reading evokes again the specter of fear:

The room is full of snakes. The poisonous ones are in glass boxes; the others are crawling all over the room. They're part of the show. I'm in the show. I'm the star. It's a horror show.

Blonde hair, a doll's hair, is hanging down from the ceiling. The room was constructed inside a doll's chest. The doll's face is facing the sky. What a setting! It won an award for the architect.

...

There are no windows. There's just one door, a door a quarter of my size in one of the walls in the room. Nuns are posted at the door. They're also part of the show.

There are mirrors in the room. In some of them I'm a dwarf, in some I'm a giant, in some I've got two pairs of heads. I see every kind of being in those mirrors except what I remember myself to be like. When was the last time I saw reality face to face?... (83)

The displaced subject realizes that she is living inside an almost perfect construct which is accommodating and lulling, yet somewhat unfamiliar. The lack of windows, the inability to see outside the self provokes an apprehensive reflection back onto the self, but only through the distorting mirrors which feed on an image of mass conformity - signifying as well a conventional desire for

order. Hence the mask projects a certain image toward the world while the interior of the mask embeds the subject who wears it with her own reflections. Although the subject begins to uncover the masking practices of the world in which she is now moving, she is still unable to remove the mask once and for all.

The O Canada Poems take up the question of the mask in direct confrontation with the myth, through the performance, or spectacle, of belonging. The mythicized name of “Shakespeare” is recalled as “the greatest word \ *mafioso* of all times”, suggesting a sense of linguistic self-deception. The underlying sense of guilt at this self-deception is also mixed with a deep resentment at having to live inside an illusive linguistic self, that is, in the English language. The Anglo-Saxon linguistic dominance is reactively deconstructed in the second poem, “Just Off the Boat” (118) which places the dominant culture ‘back’ into the ethnic category, as the Native cultures of Canada are recalled to take their place as the primary ‘owners’ of the land, thus rhetorically disenfranchising the Anglo Saxon and the French Canadians of the myths which predicate their putative rights to dominance.

and this seasoned urbanite is looking for
financial investments with better returns. Only
first she has to find a way of becoming officially
present in the land of two founding nations: Indian & Eskimo (?)

The displaced subject attempts to avoid falling into the myths of the Other as she struggles to establish her own (possibly illusory?) sense of security and inclusion. The poetic voice ultimately reveals the fact that the myths of belonging in Canada, based as they are on distinct, ideologized, cultural histories, cannot present a clear-cut concept of Canadian identity. This implies a re-evaluation of the concepts of Canada and of Canadian-ness, which steadily occurs in the immigrant, yet which does not figure in the agenda of the established dominant cultures.

As the displaced subject works her way through her experiential road-map to citizenship, here in the guise of “The Stripper” (119), she learns to don the mask since

Unhappiness has no sex appeal.
She almost lost her job.

The subject’s (non) identity as an “alien” is shown as a somewhat ‘visible’ wrapper which will remain despite her activity as “stripper” - meaning that her state of alienation cannot be displaced by her performance, but rather the required dance further supplements the disguise.⁷⁸ “The Striptease” (120) is a courtship dance dependent on seductive deception, and as such, the performance of the dance by the displaced subject returns the illusion back to her boorish audience which is a mass embodiment of the dominating culture. At the same time, this performative subjectivity is consciously seeking an adequate formula for reworking her own sense of identity *within* the new environment, rather than just in front, hence *outside*, of it. But this process does not occur without a certain amount of violence to the newcomer identity:

Maria was asked to wear nothing but wings.
But wouldn’t you know it -

an all-round Canadian drunk
came on stage during one of her acts and broke them.

Angels did not come and help her out.
They were having their own problems with upward mobility.

But the audience did get its money’s worth.

Maria had a good pair of tits,

⁷⁸ The reader may consult the bibliographic history of the feminine striptease i.e. in *The Thousand and One Nights*, for a consideration of the “stripping” performance as a disguise for an illusive space of articulation and even, as a suspended state of life, that is, as a means of holding off death.

maples leaves tattooed on both of them.

The audience itself is more inclined towards the captivating show of allegiance to a perceived national identity which feeds off the performance in a quasi cannibalistic ritual to consume her old identity. In this sense, the body demonstrates how it has an index of masking (with the “maple leaves”); that is, just like language, the body can produce false effects of the real, while its naked state (as something that every human being possesses) is also presented as a (common) suit of poverty. Yet, by experiencing the self as “body” in its nudity the subject begins the reconstruction of her personal experience. The displaced subject displays a perceptive consciousness since she must consciously re-negotiate her citizenship status against her cultural being, and in the ubiquitous return of the Canadian gaze. But the resulting problem is that of the delusional process which risks becoming intensified in this ricocheting pattern.

In “The Ex” (122), the city of Rome is intimately invoked - by means of Melfi’s parenthetical irony, “(O Roma)” - as a distant time/space that encloses the subject’s past so that the notion of “Roma” takes on a meaning of mythical proportions as a nostalgic and defensive counterpart to the present time and space.

Maria sometimes misses her ex-lover
stationed in another part of the world
like she sometimes misses part of her childhood (O Roma).

Enjoys his memory like a sweater on a chilly day
or the best Broadway show of the year.

So existence in the other cultural space is forcibly displaced into the realm of a masked nostalgia -which is constructed by a process of illusion-making - to be revisited or dispensed of according to circumstances. At the same time, the subject, to all appearances, is compelled to renounce whatever attachments

she may have felt to a previous existence in another cultural space, through a masquerading show of contempt, even playing with stereotypes to achieve the required attitude:

But let's be frank: the Italian stud is really washed out of her life (the way coffee stains are washed out of one's clothes by professionals).

"The Proposition" (123) pits the newcomer's desire for inclusion against some powerful new myths which are based on intertextual stereotyping techniques.

Maria takes a Greyhound bus to Ottawa.
She would do anything to change her status
(and become officially Canadian).

...

She would have made the PM a proposition
(a real man in his right mind
could not have refused).

The intertextuality - heard through the reworded cliché phrase: "an offer he could not refuse" from Mario Puzo's novel (1969) and the first film in Francis Ford Coppola's trilogy, *The Godfather* (1972) - serves as a channel for the production and transmission of new urban myths. Yet the meaning emitted by this intertextuality is intercepted by the poetic voice, through the deployment of irony in order to focus the reader's attention on certain realities that underlie the myths and the socio-cultural stereotyping techniques. The ultimate stanza of this poem uses a well-known intertextual expression (in the Anglo Canadian imaginary) from the tea commercial: "Only in Canada, you say. [Sip, sip.] Pity." (An impressionistic interpretation of this commercial would indicate the emancipation of the former English colony, yet the majority of the Anglo-Saxon sector of the Canadian population remains strongly monarchist to this day.) The

poetic voice calls up this intertextual technique in order to foreground and displace the stereotype of the 'nice and just' Canadian Multicultural society, while simultaneously showing the *mafioso* stereotype to be an ineffective definition of the Italian culture - as the practice itself can no longer be considered solely in its original cultural specificity. Yet the irony analogously points to *mafioso* practices of the literary industry (or family).

But only in Canada, a just bureaucracy
(if not a just society)
could such a (Wop?) trick fail to work. Pity.

The need to re-define her status takes the displaced subject through a revised development sequence which requires a passage (or authorization) through a new 'mirror stage', through the strategic image of the appropriate spouse, as seen in "Canada Day" (125):

The *persona non grata* assures the citizenship judge
she really has a (real) husband (made rich in Canada).

Reluctantly, the big prick (unmistakably Canadian
establishment) revises his opinion of the good and beautiful Maria.

This form of acculturation demands the re-organization of her "assets", which may not include a surplus, Other cultural identity. Thus the subject's grounding strategies must take place through the dominant, male (spousal) Other - who is a representative agent of the patriarchal system. The ironic bracketing of the last verse containing only the words (the title of the Canadian anthem) "(O Canada)" seems to present the idea of Canadian-ness as a notion adrift in its own, exclusive, socio-political context.

Melfi's technique of representation of the Statue of Liberty in "The Statute of Liberty" (126) foregrounds the mythical meaning of the American Dream,

which would have been imbedded, certainly in the formation of the Canadian imaginary, and in various degrees, in the immigrant imaginary (sometimes by necessity due to the lack of resources for survival in Italy during the twentieth century, and also for the contrasting ideal of “The Land of the Free” in the face of the political reality of Fascism).

The Statue of Liberty

has been saving immigrants (and Canadians) for decades.

It hands out mysteries and magic

to hungry multitudes in dire need of success stories.

The icon sustains the myth, and the desire for the illusion sustains the iconic quality of the object. The deliberate linguistic slippage in the title “The *Statute* of Liberty” denotes the metonymic relationship between the statue as representative of the myth, and of Ellis Island as representative of a rationalized, practical processing of subjects in displacement. As the Statue itself is being displaced, its materiality bears an image of acceptance for the displaced subject,

The Statue of Liberty is European in origin but just
as (North) American as this girl’s about to become:

a short story writer in the language of Shakespeare & Co.

Another mirror stage occurs when the subject linguistically mirrors herself in the English language. The tone of “Shakespeare & Co.” is ludically charged with Melfi’s ironic language of resistance, while it simultaneously focuses attention on the mythical power of the term, as well as on the omnipresent force of British colonial origins in Canada. But although the “Statue of Liberty” presents a sense of renewed hope, it becomes apparent that displaced subjects are required to retain and show their markers of “immigrants”: the mirror stages shift so that the mirror becomes re-directed toward the subject herself, indicating that

there is no justification for a refraction through the Other as an external, mediatory agent of identity processes. And any idea of “Camouflage” (127) would represent a mercenary act:

but her native-born plastic surgeon
insists it is highly un-ethical
for immigrants to match their natural surroundings
(that trick is reserved for the frogs).

If we consider the term ‘ethic’ in its definition of a guiding philosophy in addition to its primary definition of moral values and/or obligations, there is an apparent approximation in a subliminal reading of the qualifier “un-ethical” (usually spelled ‘unethical’) as the identifier: *un-ethnical*. Melfi’s poetry plays with such subliminal significations to sort of blind-side her reader, thus leaving the register of a doubly-charged poetic image.

In a similar way, the recurring term “alien” throughout Melfi’s text carries attributive significations of alienation in displacement: “an illegal alien” (“The O Canada Poems*”, 117); “The (near starving) alien” (“Off the Boat”, 118); “The PM is not in (for aliens)” (“The Proposition”, 123); “It gives Maria, an ex-stripper (and ex-alien)” (“The Statute of Liberty”, 127); “immigration is like an alien with two heads” - in which the reader visualizes the splitting effect of alienation. (“The Alien”, 128). The use of the term constitutes a progressive (pseudo-picaresque) trajectory which takes place through a series of mirror effects until, in the poem “The Alien”, the mirror is finally entrusted to the artistic representation of the self through her individual artwork. Immortality becomes possible, yet through a reflection which does offer the sought-for resolution to her dichotomized situation.

Maria promises herself
when she returns home from her (world) trip
she will write a short play on the theme:

immigration is like an alien with two heads.
Only in a comedy is the alien a good egg.

The title of the ending poem "The Costume" (129) evidences another practice of concealment, simultaneously depicting the displaced artist's attempted flight into the specular sphere of memory, a memory which itself can only be viewed through the specular framework of the present time-space, thus foregrounding the illusory functions of masks, myths and mirrors.

Maria's smile is fixed on a childhood memory:
a doll in native costume.

Its synthetic threads
seem to hold her thoughts together.

She throws it in the air.
It breaks -

no matter -
her soul was not in it.

2.3 ALTERNATIVES OF COMPOSITION: POETIC PERSPECTIVES ON IRRATIONALITIES AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL RECONSIDERATIONS

The poetic technique (as exemplified by its specific focus on ironic ambiguity) and the movement of the poetic voice (determined by the poetic eye/I) seek to rethink representation by breaking through the formal confines of the poetic space in an attempt to demonstrate the purely artificial means by which illusions are generally enhanced. A general look at Melfi's body of work posits an initial epistemological problem for the reader, who is compelled to

search his⁷⁹ own epistemological foundations of poetic art in the attempt to situate the immediate text within his own representational lexicon. Melfi's texts tend to draw from a variety of meta-realistic forms of representation which cover the range of Western mythology, of local folk tales or other recognized fables in Western culture, in order to analogically represent the systematic irrationalities that contrive the condition of displacement. Melfi's text continuously brings up the matter of 'being' and 'appearing' in a confrontation which does not resolve a dialectical issue but rather, it allows the poetic text to open up the problematics to the reader through its specific techniques.

We should note the use of the asterisk in first title of the *OCP* collection:

The O Canada Poems*

*Recount the adventures of Maria F-,
... (117)

The asterisk is a specific sign pointing to a specific other content or non-content. In its dictionary definition, it is a character used as a reference mark, as an indication of the omission of letters or words; it is used to denote a hypothetical or unattested linguistic form, or for various arbitrary meanings. [MWCD] In this view, the asterisk in itself carries a poetic charge as well, and moreover, it is able to carry and convey an intended and deferred irony. The asterisk points to an Other content (such as that of ethnicity itself), perceived as a sort of peripheral continuation extended into the paratextual form. Melfi's specific handling of the asterisk thus shifts the whole poetic text toward the (marginal) paratextual space so that the reader is solicited into entering and recuperating the marginalized space of knowledge of the poetic subject. In addition, the non-naming of the poetic subject, that is, as "Maria F-", acknowledges the diffuse comprehensiveness of subjects in displacement. Specific informative details are not simply deferred, but are contextually inaccessible so that the poetic

⁷⁹ This dissertation does not assume the new feminization of the reader. Instead this writer uses the feminine 'she' to depict the author under discussion, while the masculine 'he' is meant to represent the general readership. It is hoped that this discursive tactic will eliminate any confusion.

voice itself must be heard as one, polyphonic, voice of the irony of being and appearing.

The poetic text demands to be heard *and* read (preferably in that order for greater impact) as two, separate, means of transmission and of apperception in the subject. Thus the reader gains a deeper perception into Melfi's dual use of irony: that is, as an architectural agent in the formal composition and/or as a casualty of its form. We have seen this in Melfi's use of ironic poetic space, particularly in her technique of *enjambements* (discussed in section 4.2.A (1)) most evident in "Canada Day" (*OCP*, 125) and reproduced here:

Reluctantly, the big prick (unmistakably Canadian establishment) revises his opinion of the good and beautiful Maria.

The open parenthetical space spanning the area between the first and the second verse intensifies the ironic twist, yet not without first imprinting the preliminary image conveyed within the parenthetical space in the first verse, and the brief space of silence between the verses - which translates into a deferred irony through poetic composition. The split, or open, parenthesis indicates a bi-semantics which paradoxically separates and joins the two signifieds: "...the big prick (unmistakably Canadian" and "establishment)". This bi-semantics can be perceived in the dissociation of the word "establishment" from, and within, its parenthetical grouping. This ironic dissociation also signals the semantic weight of the term "establishment", which is meant to encompass every aspect of Canadian institutions, including the literary establishment and its operative foundational network: the educational system, the publishing industry, the commercial market, and other interrelational institutions. The charged semantics of the term "establishment" and the next lines of the poem indicate a ruling order which solicits the reproduction of its own mirror image in its (new) citizens.

The last stanzas of this poem convey the increasing ironic tone in each verse:

He dismisses her fucked-up past
(and sexual indiscretions with Canadian citizens)

and correctly re-classifies her assets:
(her future) non-Italian.

Maria/Mary unmistakably belongs where she is:
the land of un/missed opportunity
if only because the fortune hunter knows how to love
(O Canada).

The bracketed “(O Canada)” formulates the ironic epilogue of the poem: its intertextual relativity with the national anthem is a call to stand up and sing along, while its indented position invokes a silent space of transition before the flat utterance: “O Canada”. This final utterance, when considered against the predictive “(her future) non Italian”, as well as with the transitional form “Maria/Mary”, conveys the irony of ‘identity reformation’ which affirms the attainment of ‘positive’ elements through a negating process, or repression, of those elements considered as non-desirable.⁸⁰ Thus Melfi’s text questions or displaces the sources of our knowledges through the tactical uses of the poetic form which serves to annex new perspectives to the exalted Canadian landscape. In this sense, the figure of the “stripper” could also be viewed as the confluence of the mythological Venus figure emerging over the metropolis and the shamanic erotic figure of female, together denoting a presence which is ‘separate’ by virtue of her ‘sacred’ state, but more importantly, this presence recalls a primordial ontology of the male gaze over the awe-inspiring female body. However and as it pertains to the reality of the displaced female subjectivity, the erotic attraction and potential seduction leading to another form of experience does not entail any form of heroic undertaking on the part of the male; rather, it requires the complete dissolution of the female self and her

⁸⁰ The displaced text, in this part of the analysis, diverges from the picaresque text, where the ascension of the *picaro* does not necessitate the repression of the protagonist’s preceding ‘identities’ since the question of identity per se is not relevant, or as relevant perhaps, as in the literature of displacement under investigation.

recomposition through the male gaze. In other words, she must be symbolically devoured and then regurgitated by and through the gaze of her 'admirer' in an act that 'despoils' (cf. the Italian term "*spogliare*", to undress, disrobe)⁸¹ and profanes the body of the female Other. The violence of the gaze in this sense displaces the nudity of the revered female figure into the crude nakedness of the de-cultured body.

2. 4 Exogamy and other disruptions: conciliating the 'Other in me'

The poetic voice recurrently expresses her perspectival position as that of an outsider. As the subject is compelled to negotiate the Self, through her sense of trust in relation to an Other identity embodied in the spousal figure, she discovers the difficulty of obtaining a purely objective viewpoint. For these reasons, the conciliation of the self in displacement produces a particular configuration of textual practices which resists a definitive disequilibrium of identity, by generating new and different forms of signification through the poetic language and its syncretical relation to the integrity of the text (This will become more evident in the analysis of *A Bride in Three Acts*). The question of "exogamy" being discussed in this section corresponds to co-existent notions of citizenship and coercive (or non-democratic) forms of subjection constituting what continues to be referred to as the "south" of the world - a distinctive trait of capitalism in its globalization process.⁸² In another consideration, the question of exogamy is an antithetical allusion to mythological legends, particularly to the story of the mystical union between the shepherd Anchises and the goddess Venus, which would generate Aeneas - a union that introduces the future royal family of Rome. However, the woman in displacement works out her relationship with being through her strict relationship between the self and her immediate world, hence phenomenologically. In "I Watch His Love Climb Up My Body" (*AQHMC*, 29) the protagonist voice implicitly anticipates the image of the

⁸¹ The Italian definition of "*spoglia*" holds a further denotation in the sense of "*spoglie mortali*: mortal remains.

⁸² See Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, Princeton U P (1996). See also Hogan, *Rhetorics of Irony and Politics of Liberation*, where I discuss the continued imposition of "Third World" status on Italian immigrants from the impoverished "South" and other economically related regions of Italy. See also in Marino Tuzi and Pasquale Verdichio.

self as the metaphorical “mountain” (“A mountain is a mountain is a woman perhaps to impregnate”, 73):

...

“Is it possible to watch love climb onto its platform?”

There is no time to squabble.

It’s here (like a cat muffled inside a doctor’s bag).

“Is his love giving your body back parts life took
away?”

Isn’t it merely taking away all your body’s belongings?”

There is no time to squabble. It’s here.

The power of “giving” or “taking away” is wholly attributed to the male counterpart, so that the self-identity is implicitly surrendered to the manipulative desires of the (patriarchal) Other. But more importantly, even though the condition of submission is depicted in a dialogical composition in this poem, the poem implicitly manifests a problematic dialectical impasse within the protagonist herself. A mercurial succession of antithetical viewpoints is manifest in the distinctive poems - for example, from the supportive quality of the relationship against “the eyes of the world”, in “Your Love Has Its Advantages” (30), to the following poem’s presentation of the subject “Inside a Lobster Trap”, and her “husband, the fisherman”. The alternating poetic moods render the elaborate composition of the subject herself, through the variety of tones manifested in the poetic voice. This is evident in the poem which immediately follows. In “My Body’s a Helicopter” (32), the tone is completely reversed, to reveal a self-assured subjective personality:

My body’s a helicopter
and I’m its driver.

As long as you know where you belong, darling,
and exactly to whom you belong, darling,

you're welcome
otherwise you better bring
a parachute rather than a goodnight kiss.

From the subjective impotence and vulnerability of "I Watch His Love Climb Up My Body", to the subtle optimism of "Your Love Has Its Advantages", to the subsequent sense of casualty from "Inside a Lobster Trap", and then to the attitude of defiance in "My Body's a Helicopter", the poetic voice displays a range of characteristic 'voices' so that no one particular voice can categorically determine the displaced subject, even within the cultural standards of her Other.

Hence the negotiation of the trust factor is performed as in the allegorical manner of "The Sword Dance" (41), where the conjoined (but not necessarily unitary) couple will re-direct its vision toward "the world" in another defiant mood which now entails the power of two.

...
but I'm equipped to be a dancer on the stars.
Your love is my equipment.

...

Allow the world, that able but ill-tempered
swordsman,
to cut off our heads. We'll be merry.
We're equipped with lots of tricks.
You and I, two starry-eyed lovers in one costume,
will face the world looking like a giant star.

This viewpoint shifts the binary pattern (as the method of the dominating system of patriarchy) from a simplified 'Me and You' toward a more (culturally) complexified notion of 'Us and Them' - a notion which admits the antagonistic content of the conjunctive 'and' as 'against'.⁸³

⁸³ *cfr.* Luce Irigaray, *Je tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, 1991.

The exogamic rapport which accompanies displacement is assimilated through the body “You Are As Close to My Body As My Lust” (44) - so that, the body itself is no longer an agent of displacement but rather it demonstrates a sort of processing channel toward a complementary relationship with the Other.

Thank God, you fit inside my body
like color fits inside my eyes.

I'm tired of being lost inside the imperial darkness,
stranded in the big arms of the bitch, mother nature,
alone.

The complementary quality of the relationship then erects another negotiable trust barrier, this time between the aggregated bodies of the couple and the rest of the world. The body itself takes on the allegorical characteristics of a *city* encircling and protecting the immediate world of the poetic voice: her home, her husband and their future offspring. The reconfigured body space demands a particular form of allegiance that re-writes the social contract at the individual and cultural level. The protagonist's expressed desire for a baby, in “An Appetite for Life” (49-51), would presumably lessen the weight of the outside world, and precipitate the subjective gaze toward the personal sense of creation out of one's own body.

Despite this apparent completion, the subjectivity's re-formulated exegesis of the self will manifest still another wide cultural breach, manifested by the East-West division in the Canadian geography which represents linguistic and cultural differences designated by the Canadian socio-political realities of French (the East, defined as the province of Québec) and English (“the West”, or the rest of Anglophone Canada). This is evidenced in the long poem “The Exile” (69-75) (immediately following the poem titled “At the End of the Road”) in which the poetic voice deliberates the complexity of her own status as an English voice belonging in the primarily French cosmopolitanism of her adopted home:

I'm an Easterner. God of the East, help me.
Which is the way home? I want my city back.
I want my hustle and bustle. I want my city lights.
I want my Montréal. Mother, I'm afraid of the god of
the West.
(70)

Besides manifesting a (real) tension between East and West, this poem also speaks under the guise of an old division between city and nature - and perhaps, by extension, of 'civilization' against 'barbarism'. The distinction is self-evident in the capitalization of the representative, and (French) benevolent "God" of "the East" ("help me"), as opposed to the scaled-down status of the (English) horrifying "god" of "the West" ("I'm afraid..."). These expressions identify a binary interpretation of the Canadian system by which a bipolarity of order ("East") and chaos ("West") are determined by their arbitrary ethnic identities. A critical consideration of these terms also brings up a relevant historical aspect for the city of Montréal at the beginning of the 1980's (the time of publication of this novel) where the socio-political context threatened the existence of the Anglo (economic) community in the province of Québec, as the political weight of the French language issue (as well as the political referendum), would force a reconsideration of one's space-bound identity in relation to one's linguistic form of existence, and ultimately of economic survival - as shown by the mass exodus of English-based enterprises that would exile themselves out of the province during that particular decade.

GO WEST.
FIND YOU OWN GOD.
MAKE YOUR EXIT, CANNIBAL.
WE DON'T WANT YOU HERE. GO
MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN, GO.
(72)

It is not too difficult to imagine the sense of confusion, or of 'having the rug being pulled out of one's feet' which could be performed once again on the immigrant personality who had chosen the English language as her primary form of communication with the world. In such a case, the (newly) acquired sense risks being disrupted one more time. The further (real or imaginative) displacement of the self outside of her current grounding space, that is, outside of the French surroundings of the city, brings the poetic voice to another state of anxiety, yet conversely, it is the thought of Montréal as her city that has become the ultimately grounding thought of "home" (75).

By contrast, the *O Canada Poems* reposition the subject in her displacement through a deliberately aggressive poetic attitude which consistently posits the displaced personality against the extraneous, socio-political demands on her specific identity. Hence the protagonistic perspective is always an outsider's view. The poem "Off the Boat" (118) demonstrates the (ironicized) subjective view as "the (near starving) alien" who "watches", always from the outside, and never acknowledged as an included part of her surroundings.

Maria watches like the sun watches,
watching nothing; simply exploding. But but
this damsel in distress doesn't wave her handkerchief.
That trick is reserved for the natives.

Besides the ex-Roman knows full well

...

Although the poetic irony denotes an affected nobility - the waving of the "handkerchief" - of the prevailing colonial attitude in the Anglo-saxon imaginary ("reserved for the natives"), the distressful awareness of not belonging and the recognition of exclusionary practices both shake up and disrupt previous identity myths and their images in the formative imaginary of the displaced subjectivity. The foundational myths of the juxtaposed "ex-Roman" subjectivity -

such as the historicized myth (or mythicized history) of Romulus and Remus - seem to lose their meaning in the space of the Other which instead offers nothing more than fallacious and empty, manufactured and/or recycled illusions. Thus, the new mirror (cfr. "Mirror Mirror on the Wall", *AQHMC*, 77) in which the subject is reflected, merely reflects desirous 'truths' back onto the critical sensitivity, with consequential effects. The "But but" of the second verse onomatopoeically reproduces the sense of "exploding" myths (as bubbles popping away), expressed in the first part of the verse, while it simultaneously produces the poetic caesura that reveals the distressing breach between the subject's expectations and the reality confronting her and reflecting onto her status of displacement. Yet, the subjective reaction is one of defiance towards a Canadian myth in order to reveal the nature of another breach, this one contained and concealed within the 'official' - that is, implicitly inhabiting the operative imaginary - constitution of the Canadian identity:

and this seasoned urbanite is looking for
financial investments with better returns. Only
first she has to find a way of becoming officially
present in the land of two founding nations: Indian & Eskimo (?).

This ultimate verse points back to the title of the poem ("Off the Boat") in order to pit together three complex ontological forms onto a single space of articulation, in the term "Canadian". These forms include the diverse indigenous cultures who historically inhabit(ed) the "Canadian" territory; the, again diverse, French and English cultures which have historically 'established' themselves into this same territory; and the even wider diversity of immigrant cultures which have helped emulsify the image of Canadian culture. Yet the last words, "Indian & Eskimo (?)", serve here to project back onto the reader his own misrecognition of the qualifier "Canadian" as well as the generic outlines by which indigenous societies are identified and their histories displaced by the myth of the Other - through practices of linguistic displacement and of ontological abstractions. Hence, the Canadian historical tableau presents a deeper ontological problem for the critical newcomer who is able to discern incongruencies which have

been effectively 'removed' from a real, "present" (in its temporal as well as its ontological sense) Canadian image. Hence, the critical 'outsider' vision brings out a de-automation of the Canadian myth. These particular, Other, histories and ontologies are conspicuously made to remain outside the re-formulated historical continuity of the Canadian identity. Moreover, the enunciation of the appellations "Indian & Eskimo" at the end of the poem is meant to jolt the ontological circuit and rouse the established imaginary. Hence the recognition of practices of belonging and exclusion is played out within a comparative framework which testifies to a sense of Canadian identity that is deficient in its actual representation.

"The Striptease" (120) presents another process of disruption, in the striptease act where the body disrupts the (female) voice, replacing it with a presumably suitable altered image:

But the audience did get its money's worth.
Maria had a good pair of tits,

maple leaves tattooed on both of them.

The body divested of its (cultural) surplus will echo back to her viewing audience the sign(s) that represent their fantasies and values. This representation appears to approximate Lacanian thought in which the self cannot be other than alienation and entrapment of the subject in the imaginary. In fact, existence in the image that is reflected back from the Other is the prospect of the Borgesian character who realizes that he exists only in the dream of the Other. By analogy, we might say that this protagonist considers her existence in the dreamworld of Multiculturalism. The disruption of the self is therefore required as a means of acceptance, but this process of re-interpretation is not without a certain amount of violence which takes place within the displaced subjectivity.

"The Forecast" (121) calls for further disruption through the exogamous

relationship.

While Maria gracefully falls
into the arms of another man (a John?)

and unburdens herself
of all that is insanely colorless and cheap

...

The analogical espousal of the Other culture seems almost complete in the poem "Canada Day" (125) in an ironic reformulation of the Spivakian 'salvation paradigm' where the (theoretically dark) woman is 'rescued' from (other dark) men by the white man.

Maria hands her past to the judge.
She hopes he can correct it for her.

But mistakes cannot so easily be erased
(even from one's own memory)

so what does the lady expect from the man-
instant miracles (whipped eh?)?

The *persona non grata* assures the citizenship judge
she really has a (real) husband (made rich in Canada).

Reluctantly, the big prick (unmistakably Canadian
establishment) revises his opinion of the good and beautiful Maria.

He dismisses her fucked-up past
(and sexual indiscretions with Canadian citizens)

and correctly re-classifies her assets:

(her future) non-Italian.

Maria/Mary unmistakably belongs where she is:
the land of un-missed opportunity
if only because the fortune hunter knows how to love
(O Canada).

The displaced subjectivity is required to make her way through the canonical channels toward her 'new' culture by espousing the Anglo-Canadian identity. But the formation process toward the positive "assets" is gauged against a negative process of identification: "non-Italian". The tone of the final articulation "(O Canada)" and its peripheral context set the ironic dimensions of the artistic text. In a re-affirmation of the carnivalesque [Bakhtin], the poetic text instigates a disruptive activity in the (Anglo Canadian) reader who, as a possible target of the poem, is made to deconstruct the cliché phrases and expressions from popular culture, as the images accumulate one on top of the other, in a heap of images manifesting the inescapable complexity of being through meaning.

2. 5 TOWARD THE RECOGNITION OF THE SELF OR, RECIPROCITY OF THE SELF: the spectacle of the self, or, performative reciprocity

Individuals must find their own form of connection to their immediate world: and connections are created through indexes of similarity (more than through difference). It is through the search for these similarities and through common frameworks of reference - revealed through the activity of story-telling - that multitudes or individuals can gain a sense of self and/or of community. But the emergent narratives of cultural displacement also resonate with a taxing run through the gauntlet of difference(s). The displaced condition constantly challenges the sensitive subjectivity to sort out the factors that will constitute a relevant immediate reality. But this attempt is also consistently challenged by

the tension between the up-rooted traditional values and the new influences.⁸⁴ In dealing with this tension, the displaced subjectivity needs to critically sift through actual referents in order to gain a proper understanding of her surroundings as well as to apperceive the relevant framework(s) that will sustain the subjectivity in the space of displacement.

“By the Swamp” (*AQHMC*, 35) suggests the disagreements and disillusion that ensue as the subject resists certain co-optative measures of the ‘host’ culture.

You uproot a few reeds.
Decorations, you declare.
Just reeds, I answer.

You hit me with them.
I throw you into the swamp.

We argue.
Who has the more bruises?
We count them up
but it’s no use.

We argue.
What’s a decoration?
A bruise, a reed or a parting?

Yet as the subject is ‘invited’ to share the illusions that formulate the new (the North American) culture, she must also confront the incongruities that have shaped the traditional narratives of her own (southern Italian) culture. This brings up a notion of specular reciprocity by which the subjective response or

⁸⁴ It is important to note that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, all traditional values are being challenged with rapid and drastic changes to our lifestyle. However, this dissertation looks at the specific condition of the displaced Italian Canadian, as it is expressed in her artistic writings.

resistance to these tensions is first internalized by the subject and then externalized through a critical poietic expression. A different issue emerges as the displaced subject 'mates' with the established cultural entity, specifically if this particular reciprocal (mutually corresponding) relationship is foreshadowed by a historical surplus value or when the divergent historical points of reference in conflicting subjectivities result in the failure to formulate a productive or beneficial space of agreement. In such a case a reciprocative interrelationship might not be possible, and at worst it could signal a highly precarious relationship.

The critical (or sensitive) displaced subjectivity needs to make sense of her present cultural space through a glance into the formative history of the Other which informs her present, in order to "understand" it ("Jealousy", 40): something that he may not feel a need to do. Thus understanding is acquired through the perspectival "instrument" created by this Other: that is through his performative history. "This time I see... \ through an instrument you have made for me." Until this understanding is achieved, the relationship remains dissonant in the sense that a major aspect of the relationship is missing: "You fold up the instrument \ because I simply cannot share you." The displaced subjectivity is compelled to make the effort to locate a shared point of reference with the Other and in fact, to practically yield to the Other in the uniting performance. The performativity of the female (displaced) partner is supported by the "equipment" of her male counterpart as "The Sword Dance" (41) recounts: "...I'm equipped to be a dance on the stars. \ Your love is my equipment." - until the solo performance effectively produces the duet: "You and I, two starry-eyed lovers in one costume, \ will face the world looking like a giant star." The Nietzschean dictum of the necessity of internal chaos to generate a dancing star is poietically re-contextualized in this encounter of diversity, and it is conspicuously buttressed by the suggestion of a reciprocal, hence doubled, performativity in the two subjects, but this is a performativity which is speculative where the subjects have become a *simulacrum* of each other - thus Nietzsche meets Irigaray and Baudrillard.

In "An Old Musical" (42-43), the mating performance occurs through a "ritual", subjective denuding of the female subjectivity, a denuding which is not reciprocally performed by the male partner, that is, to the same degree as that of his (displaced) spouse: "...but you're a man. \ I'll never succeed in undressing you to my satisfaction." In other words, he is able to retain his own private space, even though the language within the intimacy of the couple appears to actualize a desired connection: "You call me by my maiden name. \ You call me by my nickname (Papagena). \ You make cooing sounds. Cooee! \ I'll not christen our staircase - *The Tower of Babel*." The performative, spectacular, "ritual" demands a "mistaken identity" and a certain ludic attitude which will give a required exotic "color to our performance", all of which will be played out under (or over) "a harlequin bedspread". A dual allusion is captured in Melfi's words: one of which is to popular (Harlequin Romance) idealizations of the love relationship. The other allusion would be to the character of Arlecchino from the *Commedia dell'Arte*: Arlecchino is the one who *plays* the fool, yet, who possesses the acumen that advances the play. The double-entendre of the subjective performance is revealed in these intertextualities.

One resolution to the question of the displaced identity can be found in the capacity to recreate the Self, in other words, to realize another living substance from the loving performance of the couple. For the maternal subjectivity, material "comfort isn't more alive than I am - like sawdust. \ This is alive. This is my baby and I need her to be \ here in my arms." ("Here in My Arms", 54). The subjective apprehension that giving life brings life to the Self hence generates a continuity which takes place through the mother-child reciprocity. The new condition would simultaneously cause a redirection of the specular structure, this time bringing into the present context those maternal elements from the subject's own past. In fact, it seems to bring some kind of resolution to previous tensions concerning traditional values, when the subject identifies the (performative) experience which she shares with her own mother, who "can scold me, embrace me or embarrass me \ \ but I know it is her old job to make \ peace and joy ready for me \ at a moment's notice. "Peace and Joy Free of Charge" (55) demonstrates a trajectory which takes place through

the Other in order to engender a new life, - a traditional female charge in front of her male 'spectator' - which refers the subject back through memory into her own history within the power of maternal lineage. "Heaven is akin to a durable womb."

The auratic construct of maternity is not able to transcend the banalities of the daily existential condition. The reciprocal relationship becomes complicated by the anxiety which is brought on by a third presence as it becomes clear that reproduction does not entail a complete and reciprocal reproduction of the self. The existential cognition of the subjectivity expresses a certain world of solitude as the subject contemplates herself not as a part of her own family, but rather, vis-à-vis them: "You're a trespasser. \ You're a fugitive. \ ... \ Admit it. \ No one knows where you are. \ No one knows who you are. \ You're alone. \ ... \ Where are the rubies? \ Where's the magic? ... ("The Carousal", 58-63). The resulting anxiety of the subjectivity brings her back into an oppressive 'mirror stage' by which she is unable to exact "what I remember myself to be liked." ("In the Crowd's Image", 83-86) "I'm in the show. I'm the star. It's a horror show." The subject must still perform according to certain spectacularized rituals, in order to "Recreate", "Reconstruct", and "Change" the self. "I'm ready. I'm ready to disintegrate. I'm ready to please all of my nine friends. Hurry. I'm ready to give myself up."

The O Canada Poems reconsider this sort of mirror stage process in the form of a Freudian⁸⁵ concept of scopophilia, in which the desire of an audience is satisfied through a curious and controlling gaze at the newcomer. The poems "The Stripper" (119) and "The Striptease" (120) return the displaced subjectivity to a pre-linguistic stage of recognition. The subject is placed back into an

⁸⁵ See *Three Essays on Sexuality*. However, in this instance of the male gaze upon the female we can assuredly add that the curiosity does not imply the Freudian search for the presence of a penis.

'amniotic'⁸⁶, as well as semiotic, phase of recognition which entails the projection of the self into the semiotic field of the Other, until a satisfactory 'recognition' is attained - ironically, through a process of misrecognition. Hence the initial declarations of the first two poems - which contrast the subjective right to being and belonging ("The O Canada Poems*", 117) with the oppressive reality of becoming in the so-called multicultural society ("Off the Boat", 118) - are silenced through the scopophilic component on the part of the 'receiving' culture. The displaced body must represent the self in relation to its (new) surroundings in order to project its visible presence. This aspect of becoming through the process of displacement is, in a way, a revisitation of the Lacanian mirror phase (of the child), except that this time, the mirroring activity covers a threefold dimension of recognition in which the subjective body is required to play out the desires of the Other onto the self. Therefore, instead of self-recognition through a subjective narcissism, it is the narcissistic gaze of the Other that ultimately recognizes itself in (or on) the displaced body, before it will accept that body, to differing degrees - and before the displaced body can recognize herself in a re-identification process. At the same time, the poetic space contains, as well as it reflects out towards the reader, this displaced body as it is apperceived. The risk, as Lacan's theory points out, lies in the possibility of (mis)recognized images becoming the ideal representation of the displaced body (of culture), and hence a problematic paradigm for future processes of identification. In this sense, a re-reading of the first two poems, ("The O Canada Poems*" and "Off the Boat") denotes a derogation of the Self-in-culture since the new cultural context postulates an effective process of cultural self-abnegation - demonstrating the Medusa gaze of Otherness imposed by power. The performative stage is therefore a process of a re-identification where the constitution of the ego is aligned with the image that is refracted back onto the woman's body, as object and bearer of guilt. The city of Toronto, named in "The O Canada Poems*" not only indicates the hub of Anglo culture in Canada

⁸⁶ Dr. William Anselmi made this ludic association. He also correlates this 'amniotic' stage with the act of stripping as a form of rebirth recalling Francesco D'Assisi, only this time, the abandoned richness is one's mythology and/or history. However, I would add that Francesco D'Assisi availed himself of the act of stripping as a voluntary means of recognition *by his familiar Others* of his re-invented self. In contrast to this, the "stripper" in this text undergoes a forced disrobing in the space of the cultural Other, wherein the act could be interpreted as the vicarious rape of her culture and history through the performance of the body.

(despite showing the greatest concentration of immigrants), but it also represents the “concentration of cultural vision” for “Canada’s observational culture” (Johnson). This would verify the scopophilic process of transforming bodies/objects into something desirable and consequently ‘acceptable’ . The performance is consequently validated as a static - and neutralized - performance for the ‘ethnic’ festivals of Multiculturalism.

2. 6 Assimilation by death, or death by assimilation

Sensations of anger, shame, depression and economic impotence formulate the content of the bracketed gaze which throws into relief the subjective, displaced consciousness with the dejected conditions it apprehends. The poem “A Welfare Recipient Talks to a Manikin” (*AQHMC*, 20) depicts a sort of phenomenological bracketing, yet without proposing a Husserlian essentialist intentionality. In fact the poetic text actually overshadows Heideggerian phenomenology by employing the bracketing device to define the *displaced* existence from a *displaced*, human perspective .

You and I are lovers
because you’re worth less than a thought
and I’m worthless
because I’m armed with depression,
but no machine gun.

Talk to me, dear, I like you
because with no job, no man
no guts to be merry and holy,
I’m only a beast and a burden.
Poverty is mending my clothes.

You’re naked, but I’m so so hungry for the good life.
Half your body’s missing but I’ve been jailed for
shoplifting

so let's be comrades.

Help me, sweet nothing,
fill the ranks of the unemployed
with the same grace death slaps the face of a president.
Your smile smells like my ambition to be president.

Assassinate me, lady.
I'm ready to be shipped into your arms.

Or find me a job, miss shit house
and I'll ask the shopkeeper to throw you out on the
streets.

Here the poietic bracketing, through the sketching quality of the poetic work, projects the displaced subjective thought forward into a possible future, yet this future precariously depends on contingencies. A singular condition of displacement is recognized in the crucial desire for identification with a living and dynamic Other (versus the static dimension of poverty), in a process of identification which presupposes the metaphorical "death" of the subjectivity in displacement. However the poem can be apprehended through its ironic voice which emerges in the monologue to a "manikin": a vacuous, unsubstantial and fixed - that is, non-dynamic - image of the body with the thematic "smile" which is equally voided of any substance or positive signification so that its poetic recall indicates once again the element of deception which is deployed for the process of assimilation: "Assassinate me, lady. \ I'm ready to be shipped into your arms." The last lines thereby indicate a voiding of the (surplus cultural) subject prior to her consequent displacement into the participatory system of the Other. As in the metaphorical love relationship, the process of assimilation into a system is played out in the form of an non-negotiable acculturation which implies a certain, perhaps unconscious, desire of forgetting wherein this desire entails the metaphorical death. The poem "I Watch His Love Climb Up My Body" (29) suggests that this subjective change is not necessarily consciously

anticipated nor is the process always immediately recognizable or even identifiable:

“Is his love giving your body back parts life took
away?
Isn't it merely taking away all your body's belongings?”

There is no time to squabble. It's here.

“The Liar” (36) proposes the assimilating process as a critical breakdown of the human sense of totality to its common essentiality, shown through the essential image of “the X-ray”. Yet the re-presented, pseudo-phenomenological facts can only suggest conjectural circumstances in the past which are insubstantial in the here and now:

Once inside its gates
we found a garbage can
in which an arm was sticking out,
his ex-wife's arm (he recognized
the bracelet and the ring)
waving an X-ray.

I grabbed the X-ray.
We hurried to his office to have a look at it.

“No mistake about it, ”I said,
add flesh to those two bodies
and you'll have lovers on that screen.”
“Of course,” said the doctor.

...

The female subject seeking totality undertakes a certain discarding process so

that she may secure her presence in the new cultural space, through the seemingly immutable convention of matrimony and domesticity. (Melfi's humorous cynicism in her treatment of marriage and domesticity will be further examined in the analysis of Melfi's *A Bride in Three Acts*.) The repetition of the "garbage can" in this poem and in the following one - "There's a spot on your face \ (round as the lid on a garbage can). \ The spot is less compassionate than a mating bird. \ In fact, the spot is destroying the face I love." ("The Spot", 37) - focuses the attention on the idea of *refuse* so that this "garbage can" represents a container for worthless and meaningless things (or ideas), while "the lid on a garbage can" tells of the containment mechanisms which serve to discard objects that are deemed to be unnecessary surplus to the present time/space.

By the poem "The Carousal" (58-63) - the last poem in the section titled "Welcome" -, the poetic voice is aware of being engulfed in the world of the Other, a world suggesting a paternalistic, or patriarchal, disposition which is still not really comprehensible to her, while only a (warning) sound of her own culture is audible in these lines which play out the binary formula: "The word, \ mamma, \ goes off \ like a siren. \ You're tired. \... \ Father \ looks \ like \ a fog \ and \ mother \ looks \ much \ like \ a foghorn." The poem narrates a sort of shipwrecking of the usual means of support as the voice declares that "To be loved you have to follow their commandments \ (addressed to those who drowned at sea) to the letter." The bracketed irony in this line introduces a subtle warning which resonates with the words "siren" and "foghorn" in the following verses of the poem. The image of the shipwreck along with the use of the term "siren", again foreground the precarious journey of the displaced subjectivity in her role as a female Ulysses figure. Significantly, the image of the shipwreck is the most recurring rhetorical figure in Italian literature, dating

from Roman times as in the writings of Lucretius,⁸⁷ therefore its signification cannot be easily ignored in the discourse of displacement, especially where the sea is present in its metaphorical meanings of life-giver and -taker, and as a channel bringing change (the journey).

A similar “warning” is issued in the last line of the poem “At the End of the Road” (68) but this time, the ship’s “foghorn” warning becomes that of a motor vehicle on *terra firma*, so to speak: “So someone somewhere honks in warning”. The origin and the originator of the warning are unknown as if to add an extra dimension to the subject’s disorientation. This line immediately leads to the following title “An Exile” (69-75), where the poetic voice expresses herself as a French language speaker - “*Ma mère est morte*” - in the Other official language of the new space, to signify her subjective status through a language and culture which are immediately marginalized when transposed into the much broader Anglo space of Canada, depicted here as the Western part of the country (outside of Québec). There is nothing left to do, it seems, but sacrificing the self to the “God of the West”:

Exile, I? Or are you a cannibal, an intrepid
master of ceremonies too, God of the West?
Am I a piece of meat and metal
(without even a star on my forehead) on your altar,
your table, your mountain? Yours. Take me.

But “No! No, I’m not ready and that was the whole point \ in asking: where’s a hotel, Mister? Further West? \ Stop.” The irresoluteness brings the voice back to the desire for a rapprochement with the French Canadian culture which

⁸⁷ See among others, Leopardi’s poem “*Naufagar m’è dolce...*” ; and Hans Blumenberg’s treatise on the subject in *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer: Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher* . Frankfurt am Mein: Suhrkamp, 1979. (*Shipwreck with Spectator: paradigm of a methaphor for existence*. Cambrigde: MIT Press 1997.) Blumenberg’s treatise on the subject at the beginning discusses the ambiguous role of the spectator as witness to the shipwreck, who stands in safety at a distance from the disaster. He then traces how the metaphor changes from distance to proximity, to one with the shipwreck to distancing again, etc. This spectator position in the contemporary world is analyzed by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2003.

appears to be more easily apprehended yet will it really eradicate the culture of origin? The concluding line of the poem, "I wish upon a star I were home" partakes of a Disney theme song "When you wish upon a star..." (sung by the Jiminy Cricket character in Disney's animated film *Pinocchio*) and which became the opening theme for the televised Disney series- while the phrase "I wish...I were home" approximates the famous words of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* ("There's no place like home"), to demonstrate that the new (Other) space, Canada-Oz, is not home, no matter how welcoming or unwelcoming it might appear to be. In this sense, the binary East-West could very well represent both sides of the Atlantic (Italy-Canada) so that the binary discourse is deconstructed (with a 'clicking of the heels') by its simultaneous presence and absence. Hence the fairy tale connection is again present with the 'unreality' of being displaced, to emphasize the distress and neutralize the concept of home (as the hero remains in the anti-environment) in the ending of the poem.

The O Canada Poems demonstrate how the protagonist must complete a specific trajectory towards a status of assimilation which is not desired by the subject. Hence this collection of poems demonstrates how the female "alien" subject must learn to take her place according to perceived conformative practices and learned experiences, and within the conforming aspects of her sexual difference. The picaresque element of the introductory poem "*The O Canada Poems*" demonstrates the ironic "final analysis" of the assimilation project in the formally indented, or rather indentured, lines of the poem to signify the terms under which security (as a bond) is issued. The irony of this first poem resonates in the following one, "Off the Boat" (118), which bears upon the ironic 'illegitimacy' of the Canadian hegemonic (English) culture, while the voice attempts to establish her own sense of "presence": "first she has to find a way of becoming officially \ present in the land of two founding nations: Indian & Eskimo(?)." The tone of resistance in these last two lines expresses a preliminary subjective defiance against the hegemonic (Anglo) culture into which she will be required to assimilate - yet the defiant tone will gradually become turned upon the self and her own culture of origin. The displaced perspective itself frames the Other, established (hegemonized) reality in

displacement, by re-presenting it through the lens of immigrant, as well as of indigenous, displacement - or in other terms, the newest and the oldest cultures which form a disabled framework to the 'founding' cultures.

"The Stripper" (119) announces the synoptic instance (where the many watch the one, as opposed to Bentham's 'panoptic': where the few watch the many) as the field where are played out the tension or struggle of values caused by a perceived necessity that solicits a selling (out) of the self, through a process of exoticization of the body and as a means of effectuating certain 'point of entry' tactics.

Maria and the Pope once stared at each other.
She almost fell in love (with the sacred city)

But she also had to eat.
She became a stripper in a Toronto joint.

But Maria knew how the Pope
felt about those in 'her' profession.

She would often strip off her smile.
Poor girl.

Unhappiness has no sex appeal.
She almost lost her job.

The emphasized "her" is not simply meant to present a moral judgement concerning an underworld sex industry through the prostitution of the body. In fact, the underworld becomes another metaphor for the Canadian space, when considered as a Dantesque 'underworld' (*inferno*), meaning a site of passage for the immigrant (note that emigration connotes a form of 'death') before she can 'rise up' again and become part of the host society (which is not meant to signify the purified state of Dante's character.) But another interpretive aspect

posits the problem of the literary arts and the publishing industry to which the 'immigrant' narrative is required to bare itself and/or play up to the particular demands of the national cultural industries for its survival.⁸⁸ The poem indicates that the displaced mind and body must both depend on the irony of their own being in working to achieve an assimilated state. Yet while there is a perceived necessity of (an at least preliminary) falsity for survival in the host culture, we cannot ascertain the degree to which 'authentic' voices are altered, or even eradicated, in the process of assimilation. Moreover, the figure of the stripper indicates the feminization of the displaced subjectivity through an identification with the body (versus an identification with the individual). Thus in this poem and the following "The Striptease" (120), Melfi plays out the process of assimilation of the immigrant through the negative notion of woman: that is, much like the woman who learns to take her place according to the conventions of her sexual difference while this difference is displaced into a fantasy construct for the scopophilic demands of the *watch*-person, or better, from the watchful perspective of the gatekeeper - which implies the actuality (or duration) of covert boundaries. The allegorical discourse involving the publishing industry can again be engaged in a few telling lines of this poem: "Angels did not come and help her out. \ They were having their own problems with upward mobility" - which can point to the *alienated* (referring to the poietic leitmotiv of the "alien") situation of the (non-British) immigrant subject vis-à-vis a self-absorbed Canadian literary 'industry' which was at the time navigating the channels towards an identity and prominence of its own - or simply indulged in belly-button gazing. Hence the lines: "But the audience did get its money's worth. \ Maria had a good pair of tits, \ \ maple leaves tattooed on both of them", combine a ludic sense of ironic surprise with the resentful irony of an imperative stripping of identity in order to become finally received - even if not truly 'recognized', and even if under a patronistic eye. The last line satirizes the representation of a Canadian marker - the poietic "tattoo" - as a show of 'politically correct' assimilation, which is achieved through caricaturistic functional performativity. (Melfi hence plays out the context of the erotic with

⁸⁸ The poet Len Gasparini broached this problem in his poem "I Was a Poet for the Mafia", concerning the publishing industry. In *Italian Canadian Voices*, Caroline Morgan DiGiovani, ed. Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1984, p. 52

irony as her supreme *jouissance*.)

Mary Melfi is only one of several Italian Canadian writers (issued from the immigration wave of the 1950's) who hold a university degree in English.⁸⁹ Thus from this viewpoint, the allegorical espousal in these poems could refer not merely to the English language but more specifically to an espousal of its canonical channels, through the study and imposition of English literature. Taken in this light, the poem "Canada Day" (125) reaches yet another level of irony requiring another reading of the poem with particular attention to the framing lines of the poem: "Maria hands her past to the judge. \ She hopes he can correct it for her. \ ... \ Maria/Mary unmistakably belongs where she is: \ the land of un-missed opportunity \ if only because the fortune hunter knows how to love \ (O Canada)." Yet the quasi resigned language of these framing verses does not manage to 'contain' the visceral irony of the medial section,

The *persona non grata* assures the citizenship judge
she really has a (real) husband (made rich in Canada)".

Reluctantly, the big prick (unmistakably Canadian
establishment) revises his opinion of the good and beautiful Maria.

He dismisses her fucked-up past
(and sexual indiscretions with Canadian citizens)

and correctly re-classifies her assets:
(her future) non-Italian.

This would point to the necessity of at least the *appearance*, or performance, of assimilation, since the process of assimilation itself is not completed within the (critical, or sensitive) displaced subjectivity. Hence assimilation does not necessarily bring the death of the displacement-in-the-subject, at least not as

⁸⁹ The list of Italian Canadian writers who have acquired their university degrees in English (i.e. Mary di Michele, Frank Paci, Pier Giorgio DiCicco, et.al) also includes a number of Italian Canadian writers who have taught in the English departments of various Canadian universities (i.e. George Amabile, Caterina Edwards, Len Gasparini, etc.)

can be seen in the texts of critical artists. The second verse thus intercalates the cultural (not *collective*) memory in : “But mistakes cannot so easily be erased \ (even from one’s own memory)”. The ironic bracketing of the subjective memory serves almost as a buffering system against the poetic enunciations outside the parentheses. The displaced subject physically feels the operational mechanisms of power, but the question lies in whether she will be able to deflect them.

The artifice of “Camouflage” (127) can become an effective manual for the subject in cultural displacement. At least on the linguistic, or superficial, level, the female displaced subject who “marries” exogamically into the English culture (in the everyday sphere, hence, bringing the control ‘home’)⁹⁰ has the capacity to conceal her displaced subjectivity within her assumption of the spouse’s surname - except in the province of Québec.⁹¹ This linguistic aspect of camouflage can be critically treated as an absolutely feminine means of circumventing the problem of ‘ethnicity’, especially if the subject does not display any external markers of displacement. Hence the literature of displacement explores ways of re-assuming a subjectivity from within, although perceived exclusionary and possibly even morally-charged practices may intervene: “but her native-born plastic surgeon \ insists it is highly un-ethical \ for immigrants to match their natural surroundings \ (that trick is reserved for the frogs).” The Other’s enunciation of an “un-ethical” dimension in regards to cultural displacement may reveal a fear on the part of the “native-born” subject, for the fact that this idea of “camouflage” by the immigrant could be interpreted as an infiltration strategy for purposes of allegedly learning the ‘language’ of the dominant power and using it against them (since this ‘infiltrator’ could not be recognizable as an ‘alien’). However, such a conspiracy theory fails to admit a potential of self-empowerment for this alleged ‘infiltrator’. Moreover, the sardonic, bracketed declaration “(that trick is reserved for the frogs)” spills over into the question of Québec and reveals an abiding distrust (“that trick”) of the French Québécois in the Anglo-Saxon imaginary, as well as a tacit appeal that

⁹⁰ The everyday sphere is intended here in opposition to the literary sphere, where a writer basically chooses to use her own name, or borrows or invents an authorial name.

⁹¹ Québécoise citizens are required by law to retain their maiden name in their marital state.

the French Québécois (and including their adopted 'immigrant' population) stay within 'their own' territorial borders.⁹²

2. 7 Polysemy of ambivalence

In the poem "Look" (*AQHMC*, 15), life in the "mosaic" (of multiculturalism) is narrated from a subjective space which uneasily discerns the selective containment process of the Canadian cultural mosaic, here being subjectively perceived through the marginal viewfinder. Memory is again shown as the agent provocateur between two conflicting lifeworlds in the 'here and now'. Thus the "crazy window" which delineates two (or more) liminal spaces serves to problematize the question of belonging within an official (at least in the Canadian identity collective) "mosaic" space. Thus "that window" indicates this containment and impels the subject to "stare out", although she is aware of the precariousness of the activity: "It's not useful. \ One look was enough to hurt my eyes \ Another look might pluck out my eyes altogether." Thus the poetic voice directs the look towards an *Ur*-grotesque: the unknown and unknowable inside the Platonic cave. However the "*Look*" of the title dictates a distressing re-direction of focus for the poetic voice. This activity of re-directing the gaze demands a corresponding capacity to re-formulate subjective frameworks of perception, so that new conceptualizations of the lifeworld, together with "its stains", become (more) visible. More importantly, these divergent conceptualizations partake of one consciousness which is comprehensively human.

Ironically, consciousness as a generator of human agency must contend with some essentially⁹³ human needs, such as shelter. But in the same way that the body requires shelter, so must the displaced consciousness find a

⁹² The socio-political history of the relationship between French and English Canadians supports this premise and Melfi's poetic critique of this internal animosity should be considered as her socio-political reality. This point will be discussed more intensively in the next chapter (and the conclusion) which deals with the question of a "breach" of a presumed socio-political entente.

⁹³ The use of the term essential is meant to refer to those basic human needs for physical survival, such as shelter and food. The philosophy of this dissertation does not partake of the notions of essentialism and universalism, especially in the discourse of cultures and multiculturalism.

sheltering space of being. The voice in this poetic narration is in that liminal space of ambivalence where the view from the refuge of the metaphorical cave simultaneously apprehends an overbearing and menacing presence. "The Spot" (37) attests to a polysemical sense of home for consciousness in the sphere of displacement:

There's a spot on your face
(round as the lid on a garbage can)
...
The spot is bloodthirsty
and just as pragmatic as the roof over my head.
It flies out of your face and breaks up our marriage
instead of breaking the vacuum (cleaner?)
the world is using to brush its (sanguine) teeth.

The difficulty of fitting a displaced subjectivity into an Other space is graphically presented in the following poem, "A System of Lines: My Husband" (38):

His self-portrait consists of
horizontal and vertical lines.
I am there as a huge circle
he is carrying on his shoulders.

In short, the spousal relationship denotes an architectural system which does not encompass the displaced subjectivity in her complexity and attempting to do so could mean trying to fit a round piece into a square peg. Yet this antithetical geometry can also promise new possibilities, particularly, in the capacity for procreation. The paradoxical resolution to the chaos in this displaced consciousness lies in a subjective displacement of the chaos into the body, where the "chaos inside my body, that superb enigma" is not fearful since it is willfully produced by the subject herself. At the same time that the subjective attention is directed towards a possible fusion with a future presence produced by the self (the spousal participation is downplayed), while the presence of the

spouse from this point on is displaced into a silent and invisible background. The liminal space (the Platonic cave) also becomes displaced inside the womb, from which a lack of “guarantee” and the “mystery” aspect of the process of procreation, in the unknown and/or unknowable, is no longer as fearful in the imaginary of the subject since the new existence would be produced by, as well as being dependent on, the subject’s own body. A philosophical reading of the ‘cave’ and of ‘chaos’ in this interpretation recalls the Socratic irony mentioned in the beginning segments of this chapter. Yet for the actual reading of Melfi’s poetry, we should consider Plato’s use of the Socratic method as a foil for his philosophical city-republic, and the philosophical actualization of a civic and moral sense of order. In contrast to Plato’s stance, Nietzsche’s notion of chaos introduced as a way out of that construction is exemplified by the womb’s function as the cave which entails a space of ‘chaos’ from which will emerge a ‘dancing star’ - thus the Nietzschean viewpoint sustains the ironic stance of Melfi’s poesis.

The ironic ambivalence, however, is not focused on a self that is detached from its external world. Rather, “In The Crowd’s Image” (83-86) depicts the polarizing irony of the persistent values of a modernity that seeks a final resolution to the question of difference⁹⁴. The poetic vision is re-focused outward to problematize the unrelenting spaces of chaos in the external lifeworld:

It’s a modern crowd. It’s sophisticated. They’re dressed up for the occasion. Some are in white tuxedos, some in black. Some of the women are wearing their country’s native costumes. It’s a modern crowd. They want to participate in the horror. We’ll let them participate. Let the crowd come in, Delia. Let the show begin.

The visual irony rests on the image of colourful native costumes worn by the women, against the black and white of the established or acculturated Others.

⁹⁴ There is deliberate allusion here to Adolf Hitler’s program of the Final Solution, to recall the dangers of categorizing human beings into racial categories, which could accordingly be glorified or slated for destruction .

Here again the displaced subjectivity is represented as being female, since no males are represented here in their “native costumes”, but rather they are represented in their (upper scale and pretentious) “tuxedos”. The “black” and/or “white” crowd does not allow for ambivalence in the self, rather, it relegates the variegated and polysemic beings to the liminal space of displacement.

The *O Canada Poems* show more vividly the polysemics that emerge from, or that motivate, ambivalent meanings in the liminality of displacement. The stock phrase quality of the title “Off the Boat” (118) is a pejorative designation in the Anglo Canadian vernacular which is often applied to new Canadians - even if these might have been in Canada for many years - to cynically peg them indefinitely in their difference. In addition to this designated image, the “alien” poetic voice is consistently played off against the image of the “Canadians” throughout a surface discourse of economic differences. It is within this pluralistic reality that the poiesis searches for meaning. The poetic voice thus performs this play of differences through a constant alternation of contrasting images (with my emphasis):

“The (**near starving**) **alien** watches the **very rich** <=> The Canadians are...**strong** and **free** - and she isn't.

The **Tramp** watches the **ladies**... \ like someone about to be executed... \ or like an **executioner** watches \ a **child** make the sign of the cross. \ \

Maria...this **damsel in distress**...

That trick is reserved for the **natives**. <=> the **ex-Roman**...this seasoned urbanite \ first she has to find a way of becoming officially \ **present** in the land of two **founding nations: Indian & Eskimo(?)**.”

The economic discourse which sustains these juxtaposed images presents a clear delineation by which a negative element of difference is sustained. This economic discourse is shown to be the conservative strategy of a colonial status quo which does not appear to recognize -yet which might very well be aware of - the fact that its own dominance rests solely upon the power of its discourse. The central discourse of this poem is framed through the image produced in the

last line: “in the land of two founding nations: Indian & Eskimo(?)” as this image is bounced back to the title of the poem so that indigenous and ‘immigrant’ cultures are effectively precluded from the central discourse. Incoming (Other) cultural groups and indigenous groups are maintained in a sort of underworld, at the same level as the “tramp”. The poetic voice, as a conscious spectator, gains the capacity of liminal vision, so that she can see and relate the spectacle (or the ‘shipwreck’?) of belonging against and within the “Canadian” self-representation where the “strong and free” would presumably live ‘happily ever after’ - in contrast to the hopeless solicitation of the “damsel in distress”.

The technique of the ironic framework is deployed again in “The Forecast” (121), where the title first appears to support a central discourse indicating the required path towards the complete divestment of ‘ethnic’ markers. (The central idea of “The Stripper” and “The Striptease” consistently underscores the poetry.) Again, the framing effect of the last line, “Canada falls into another economic low”, when bounced back to the title, serves to deconstruct the central discourse in the poem: “While Maria gracefully falls \ into the arms of another man (a John?) \ \and unburdens herself \ \of all that is insanely colorless and cheap”. These are ways for Melfi to maintain the surplus meaning of the displaced existence. Moreover the ironic framework of the poetry - along with the ironic bracketing technique within the poem - continuously shakes up its central discourse to denounce its own displacing meanings, and at the same time, to allow for those surplus meanings that identify the displaced subjectivity.

The title “The Ex” (122) is a reduced and incomplete denotation, which in itself points to a surplus meaning beyond that which is anticipated. The first line of the poem attributes the notion of the “ex” to speak of an “ex-lover”, while the remaining body of the poem depicts a disacknowledgment of the subjective cultural identity, as we see in the lines: “But let’s be frank: the Italian stud is really washed \ out her life... \ \ The idea of intimacy with the man repels her \ like the idea of walking on solid waste.” The appearance of ambivalence in this framing technique is intended to maintain the reader on an uneven keel,

perhaps as a means of displacing the displaced reader, while on the other hand, the already culturally displaced reader should be able to identify with the contradictory discourse of the poetic voice. The concept of nostalgia presents its ambivalent characteristic in the lines: “Maria sometimes misses her ex-lover \ ... \ like she sometimes misses parts of her childhood (O Roma). In these lines, the term “(O Roma)” nostalgically precedes the final “(O Canada)” of the poem “Canada Day”, yet the allusive nostalgia carries the awareness that there can never be a complete return to an idealistically innocent condition in the past. Thus nostalgia itself remains in a complex state of ambivalence between different time-spaces. The pressure of assimilation is conceptualized by a required exoticizing of the self (the ‘exotic’ dancer), and by the ironic forcing of memory into a state of pseudo-nostalgia that does not bear any comforting effect but rather that internalizes the anxious realization of not really belonging anywhere.

In “Canada Day” (125) Melfi re-affirms a Bakhtinian sense of the carnivalesque with a fireworks of cliché or stock expressions such as: “instant miracles (whipped eh?)?” \ ...*persona non grata* ... \ ... \ the land of un-missed opportunity”. These and other (occasionally) stylized phrases accumulate amid a discourse which fuses the notion of citizenship with a solid economic foundation. Thus the tortuous process of poetic interpretation itself indicates a complexity of meanings which is sometimes reflected in a superficial ambivalence.

2. 8 Seduced by power: patriarchy, hierarchy, classism

The trajectory of the displaced subjectivity - as we have mentioned before in a comparison with the picaresque genre - takes place through a tacitly hierarchical system that serves to maintain the power of a status quo. The poiesis assumes this discriminating conceptualization through the poetic search for the male, wealthy Other (as representative of the established hegemony) who will authorize, or legitimize, a new presence. Under these terms, the capitalistic state, rather than Multiculturalism, absorbs the immigrant. In the

poem "A Welfare Recipient Talks to a Manikin" (*AQHMC*, 20), the displaced subjectivity attempts a dialogue which falls on the deaf ears of a human-looking, yet inanimate, female figure of the "manikin". The poetic voice speaks from her standpoint in the lowest economic sector of Canadian society: the female welfare recipient. This position makes her invisible and voiceless in the broader social system. Hence, the image of the poetic voice in this muted conversation depicts her powerlessness both as woman and as a poor person who feels "jailed" in her condition. This poem brings up the old phenomenological dilemma: if a voice is unheard (by her Other), has it really been spoken? Yet the need for belonging still prompts a search for an interpretation that designates acceptance and ascension into the world of the Other. The last verses of the poem reveal the means toward the realization of this "appetite for the good life":

Your smile smells like my ambition to be president.

Assassinate me, lady.

I'm ready to be shipped into your arms.

Or find me a job, miss shit house

and I'll ask the shopkeeper to throw you out on the
streets.

Ironically, the thematic metaphor of the "smile" which permeates Melfi's poetic works is shown here in its first instances as a means towards assimilation, that is, through subjective displacement into the spectacle of the smile⁹⁵ - the Cheshire Cat, or the *appearance* of the Trojan Horse, that is, as a hollow form without content⁹⁶ - , as it is demonstrated here by the non-human "manikin".

There is a sense of incompleteness due to the compromising (cultural)

⁹⁵ I have discussed the "spectacle of the smile" in its intertextual relationship to the Cheshire Cat of Alice in Wonderland in the article "Acts of Figuration in Displacement: From Metonymy to Palimpsest." for a monograph series on Mary Melfi, edited by W. Anselmi and to be published by Guernica .

⁹⁶ *Cfr.* Giorgio Agamben, "*L'uomo senza contenuto*" (Rizzoli, 1970) (The man without content, trans. 1999).

displacement that must be compensated in some form. For Melfi, the compensatory poiesis takes the form of the baby discourse, from its desirous inception to its realization (narrated in full in *Infertility Rites*). The initiation of the coupling process briefly exposes the dilemma of this union in “I Watch His Love Climb Up My Body” (29): “It’s here (like a cat muffled up inside a doctor’s bag). \ \ “Is his love giving your body back parts life took away? \ Isn’t it merely taking away all your body’s belongings?” \ There is no time to squabble. It’s here.” The quoted problems belong to a remote voice within the self, a voice which is being “muffled” by an imposed reality which displaces the problematic into that muted sphere. The baby discourse is played off within the trying ups and downs of the desired procreation: the hope for new life is not so easy to realize but rather it must contend with the distress (and grief) of mis-carried attempts. The poetic images in “The Spot” (37) attest to a failure of this challenge: “The spot is bloodthirsty \ and just as pragmatic as the roof over my hear. \ It flies out of your face and breaks up our marriage \ instead of breaking up the vacuum (cleaner?) \ the world is using to brush its (sanguine) teeth.” An analogy with the artistic production industry is maintained in a discursive parallel with the desired “baby” so that the idea of the “vacuum (cleaner?)” (alluding to the dilation and curetage procedure) converges with the “(sanguine) teeth” of “the world” in a double-charged meaning in these last two lines to simultaneously refer to the difficulties, and the artist’s ‘aborted’ effort to reproduce the self in the sphere of displacement. This failure of completion is simultaneously represented as an aborted effort at “breaking up the vacuum...[of] the world”. The vacuum presents the image of a void or of a state of isolation from outside influences in such a way that the world outside is of no moment (*MWCD*). The status of the marital relationship is unable to survive the power of this vacuum since the latter does not allow space for ambivalence: “It flies out of your face and breaks up our marriage \ instead of breaking up the vacuum”. The addition of the word “(cleaner?)” immediately following these words denotes the centripetal power of the machine yet the device of bracketing in a way isolates the ironic voice and emphasizes the inability of “breaking up the vacuum” itself. On the other hand the bracketed ironic discourse works within, yet against, this barrier by injecting arbitrary interpretations, by means of a ‘moveable’ irony so that the bracketing

device becomes the recurring bifurcation point, or window, to admit the critical reader into the parallel discourses.

The graphic representation of “A System of Lines: My Husband” (38) shows the “husband” (her Other) as a subject who evades complete identification while he also claims knowledge over a world into which she is supposed to fit, yet: “I am there as a huge circle \ he is carrying on his shoulders”. The female figure must depend on the knowledge of this male Other in order to find her own presence in the other cultural space: a matter which can be quite problematic for the displaced subjectivity whose potential for empowerment in the new space will derive in great part from these acquired knowledges. This is the reason for the ‘new’ other body which will derive from within the self, and which would displace the Other overwhelming power from without. “Thank God, you fit inside my body \ like color fits inside my eyes. \ \ I’m tired of being lost inside the imperial darkness, \ stranded in the big arms of the bitch, mother nature, alone.” (“You Are As Close to My Body As My Lust”, 44) The subject holds no power in the space of “imperial darkness” as she recognizes this “imperial” power as being a part of her body, so that her sense of disempowerment comes to rule over, and out of, her own body. The poetic image presents the creation process as a Russian nesting doll (*matryoshka*) effect, where the subject ‘doll’ who will hold the new life within her body is herself wrapped within “the big arms of the bitch, mother nature, \ alone.” There is also a significant meaning to “the big arms of the bitch” with its ironical allusion to the symbolic representation of *la lupa di Roma*. The irony lies in the contrastive meanings of the *lupa*, symbolizing the protective guardianship by the she wolf of the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, against the tensive image of being “stranded in the big arms of the bitch”, to provide a multiple discursive meaning. (Another significant connotation of the *lupa* in the Italian language is that of a woman with an insatiable sexual appetite.) Thus these two lines apparently contain and simultaneously emit a sense of sheltering protection mixed with the perception of an invisible danger. Yet the last word, “alone”, is formally isolated from its preceding images so that it conveys the sense of alienation between the displaced subjectivity and any sense of

security.

“An Exile” (69-75) lays out a trajectory within the problematics of the two official linguistic and cultural spaces of Canada - which are geographically divided⁹⁷ Here among the many influences - including the pervading American influences - within the new Canadian cultural space, the subject undergoes a further displacement, so that she is again required to claim an allegiance. She does so in this poem, where “my Montréal” becomes the metaphorical “Mother”, so that the displacement claims adherence to a specific (cosmopolitan) Canadian culture, that of French Québec, while the poetry of displacement is expressed in the English language, the other official language of Canada. Yet the force of “the God of the West”, in terms of the English Canadian culture, presents the threat of neutralization of the “God of the East” (the language and culture of French Québec).

I'm ready to fall over a mountain cliff.

A nocturnal exercise!

Hi, bridegroom! Take me quick, my aboriginal lover.

Make me shine. Turn me into a star tonight.

A star of the West.

...

A mountain is a mountain is a woman perhaps

to impregnate.

...

I wish upon a star I were home.

The process does not occur without an intense irony in the poetic language and images. The question of home (what and where is it?) is re-visited and re-problematized with each ancillary displacement, so that the condition of displacement itself remains a self-reflexive process but it specifically remains a conscious activity (or game) of repositioning the self. In short, the displaced

⁹⁷ As of this writing, Québec is delineated as the French province, while the rest of Canada is officially English, except for New-Brunswick which is the only officially bilingual province. However some cities within provinces, such as Ottawa, can also be designated as bilingual, even if the province itself has an English designation.

subjectivity within the Canadian space is impelled to continuously re-negotiate its presence as it moves through the wide Canadian cultural powerscape.

The initial *stage* of the female protagonist's trajectory in the *OCP* demonstrates some concepts from Laura Mulvey's criticism concerning "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look"⁹⁸ :

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotiv of erotic spectacle: from pinups to striptease (...) she holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire.

Hence the displaced subject does not completely control her new 'development' even though she gives the impression of playing the game of the Other and according to its rules. Moreover, Maria's performance and her "good pair of tits \ \ maple leaves tattooed on both of them" impersonates to a certain degree Mulvey's "female figure, which is styled accordingly". In Melfi's text, the idea of "styling" or better yet, of stylizing the self to please the Other indicates that the displaced subject must first titillate the fantasy of the Other before she may be allowed in. In contrast to Mulvey's male spectator who stands as an active bearer of the controlling gaze outside the representational narrative, Melfi's female protagonist directly confronts the gaze of her male voyeur to the point of personal risk: "Maria was asked to wear nothing but wings. \ But wouldn't you know it - \ \ an all-round Canadian drunk \ came on stage during one of her acts and broke them. \ \ Angels did not come to help her out." Her vulnerable presence is narrated in the impersonal style of the third-person to mask the appearance of a subversive irony in the last lines: "Maria had a good pair of tits, \ \ maple leaves tattooed on both of them."

⁹⁸ "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in Wallis, B. *Art After Modernism*, p 366-7.

Although the poetic voice is female, the male gaze does, at this stage, act out a specific and active role in “making things happen” (Mulvey, 367) so as to forward this narration of displacement. The male gaze is representative of power and of its neutralizing effect on the extradiegetic realities of the woman presented as spectacle. This way, the male spectator seeks to recognize himself (in a sort of mirror recognition) through the female figure, by recognizing on the mask of her body his own internalized myths representative of his particular imaginary identity - although he does not necessarily recognize these myths as the constructions that they are. Hence the (female) displaced subjectivity must validate her presence in the new cultural landscape by passing through the imaginary of the (male) established culture and at the expense of her own cultural reality. Hence the idea of a Catch-22, as suggested in “The Catch” (124), of an official multiculturalism is apparently counterchecked by such conflictual practices. Yet the performative voice in the text reciprocates, Medusa-like, the gaze and exposes *his* death-like fixity in his conventional patriarchal imaginary. This poetic stance conforms to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the “state of exception” (*stato d’eccezione*) signifying a ‘state of death’ (*stato di morte*) as that condition which now invests every structure of power and which empties out in a radical way every experience (and definition of democracy). Agamben calls this the “imperial condition”.⁹⁹

The poem “Off the Boat” (118), which immediately precedes the poems discussed above (“The Stripper”, 119 and “The Striptease, 120) may explain the motives for the performance. The motivational factor toward this (albeit deficient) re-subjectivization is dependent on a sense of being that mimicks the binary system: 1-0, something against nothing, or, being versus nothingness, where the (established) “rich” have a legitimate presence, while the “poor” “alien” is the outside, invisible (thus rendered absent) spectator, who is only allowed to “watch” the rich; hence the incoming identity who does not visibly show a certain internalization of the myth cannot take her place in the actual system of power. For the female, “Love” - or, submission to this patriarchal

⁹⁹ This definition of Agamben’s theory is taken from Antonio Negri’s article “Il frutto maturo della redenzione”, *il manifesto*, 26 luglio, 2003. The question of the “imperial condition” will be discussed further in the following chapter and in the conclusion, on the notion of the “breach” and the internal problematics of Canada vis-à-vis the question of colonialism.

system through assimilative means - "is a far cry from being exploited and/or deported" ("The Catch", 124), metaphorically speaking. A paratextual irony presents itself if we consider the situation of the educated, female (post)immigrant who already represents a threat to the patriarchal system, yet who is internally or extraneously compelled to make a show of subsumption to sustain the former complementarity in the status quo of gender differences. The subjective need for a holistic (rather than just juridic or economic) equality and integrity of being is shown as being systematically ignored, so that the discursive cultural divide between the sexes is exponentially problematized by subjective displacement.

The notion of "Camouflage" (127) brings up the metaphor of the "frogs" referring to the French Canadian culture which, in the Canadian imaginary, has been allowed its own 'designated' space of identity - where it can (now) freely practice its official presence in the French language. But looking at this from the greater, national, picture it becomes clear that this linguistic identity (which is in itself highly variegated and complex even within the Québec culture), when taken outside of its 'protected' cultural zone, inevitably depreciates in the linguistically-determined space of the larger system of cultural hierarchy, that is, within the discriminatory Anglo-Saxon hegemony which permeates the 'rest' of the Canadian territorial space and imaginary, as this latter has been formulated in the British loyalist vision of the Canadian "pact" (this problematic will be elaborated in the next chapter and in the conclusion of this dissertation). In these terms, the socio-cultural practice of multiculturalism falls into the mythical and/or masquerade categories.

2. 9 Paradoxical spaces of silence: forms of control

Interestingly, the performance of the displaced subject ("The Striptease", *OCP* 120) unfolds the myth as a (required) narrative which has taken place over time (from even before 1867) and which is meant to bring a change to one or a group of characters; it also enunciates a certain tension of will(s) as well as the narrational stipulation of success or failure.

Maria was asked to wear nothing but wings.

But wouldn't you know it -

an all-round Canadian drunk

came on stage during one of her acts and broke them.

Angels did not come and help her out.

They were having their own problems with upward mobility.

...

Melfi problematizes the notion of the *stage* as the spatial illusion for a ritualized and silent performance of the myth - the performance being the silent speech of the body in the ghettoized categorization of the performance: yet this protagonist is as aware of her own fragility as she is of her illusory command of the stage - since the ritual performed through the spectatorial gaze - and in the performer's complete silence - must also reach the erotic, or fantasy, instinct of her target audience. To a certain degree the displacement of pleasure from the female body to the male observing gaze is a controllable mechanism, but the subject's ritual (repetitive) and public yet closed performance within a controlled space, serves mainly to determine the limits of control over her own subjectivity. Moreover, this performance takes place within a repetitive (or looped) circuit of representation where the image of the body ends up displacing the word, or its requirement to signify. Instead, the body's attraction by seduction becomes speech and interrelationship towards the Other, according to the visual-conceptual dictates of Western thought. Hence the possible re-definition of the self in displacement exposes the marked illusions of control over self-definition, while at the same time opening up to debate the question of *authenticity* in the definition of identity.

The acquired awareness of various forms of control and silencing over the displaced subjectivity - who retains her *difference* - induces a poesis of ironic configurations to countercheck this perceptible violence, so that the

awareness of the violence can potentially offset the sense of subjective alienation. For example, in “The Forecast” (121), “While Maria gracefully falls”, the ironic voice points to another, muted, impression of a subjective ‘fall from grace’, “into the arms of another man (a John?)”. The irony is fairly obvious: the “arms of another man” suggests a sort of transfer of ‘guardianship’ - in an evidently patriarchal system - for the subjectivity, until the ironic twist provided by the following words “(a John?)”, ironizes the solicitous rapport between the two entities. The irony is further amplified and simultaneously reversed, when this underlying meaning of a devaluation of the self is vocally expressed in the terms “and unburdens herself \ of all that is insanely colorless and cheap”. The irony is amplified by the historical antecedence of Maria who comes from an ‘immortal’ empire (Rome), which has been reduced to fragmentation (in Medieval times) and then to a state (Italy) which ‘falls’ into destitution, a non-being in a world that does recognize the greatness that is/was in her collective nostalgia. Thus the ‘fall’ is a key signifier that unveils religious and historical myths, (and we are back in our mortal self). And ultimately this process of subjective silencing or voiding, directly reflects another denunciation of a voiding activity in: “Canada falls into another economic low.” Thus configurations are continuously un-settled through the paradoxical silence of ironic poesis.

The strategy of silence is again evident in “The Proposition” (123) which proposes a “sightseeing” journey, rather than a verbal audience with “The PM [who] is not in (for aliens)” and to whom she “would have made ..a proposition”. The “proposition” of the poem’s title is ironically charged with the significance of unsaid or silenced “propositions” or deals (*omertà* ?) on the part of both constituents. The opening line of “The Catch” (124), relating that “Maria finally gets it” - and opening up an elaboration of the Catch-22 irony of her situation, already discussed above - establishes another ironic precedent in the last verses: “Love and marriage for Maria \ (an illegal alien, alias Donna Prima) \ is a far cry from being exploited and/or deported.” The bracketed irony contains multiple images of the silenced subjectivity: the notion of the “alien” in addition to its (dis)qualitative “illegal” which, when put together constitutes a stock

expression, is followed by a reworked stock phrases, from Prima Donna, a lead singer in an opera company, to “(...Donna Prima)”¹⁰⁰, effectively silencing the operatic voice to “a far cry”, where it becomes dimmed by dissociative disparities. At the same time, a connotative definition of the term “prima donna” relates to an overly sensitive, vain, and/or undisciplined personality [MWCD] or in other words, someone who posits the spectacle of the self above all else; in this sense, we can deduce another interpretation of Melfi’s irony, in her use of the expression “Donna Prima” indicating a repositioning of the woman (*donna*) by putting her first or before (*prima*) her own spectacularization. The omission of the bracketed verse reinstates another irony, this one in a more literal sense, with the idea of “Love and marriage...[being] a far cry from being exploited and/or deported.” - to produce a revealing image of the grounds on which the relationship is constructed: that is, on the ironies of silence and control. However, the bracketed ironic voice undermines the strategies of silence on the outside.

“Canada Day” (125) depicts an internalized conflict by the displaced subjectivity - represented in the figure of the “*persona non grata*”, that is, as one who is personally unacceptable¹⁰¹ and hence, without verbal rights. However the intensification of conventionally objectionable, and deliberately offensive, language in this poem, i.e., “the big prick” who “dismisses her fucked-up past”, is an acute expression of irony which seeks to silence out societal conventionalities and which also incorporates an ironic sense of guilt, but which culminates in an irony that is understood through the common consumer slogans in the Canadian imaginary, and by ridiculing a generic - or ‘mass’ - English speaker whose existence is verbally substantiated through the stereotypical “eh?” of a certain Canadian vernacular: “so what does the lady expect from the man - \ instant miracles (whipped eh?)?” The socio-linguistic dispositions within this poem reveal a classist system which is tacitly existent yet which can be disclosed through language itself. The whole is correlated to a struggle taking place within the displaced subjectivity thereby relating the pressures of control methods upon the subjectivity.

¹⁰⁰ The suggestion of the Eve figure will come under discussion later in the dissertation.

¹⁰¹ According to the Merriam Webster definition.

2.10 The language of dreams and the revelation of private dimensions

It is reasonable to assume that the impact or distress of cultural displacement may be absorbed, to certain degrees, within the sphere of unconscious images which are released through the language of dreams or through the language of a critical self-consciousness. Going beyond Freud,¹⁰² as images of dreams achieve re-verbalization in a conscious sphere they provide an alternative to shed or explore the dissonances which inform the ontological moment. Hence the poetic notion of the dream introduces a polyphonic space which encompasses all that the subject is in (her known) language, yet the displaced dream space may also reveal an ideologic surplus to the known language itself. In any case, the images emerging from the unconscious or subconscious bring back to language its requirements of signifying even though these requirements are not always met in the conscious world. This failure to signify could signal the dominating framework of visual-conceptual thought, as can be evidenced in the *OCP* collection, where the “stripper” (119-20) is depicted as the public self (the public “I”) inside the controlled space of the look, or inside the *synopticon* until this *synopticon* is virtually internalized as the reformulated Super Ego in the subjectivity through the channel of the gaze of her male audience.¹⁰³ But as mentioned in the section immediately preceding this one, the repetitive representation of the image (through the ritual of the dance) corresponds to a continuous elimination of the word by the tautological image. In a similar way, the public “I”, looking at, and absorbing the self through the spectacle of the performance risks falling into this circuit of representation that threatens to eliminate the self through the

¹⁰² Freud’s analysis addresses the question of displacement within consciousness as part of the dreaming process, however, as far as I know this analytic field did not address problematics of dreams in the consciousness of culturally displaced subjects.

¹⁰³ Although a feminist criticism is highly applicable in this representation, the focus of this dissertation is on the patriarchal system in the sense of control of a society which consists of both genders (and sexual lifestyles). In addition, it must be remembered throughout the analysis that the displaced subject, whether male or female, has been socio-politically feminized, that is, cast in the disempowered category as the traditional female subject. Displacement partakes of several categories of criticism including that of gender and sexuality.

assumption of an image of the Other.

The poetic voice claims her sense of 'being there' and her sense of signifying through the seducing power of the poetic image which is accessible only in its interrelationship with the poetic text. Hence the poetic text itself, through the power of the word-image, assumes the channelling function between a possibly hostile external world and a private dimension which is lived as a parallel ontogeny. In this sense, the ironic disposition which usually articulates an other, impossible world (in direct antithesis to its 'real' counterpart) is recognized in the poetic text as a point of aperture into that parallel ontogeny. The window of irony - represented in Melfi's bracketing technique - thus assumes a channelling function into the subjective private dimension when the analysis takes into account its parallel utterance in the wider sphere of the text. Moreover, the individual poetic anthology of ironic utterances - drawn from the private dimension - brings up the ontological question of the possibility and/or nature of parallel existences within displacement. From this standpoint, the praxis of ironic play, through the making and undoing of meanings in the public dimension of the written/verbal poetic word would, ideally, minister a proper sense of equilibrium in the private dimension. Hence the correlation between words and their *alternative* (rather than their opposite) forms of signification opens up an ontogenic space which is organized by this ironic tendency.

The poetry of displacement thus provides a wealth of images which will not be comprehended in its entirety by the monocultural and monolingual (Canadian or other) reader. Indeed, the irony which is obvious to one reader/listener might not hold any signification to the other specifically because the displaced text contains a memory of images which are based upon a complexity of experiences which can only be individual. Yet the images and language of the displaced poetic text can also represent an authentic connection among the disconnected. In other words, *authenticity* relates to dynamic forms of communication and therefore to a process - rather than to a content. In this sense, the poetic word becomes an authentic process as it

passes from written word (content) to its verbal enunciation but only inasmuch as its signification can be perceived in its complexity.

2. 11 From metamorphosis to metamorphosis

The 'baby discourse' of *AQHMC* - analogically with the bio-political discourse of the *OCP* - speaks of a desired metamorphosis which is physically impermanent (9 months of pregnancy) and suggestive of an affective, i.e., psychological, emotional (albeit ideology free), permanence while creating a material identity matrix in and through the subject herself. In other words, this desirable metamorphosis is a would-, or could-be, revolutionary event and as such it bears an affinity with the utopic discourse. Moreover, the metamorphosis of the 'baby discourse' is sought towards the consequential purpose of creating a being in the image of the ontological self and as its ontogenic continuation, in a similar configuration with the utopic vision. Hence, this metamorphosis addresses eternity ("The Lobotomy" ,12) as the (pre-romantic) utopic vision that unites a subjective, elapsed history with the wonder that is contained in the eternity of the moment. Thus the subject seeks "To gain favor with Eternity" since this desire for "eternity" can also, ironically, play Medusa to a subjective history: "With half my brain missing \ I'm bound to give up reading the obituaries \ (voraciously)." A collateral metamorphosis is perceived as the matrix of reference is revised so as to mark "the God of the East, "my Montréal" and "Québec, *mon pays*" as a new matro-trinity. ("An Exile", 69-75) This metamorphosis is immaterial to the still elusive, desired metamorphosis and it is sensed through another displacement within the greater area of displacement, that is, Canada outside Québec. Though the ontological revolutionary moment itself is indistinct, it is marked by this encounter of the metamorphological self within the self.

The metamorphological trajectory of the *OCP* is manifestly bio-political and is recounted in a flashback technique depicting, in the initial poem ("The O Canada Poems*", 117), the resulting status of the subject as she "recounts" the

stages, or “adventures” of her acculturation¹⁰⁴ , since the metamorphosis in this collection takes place through a process of Canadian acculturation. The “almost everything an \ ex-stripper in a Toronto joint \ could have wished for (in random order)” is presented as a list of status signals, each presenting a new identity-sign in itself, while simultaneously presenting only different facets of her conforming identity in the lines which are significantly set off from the margin:

- a) Canadian citizenship,
- b) matrimony to an aging oil baron and
- c) an unexpected career in the literary arts

in the language of the greatest word
mafioso of all times, Shakespeare himself

The indented (or indentured) qualifications for a legitimate Canadian identity immediately follows the para-naming (that is, of naming herself ‘outside the text’) of “Maria F- \ an illegal alien...”, all of which is followed by the ironic usage of the word “*mafioso*” to displace the familiar (especially in the North American imaginary) stereotype - used to refer to individuals of Italian origin -, and unloading it back onto the English (literary) institutions by appending the word “*mafioso*” to a super-charged notion of “Shakespeare”. The alliterative quality of the two expressions, “Maria F-” and “*mafioso*” also draws them together so that the first term seems to fall right into the latter, and in this way parodying the associative play of stereotypes. Moreover the presentation of “Maria F-” as “(an illegitimate kid..)” also proffers a defamatory correlation with the enunciation of “Shakespeare”. Thus this short poem problematizes the question of cultural identity while at the same time caricaturizing an inevitable fall into its conceptual trappings. This would signify that the displaced subject’s desire for belonging is driven by the social, cultural and linguistic discourse, hence the ideal, or utopic discourse of the Other. “Maria/Mary” diffidently follows the required trajectory, continuously referring to herself in numerous derogative terms such as “an illegal alien”, “an illegitimate kid”, a “stripper” and “ex-stripper”, etc., as if to paraphrase and then exorcise herself from her displaced identity. The

¹⁰⁴ This flashback technique was also used in Melfi’s *A Bride in Three Acts* (1983), which will be analyzed in the next section.

attempted metamorphosis reaches its ironic peak in "O Canada" (125), "Maria/Mary unmistakably belongs where she is: \ the land of un-missed opportunity \ if only because the fortune hunter knows how to love \ (O Canada)". Yet the metamorphosis is still incomplete as the name Maria almost assumes the qualities of a *nom de guerre* - or perhaps, a *non de guerre*, if we consider the expression in its description of the poet on the street (as opposed to a *nom de plume*, which indicates the ivory intellectual), constantly being reinforced through its repetition in each of the remaining poems, as if to indicate the violence of the metamorphological revolution, and its incapacity of completion, at least until several other objectives are attained, such as the accumulation of capital and of identity definitions.

The anthropological question of metamorphosis engages the figure of the *dakîni* as the personification of the female energy that gives life to the cosmos (as previously mentioned) and as a means of accessing a superior condition of consciousness. This figure merges with the historical literary personification of the woman as the guide for the male hero i.e. Dante's Beatrice (*Paradiso*). In this type of representation, the *donna guida* serves as the channel of access for her male counterpart to a higher (or purer) conscious being - a configuration that presupposes the female's *a priori* inhabitation in the higher state of knowledge. In contrast to this, the displaced female subjectivity in this analysis demonstrates a reorganization of the process of metamorphosis in the sense that our protagonist determines her own trajectory towards her metamorphosis, so that the *donna guida* is reformulated as the *donna iter*, who negotiates her own channel of access and through the measure of her own local and acquired knowledges, as well as through the gaze of the Other to a certain degree, thereby principally relying on the self as the place of knowledge that will generate the metamorphological process. Yet the transformation entails a certain trial of faith by requiring the subject's disposition toward the uncertainty of the game, so that the female subject becomes *la donna giocatrice* (the gambler) who puts the highest stakes, the self, on an undetermined outcome. The poietic composition of displacement expands to allow the intercedence and reinterpretation of Walter Benjamin's angel of history where

the angel's backward glance, transposed into the poiesis itself, could be interpreted as a means of reconsidering the subject's apprehensive relationship with her displacement from her particular cultural history. This means possible renegotiations in a present that is substantiated by the interruption of her past, indicated by the look itself.¹⁰⁵ The question of the angel in the possibility of metamorphosis lies in the ability to outrun an accumulated (and possibly still accumulating) history which might jeopardize the present and the ensuing future for the self. A potential means of redemption appears through the politicized act of the poietic text.

2. 12 An invitation to the ritual: questions of representation

Both titles, *A Queen Is Holding A Mummified Cat* and *The O Canada Poems*, pertain to, and signify, ritual events. The first poetic collection, *AQHMC*, in addition to being the lyrical precursor to the prose narrative *Infertility Rites* (1991), presents an *image* of infertility in the *idea* of a performative ritual, whereby the image itself is empowered by a repetitive pattern of events and gains the quality of a ritual also in terms of its use of representation(s). The *OCP*, on the other hand, restate the questions of *image* and *idea* in a problematical relation to their representational uses - and abuses. Both of these texts are structured around a conceptual performance sometimes emerging explicitly as a dance, i.e. "The Sword Dance" (*AQHMC*, 41) and "The Striptease" (*OCP*, 120). But the poetic content of *AQHMC* undermines the threat of solidification into ritual, through a successful reproduction of the 'us', naturally, through the 'I-you' relationship. This ritualistic renewal is translated into the socio-political context, as evidenced in the *OCP*, where a ritualized reenactment of the self engages an Other self, that is, alienated from the antecedent self in the new element. Thus the signification of the body is particularized in each instance: *AQHMC* invokes the ceremony of the ritual ("An Old Musical" 42-3; "In the Crowd's Image" 83-86) toward a desired, material performance by the body, while in the *OCP*, the body must willfully represent its imposed desire through a ritualized performance so that it may achieve

¹⁰⁵ The question of an interruption does not exactly follow the schema of Anselmi and Gouliamos (in *Elusive Margins*) since theirs would entail a nostalgic disposition that is not visible in Melfi's text.

recognition into the process, if not into the content, of the Other in the space of displacement. An invitation to the ritual therefore corresponds to an invitation into the performance of a morphological process in each instance, although in various forms and in varying degrees. The performative trajectories in relation to the body could be represented as pointing toward opposite directions, where the body presents the successful finality in the first text, while in the second, the material body is presented as a performative starting point toward another, more abstract goal. In both of these works, the body as text is remodeled to a degree through the look (or love) of the Other - hence the proportionate necessity of the Other for the accomplishment of the ritual in displacement. Yet in both cases the female body offers itself in the ritual as the potential catalyst. The case of *AQHMC* in particular demonstrates an anthropological process, wherein the circular orbit of the female inner space contains and deploys the ancestral forces of its bio-political presence. In the case of the *OCP*, the bio-political presence is exposed on the outer space of the body and does not depend on the deployment of ancestral forces. The apprehension of the self as the catalyst - as the agent that provokes and/or speeds significant change - would thus downplay Spivak's 'saviour paradigm' for the fact that the female "I" , through the performative ritual, insists on her own continued historical existence and on the possibility of self-representation of her own experience.

2. 13 Symbolic dispossession of the self

The idea of the ritual towards a re-organization of the self is vital for the reinforcement of the self in displacement, but this re-organization occurs through the power of the Super ego, that is, through internalized forms of the Other - in other words, through the colonization of the displaced subject. The re-organization of the self also induces a temporary letting-go of the self (as ego) into the Other, that is, through established (patriarchal) structures of attraction. In this way, the impression of a subjective loss into this Other corresponds to an alternative perception of the self. However, the shifted identification process, that is, from a subjective experiential derivation to an extraneous re-organization, retains a meaning within the symbolic articulation of subjective

desires in poiesis. Moreover, the images and symbols of the feminine subject(s) in these texts overcome limitations that are critically attributed to female sexuality¹⁰⁶ by bringing into play the socio-political contextualization of displacement. Hence it is an integral representation of subjective displacement, and not a mere representation of woman in her sexuality, that reveals the conditioning agents toward a potentially adequate praxis from within a state of displacement. In other words, as the possibility for an integral presence ('I am all that I have been') spills into a generalized reduction of existence or a forgetfulness of one's presence, ('I am sexual woman, period.') woman risks a historical backsliding into "just a symbol of mediocrity" (*AQHMC*, 13). This sexualized subjectivity stands (or perhaps more accurately, lies) outside of historical time, signifying a principal measure for the disempowerment of the female subject and for the neutralization of any critical discourse which may inhabit the 'feminine' poiesis. But paradoxically, and as pointed out in the previous section, the female sexuality is ironically that which permits fertility and reproduction so that, in this sense, it is the catalyst that permits historical continuity: hence the ambiguousness of the female subject in historical discourse.

The symbolic dispossession of the self which is not imposed by a colonialistic criticism must be distinguished in and through the poetic self-representation, and inside the self-referential discourse of the protagonist voice. The *OCP* present a directly socio-political discourse so that the female voice can be distinctly heard outside of her sexualized identification while at the same time problematizing sexualizing strategies. The *OCP* manifest a certain process of seduction taking place in both directions. It is quite clear that in social practice, a seductive performance, poetically represented here through the "striptease", is required of the "alien" who, in a sheer disguise of the Napoleonic code, will remain an "alien" until she can undoubtedly prove her 'Canadian-ness' and/or until her upgraded financial status can legitimate her presence in the eyes of the established society. In this sense, the poem "The Ex" (122) assumes a centrality for the *OCP* because it articulates an ambiguous,

¹⁰⁶ There is a tendency for Italian Canadian critics to corner the feminine writers into an exclusive category as if the texts merely narrated a kind of 'female condition'. See Pivato, et al.

psychological moment of dis/possession - which is also the moment depicted by the analogical image of the angel. The simple use of the prefix “ex” as the substance value of the title projects a truncation of subjective identities in the simple reductive term, while it simultaneously relates its polysemic quality. The polysemic “Ex” in this poem primarily implicates an Italian “ex-lover” while it also picks up the other poetic references to Maria herself as the “ex-stripper” (117), “the ex-Roman” (118), an “ex-alien” (126). In other words, the prefix “ex” precludes any attempt at definition of the subjectivity in displacement since all of these terms preceded by the “ex” are attributed in the space of displacement. The prefix thus serves to bring out several facets of its definition such as being *from* another, significantly different cultural space; of being *without* something (wealth) or someone (the “ex-lover” or her family); of a *former* position or state of being (an ex-lover); of being *outside* (in the cultural exclave); of *not* taking active part in a (hi)story (*exegesis*). Yet to these we can add the connotation of extant, as an assertion of *existence* and of a sustaining being over and/or above this existence. Hence the notion of dispossession is symbolically engaged in the poetic text as a paradoxical means to arrest and possibly reverse a negative process. In the end, the poetic notions of “Camouflage” (127) and of “The Costume” (129) indicate the necessity to accommodate the “ex” within the scope of the *O Canada Poems*. Ironically, the poesis harbours another extreme in the quality of life-generating forces which take place through the female - while the role her male counterpart is detached - therefore ‘ex-ed’ - into that of the spectator in her process of transformation.

2. 14 Poetry, transgression and eroticism: return to origins

As Maria gracefully falls
 into the arms of another man (a John?)
 ...
 (“The Forecast”, *OCP* 121)

The Freudian tension point between life/love (*eros*) and death (*thanatos*) can be paralleled in the notion of the Garden of Eden, or rather in the ‘Fall’ from

a defined point of origin, which is recalled in the modern displaced subjectivity as a tension of being which seeks a renewed balance between the dichotomized instinctual drives and self-preservation. The displacement generates a reorganization of the tensorial components, inducing a critical return to the origins of the myth. Hence since the idea of displacement contains the notion the 'Fall' itself, it also prompts a reconsideration of *eros* and *thanatos* in the subjective state of displacement. The poetic discourse of *AQHMC* also replays the moment following the fall as the moment of *thanatos* which might possibly be redeemed through *eros*, or the erotic moment, by seeking regeneration in the new space. Hence the erotic moment is invoked as a tentative reunion of *eros* with *thanatos*, yet within a restricted field of tension. Both elements are present in those moments where the myth of Adam and Eve is alluded to in the poetry, such as in "The Liar" (36) where the voice relates:

"Isn't that the lady who tried to unman you?"

"Myth," said my man.

These ending lines of the poem implicate the male repudiation of a notion of the Fall since it would imply a breach in the authenticity of patriarchal dominance. Thus the "myth" of the status quo paradoxically affirms itself against possible interferences by neutralizing possible points of tension and/or relegating all tensions to the mythical realm.

In the question of the exogamous relationship, the maintenance of the myth implies the application of a process of inductive transgression for the so-called outsider, through the erotic channels sustained by the dominant realm. This notion is relevant to the question of the exogamous marriage in its analogical form as the possible emergence of a literary voice. It is significant that the initial poem in the *OCP* lists "an unexpected career in the literary arts" as one index of subjective 'arrival', or success, in Canada. However, the poetic discourse elaborated in *AQHMC* metaphorically posits particular ontogenetic aspects that condition the material consummation of the relationship: the desired baby. Paradoxically, the failed pregnancy narrates a caesura with erotic origins

while it maintains the subject in her precedent state. At the same time, any idea of transgressive action remains at the tacit stage, at least, until it erupts in and through language, as the vehicle of "An Exile" (69-75):

Here are the masks
or are they the faces?
The faeces of my own God? ...

I honk the horn of my car, a cougar,
my sweet American cougar.
I honk. Will my honking (a sure lamentation)
inspire the God of the West (a mountaineer?) with pity?
I'm afraid, thoroughly afraid of these mountains
because their mouths are wide-open
and I can easily slip into their void
because the God of the West is crying.
(Or is it vomit?) It is dark.

The fear of transgressing into the Other implicates a retrospective stance and the introspective knowledge of human exile into and among the multitude: "I'm alone, an exile, an expatriot, a citizen of fear." (71) Hence "that Garden of Eden" is announced as "the mirror" ("Mirror Mirror on the Wall" 78) into which the spectacle of the bodily self is discharged along with all its desires. "I'd attempt \ to protect at all costs \ what I behold in the mirror \ (rustproof like a fairyland's staircase). \ Because it's not empty it's fragile."

In the *OCP* the testimonial of transgression is manifest as the "The Catch" (24), at the poetic moment where "Love and marriage for Maria \ (an illegal alien, alias Donna Prima)" refers to the Italian "Donna Prima" which literally translates as the "first woman", alias Eve. This dual definition of the Eve figure - that is, as the Christo-mythological symbol of female genesis who is also "Maria (an illegal alien)", contains in itself a drive towards a certain transgression (possibly against the self) which translates into an instinctual *thanatos* in which

woman is also valued as prime material for the construction of life while at the same time becoming the paradigm of her subalternity. The appellation of 'first woman' is misrepresentative unless this woman successfully recreates her form into another human being. (In Catholic terms, the representation of a first woman also connotes "Maria" as the Virgin Mary who generated the beginnings of Christianity and who also represented an 'illegal alien', or subaltern, presence in a historical geospace.)

The *OCP* do not invoke the reconstruction of the self through a process of human recreation in the sense of a 'baby discourse' as in *AQHMC* but rather it tackles the question of displacement at the primary level of the erotic instinct, through the performative image of "The Stripper" (119). In this text, a required, artificial performance showcases an erotic image upon which can be set an economic value. "Unhappiness has no sex appeal. \ She almost lost her job." The application of an economic value on the displaced subjectivity is achieved initially through its constructed erotic image as well as a thanatological impetus.¹⁰⁷ "But the audience did get its money's worth. \ Maria had a good pair of tits, \ maple leaves tattooed on both of them." ("The Striptease" 120) The thanatological discourse cites the precedent, rendering it all as "The Ex", as something that must pass into the Other world of memory and remain within its limits, so that the origins of the self become the silenced Other. However, poiesis provides a recuperative terrain for another, nomadic impulse which continuously transgresses the limits of the acculturation discourse in order to ascertain a personal access to erotic (life-giving) origins. At the same time, the spectacle of transgression works as a mutually reflexive process through which images of the newcomer are offset by those of the established citizen in a disciplinary strategy for the control of subjective desires which are related to an Other. This specular aspect of transgression serves a virtual function in the

¹⁰⁷ *Cfr.* Articles such as these by Diane Francis (financial commentator for the National Post) were reproduced in the Edmonton Journal. A small sampling includes "Sanctity of Canada's border criminally compromised" (January 24, 1999) and "immigration sponsorship policy a disaster, \$1B annual bill for taxpayers as relatives opt out" (March 14, 1999).

rhetoric of Multiculturalism.¹⁰⁸ Hence the poetic work contains within itself the dichotomous *eros* and *thanatos* in a Nietzschean mechanism for the comprehension of the world. In reference to Benjamin's angel of history, the idea of transgression is introduced in Gershom Scholem's first essay (and in relation to Benjamin's angel) as a conducive element towards redemption from catastrophe. For Scholem, looking back signifies picking up the link between catastrophe and redemption and thus permitting the individuation of the concept of catastrophe as a generative space for a new identity.¹⁰⁹ This idea, which forms the foundational nucleus of Scholem's research on religious nihilism, brings up a juxtapositional aspect of the two works under discussion by emphasizing the presence of a spiritual focus in *AQHMC* versus the absence of this spiritual focus in the *OCP*. However, Melfi's texts bypass a strict definition of nihilism (which prescribes destruction without reconstruction) while simultaneously partaking of specific intertextual elements in the proclamations of the first Futuristic manifesto, as previously mentioned.

2. 15 (Reader discretion is advised:) the use of 'coarse language' in poetic representation

Melfi's use of terms generally considered vulgar conveys the shock of disillusion and an awareness of a certain betrayal. In *AQHMC* the idea of vulgarity is minimal and is reduced to scatological references or allegedly blasphemous notions, for example in "An Exile" where the poetic voice proclaims that "even God's bowels \ are worthy of a show in the West." (70) Yet this God - an in fact, all Gods: "Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, pantheist or atheist" ("In the Crowd's Image" 86)- are cynically implored for the purpose of recreation.

...let them each have a turn to play God. My body is clay. My spirit is clay.

¹⁰⁸ This strategy of specularization for subjective control is not new; in fact, it has formed the basis of preaching techniques which can be verified in surviving texts from the Middle Ages. In modern terms, this form of exercise falls under the auspices of a pedagogy of citizenship, thus demonstrating the prevailing power of the image as a means of discipline and control.

¹⁰⁹ Consult Scholem's essays and his correspondence with Benjamin. Also, David Bidussa's essay "*Uno sguardo senza nostalgia*", *il manifesto*, 27 agosto 2003, from which these explanations are drawn.

Let them turn me against myself. Let them turn me into what they think I should be. In the spit image of their fathers? Their mothers? Their idols? Give them a chance to turn me into an image of themselves. Give them a chance to play God.

I'm ready. Don't be shy. Recreate me. Reconstruct me. Change me. Hurry. Use all the instruments at your disposal. Use all the horror you need. I'm insured. I'm a star. You've got two minutes and a half. Hurry. The others are waiting.

I'm ready. I'm ready to disintegrate. I'm ready to please all of my nine friends. Hurry. I'm ready to give myself up. Yes, squeeze me and I'll cry. Open my legs and I'll laugh, yes. Yes, open and close my eyes.

The body takes precedence in the form of a passive offering for the rite that would impregnate the subject's sense of existence with a concrete meaning. Yet woman as sexual object has a plural signification when it is defined by displacement. Hence Laura Mulvey's observations on the "traditional exhibitionist role" of women need to be re-addressed within the question of the displaced female. Mulvey states further in her essay (Wallis, 366):

The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This *alien* presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. [my italics]

While Mulvey's criticism concerns the female presence in (male) filmic narrative, the issue that concerns the analysis of the *OCP* is in the last sentence where erotic woman is considered as an "alien presence" - by her spectators, who will ultimately dissociate her role and/or importance from a predominantly patriarchist narrative. Mulvey exposes exclusionary mechanisms of a patriarchist social narrative which can also be said to project over the social and psychological status of the displaced personality.¹¹⁰ "The Stripper" (119)

¹¹⁰ This idea of eroticized woman, as well as Mulvey's concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness" correlate with Melfi's definition of "fuckability" in the novel *Infertility Rites*.

depicts such a prescribed performative approach - "But she also had to eat. \ She became a stripper in a Toronto joint." Yet the performative course, as illustrated in the image of "The Striptease" (120), is a perilous one:

an all-round Canadian drunk
came on stage during one of her acts and broke them [her wings]
Angels did not come and help her out.
They were having their own problem with upward mobility.

However, Melfi displaces Mulvey's model by setting up the female protagonist as the mirror that refracts the Other culture as a crude ironic image of itself. In answer to the menacing behaviour of her 'audience' the subject semiologizes her irony through the body. "Maria had a good pair of tits, \ \ maples leaves tattooed on both of them." Maria's reaction shows a critical awareness of the new system and a quick disposition to comprehend the standards of its spectacle, while displaying an ironic concession to its process, if only on the superficial level. The bottom line is that she must seduce to survive. Hence the poetic voice gains a more aggressive ironic edge due to behavioural pressure in and from the new, Other space - as if the dimension of irony itself assumes a sublimating function within the expanse of displacement.

The marginalized dimension of the *OCP* brings up allusions to the underworld of the sex trade, i.e. "(a John?)". Moreover, the double-negative designation "illegal alien" exemplifies the dehumanizing tactics which reside in common language and subsequently in the common imaginary.¹¹¹ These marginalized states depict a transgressive subjectivity as a personality which is deemed not desirable to the moral citizenship of the new time/space. The notion of time is relevant here for the reason that displacement produces a sense of individual desynchronization in and from (at least) two cultural spaces - in short, she stands outside of time, in the sense that there is no longer any historical time which corresponds to her. These blunt renditions of the process of

¹¹¹ Melfi's discourse involves the predicament of immigrant groups whose way into another country is through sex, by means of prostitution, especially of the female. And even street prostitution is hierarchically ethnic - see in Italy for example, where the bottom rung contains the prostitutes from Naples, while the Russian prostitutes occupy the top of the ladder.

displacement also seek to exploit the reader's sense of moral impurity, or of impure morality, in relation to two (or more) conflictual cultural spaces. But more importantly, the poietic passage through the marginalized zone (in the new space) represents a dynamic displacement which is boosted by an ironic image of conformity. Thus the ironic disposition of the self is also the driving force that can intersect the Other in and through language.

The sharp irony of the poetic expression corresponds to a detection of deceptive notions. In fact, the displaced subjectivity survives her passage upon these shaky grounds, through her praxis of recognitive and demasking irony. For example, "The Proposition" (123) translates the pressure of subjectively belonging as a forceful 'desire'. "She would do anything to change her status \ (and become officially Canadian). \ \ The PM is not in (for aliens)." This harsh revelation is counterchecked by a sardonic use of *mafioso* language to bring out and neutralize the intertextualized stereotype (with the popular phrase from the *Godfather* movie). "She would have made the PM a proposition \ (a real man in his right mind \ could not have refused)." The use of the conditionals "would" and "could" demonstrates a sense of disempowerment in relation to the stereotypes. (Stereotypes that describe Otherness are set off against nationalistic forms of stereotyping that seek to formulate appealing traits of national character in techniques that entail seductiveness and sometimes, a betrayal of affection.)¹¹² The connotative irony is then extended to a perceived hypocrisy of the new geographical space which the voice claims to be no more than the image of its ideal organization. The last lines of the poem speak out clearly: "But only in Canada, a just bureaucracy \ (if not a just society) \ could such a (Wop?) trick fail to work. Pity." The idea of "bureaucracy" refers to the Establishment, as a system of organizational control which is contained within the ideal realm of its policies. The ironic voice recognizes a discrepancy and a displacement of ideals that are not actuated in a real, "just society". Moreover, the notion of "bureaucracy" signifies a masking strategy which trickles into the imaginary of the socio-political sphere as the illusion of itself. This apriority

¹¹² The sense of a betrayal of affection is particularly significant in the Canadian space which has a history of sentiments of betrayal on the part of minority groups, most loudly denounced by the Québec français.

reinforces the subjective state of displacement, where the derogatory appellation of “Wop” that is, the donning of the (stereotypologically ordained) ‘alien’ mask and the coincident lack of a protective national ‘mask’, simultaneously illustrates a uneasy sense of exposure in a potentially hostile environment, and allows a streak of revolt perceptible in the stream of ironic consciousness. In addition, the perceived contrast between the ideals of “bureaucracy” and the real of “society” generates a conceptual clash at the level of legitimacy, until the three conceptualizations - “bureaucracy”, “society”, and the denominational “Wop” - become displaced by the parodic irony of the last line, particularly through the multiple irony contained in the isolation of the last word: “Pity.”

As “Maria finally gets it”, (“The Catch”, 124), her recognitive irony speaks of understanding a process which stipulates the wearing of the mask, as a necessity of pretense, through the displaced performance of the Other, as well as in that of the already displaced self; all of which ultimately suggests a multiple removal, and the risk of a generalized break from reality on the part of all involved. Yet a total fragmentation is averted through the vehicle of irony itself serving as the connective tissue. This is poetically refracted in the notion of “love” as the vehicle for the ironic disposition that perceives an irony of freedom (or, ‘free-doom’) accomplished through a compromising act. “Love and marriage for Maria \ (an illegal alien, alias Donna Prima) \ is a far cry from being exploited and/or deported.” “The Statute of Liberty” (126) reiterates the meaning of displacement from the Latin etymology of the term “Statute”: *statutum*, signifying a law or regulation, that is, an ‘act’, on paper. In other words, the idea of a statute denotes setting something up and indicates a permanence. Thus by extension, a poetic ‘act’ could itself be considered as a ‘statute’. In contrast to this two-dimensional representation (as something existing ‘on paper’) in the “Statute” of the title, the body of the poem speaks of the “Statue of Liberty” whereas the “Statue”, as a three-dimensional representation, holds a stronger signification in the imaginary of the immigrant for its enduring signification of displacement from one cultural dimension into another - especially due to the statue’s own transfer from Europe to America. Thus by

correlating the “Statute” of the title signifying the legitimation of a process, with the “statue” in the body displaying a hollow form, and with both terms implying permanence, the ironic voice shows (rather than just tells) specific problematics of displacement.

But this “Statue of Liberty \ has been saving immigrants (and Canadians) for decades.” The use of brackets serves to exclude one from the other - “immigrants” vis-à-vis “Canadians” - and to exclude, or displace, one for the Other. The question of who exactly wears the mask - whether it is the self or the Other, or both - is of reduced importance when we consider the basis of all displacements to be a sort of dis-phasing which brings up a ‘distinguishing peculiarity’¹¹³ of two social entities who are fundamentally displaced: one (Italian) culturally and geographically, the other (Canadian) in a more cultural (and remotely geographical) sense, due in part to external viewpoints which would define Canada as a cultural extension of American culture. The far-reaching myth of the “Statue of Liberty... \ \ ...hands out mysteries and magic \ to hungry multitudes in dire need of success stories”. The disillusioned irony partakes of desires to believe, which often translate into the over-interpretation of, or assimilation into, certain myths and the under-interpretation (in the conscious or unconscious rejection) of other ones. “It gives Maria, an ex-stripper (and ex-alien) \ a needed sense of direction: south...” Cultural markers and status categorizations are transferred into the new subjective space to form the elemental composition of the “(North) American” subject, while the new cultural space also promises lucrative changes through the symbolic freedom represented in the image of the “Statue of Liberty”. A more intrinsic irony of the “Statue of Liberty” is contained in the lines that pit “The Statue of Liberty [as being] European in origin but just \ as (North American) as this girl’s about to become.” The conflation of Canadian culture into the American culture emphasizes the influence of the American cultural industry on dreams and expectations in general. On the other hand, an emphasis on the idea of the statue as a rigid, sedentary monument to freedom and progress, and of the right

¹¹³ The ‘distinguishing peculiarity’ is defined in the context of synchronized correlation as an “individual or subgroup distinguishably different in appearance or behaviour from the norm of the group to which it belongs.” Refer to the definition of ‘phase’, *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 5th ed.

to hope, hence as a symbol for the future, is counterchecked by the ritual nature of monuments to commemorate something in a historical *past*. Yet the “Statue of Liberty”, as a displaced, monolithic construction, contains its own compounded ironies of difference through its arbitrary meanings for different groups. Its greater significance is not as a memorial to an American event, but rather as a memorial for incoming immigrants, for whom it signifies leaving behind a personal history in order that they may accede to hope and a future; hence, it is a testimonial to loss as well as a panegyric to the future. In its pluralistic sense, it also signifies different facets of immigrant existence according to the place that it arbitrarily inhabits in the imaginary of the immigrant - according to its time/space position in relation to the immigrant subjectivity. In view of this, the analysis of this poem reveals the reciprocal masking techniques which are inherent in our constructed symbols of freedom.

In the poem “Camouflage” (127) the lingering image of the “Wop” (“The Proposition” 123) is joined by the image of the “frogs” as the ironic voice alludes to possible techniques of deception by non White Anglo Canadians who seek to ‘blend in’ with a putative Canadian identity. The poetic representation ultimately discloses a lack of communicative contact among cultural groups, so that the final irony of the official representation of Canada as a mosaic of cultures, betrays its denotation of cohesion to present instead the image of several, separated entities that communicate almost exclusively through interpretative, antagonistic materials of inter-communication.¹¹⁴

2.16 Over-stepping boundaries: questions of fear, obedience and failure

Fear and desire constitute the paradoxical impetus towards a potential change. The two elements induce a certain initiative in the subject, which will propel the movement from the known to an unknown. The poetic discourse instigates an explorative trajectory of this subjective initiative as it is perceived

¹¹⁴ Marco Micone again illustrates this best in his play *Les gens du silence*, where the antagonistic spirit displaces all forms of inter-communication between groups in the multicultural setting of Montréal.

through the varying cognitive signals in displacement. The discourse of *AQHMC* presents the desire for a psycho-biological displacement of the self combined with a complex fear of potential voiding tactics in distinct stages of the displacement. Natural mortality is conceived as a motivating factor working in tandem with the desire for continuity in nature. "To gain favor with Eternity"...\ "I'm bound to give up reading obituaries" ("The Lobotomy" 12); "and my grandmother watches all this \ on her deathbed." ("Let's Get to the Climax" 14); "I can't avoid being mortal" ("Look" 15); "Our bones only make for cemeteries. \ \ I believe my bones are much finer \ than the bones of any animal on earth." ("Of Animals and Men" 16). A subjective sense of failure (a component of *thanatos*) meets up with the subjective life instinct (*eros*) in the artistic space in order to articulate, as if to exorcise, the dread of totalizing deadlocks.

In "The Loser" (17) the sense of failure is turned back onto the subjectivity through the specular medium in order to identify the divergent and contradictory stages of her (mortal) life. "I lost more than a page out of my life \ when failure chased me down a one-way street and bit me. \ \ I lost the ability to be sweetness itself. \ \ I look at my face in the mirror \ and read I used to be sweetness itself \ but why I don't know." Yet recognition is achieved by displacing the sense of self onto the Other, where the discourse of difference can be played out with a potentially conceptual insight. "*The Chair*" (18-19) takes the matter of "difference" out of a sphere of natural boundaries between the intangible and the tangible, and applies it to displacing principles (vicinity and remoteness) of sensorial capacities which serve to construct the idea of difference.

It wasn't the difference between
the colors of the sky and the palms of his hand
...
He could remember the difference
between landscapes and horizons, between
constellations,

between van Gogh and the rest of the Impressionists,
but he'd never be able to gain a sense of himself.

Ever since the doctor convinced him he'd go blind,
for example,
he'd search out the blind in a crowd
but it wasn't the blind which held his attention
(he hated them the way he hated failure all his life)
but their canes.

...

The displaced sense of self simultaneously acknowledges and disclaims the sense of sight for the recognition of an individual subjective world, as it pertains to shifting mechanisms of difference (in relation to a point of reference) and to displaced memory, or fear of loss in memory. The poem also illustrates how, as an object of desire is removed from sight and is practically destroyed with the passage of time, the act of desire itself will resonate with its absence. Hence the desire for success must be played out in a theoretical (conditional - "if" clauses) idea of presence which serves as a preliminary basis for the development of the Self in displacement.

The conceptualization of the self in the intimate relationship becomes a question of performance which also determines the vulnerability of the partners in their desire and capacity to apprehend the Other as a means to reformulating the self (through successful procreation), as "An Old Musical" (42-43) indicates:

...

It's all part of the ritual.
I'm wearing green velvet slippers
to enhance my supple nakedness,
yes, my agile nudity.
It gives color to our performance.

...

I'll catch you.

I'll tear off your gear, but you're a man.
I'll never succeed in undressing you to my satisfaction.

The displaced body presents itself in its vital and asymmetrical image of vulnerability, in its ceremonial offering ("It's all part of the ritual") towards the possible re-creation of the self. But ultimately, the recognition of a certain lack of control over her body overtakes the subject, in her role as a subject to, and of, nature. The consequences cannot always be under the subject's control. "An Appetite for Life" (49-51) posits the subjective "riddle" which paradoxically inhabits the subjectivity.

It's a riddle.
I'm so neat otherwise.

I want a baby to come and clutter up my body.

...

The baby is a new untameable animal, the new me.
Let it come and pounce on the world.

...

Once the loafer will swell up my body I will love it
because its mess, the half round mess, will be familiar
to me.

I'll justify even the chaos inside my body, that superb
enigma.

I'm precise. I've taken out a life insurance policy.

I'm impatient with miracles.

...

I can't even guarantee my baby wholesome feet and
hands.

I'm helpless.

The dialectics between the *bios* and the psyche relates the human logistical

exercises prompted by the realities of (approaching) change. This type of dialogue also narrates a conscious or unconscious desire for access into a certain conformism of expectation and toward a certain, predetermined (in a broad sense) conclusion. The ironic attitude that lies at the centre of the dialectics points to another discourse concealed within the irony of this main discourse. Thus the bio-psychological discourse is correlated to the non-psychological *bios* of Nature as depicted in the initial poems of the collection (“The Transvestite” 11, “The Lobotomy” 12) or of the inanimate object (“A Welfare Recipient Talks to a Manikin” 20, “On My Raft” 67). “On my raft \ \ I used the arms of a manikin \ to push myself onwards.” The latter reference particularly shows the irony of a fetishistic, psychological tendency by which we, as human beings, are, and have probably always been, dependent on our own constructions (or constructed notions) for promoting our own sense of being. This in a way characterizes a human condition of “lobotomized”, or “Transvestite” forms of existence - that are as remote from reality as these terms suggest. In the condition of displacement, the frameworks of psychological support become evident since these frameworks effectuate a shifting process which may be consciously or unconsciously experienced. Moreover the conscious experience of the shifting process admits a conscious diffidence and fear - of being swallowed up into the voided sphere the Other, depicted as one risk of “An Exile” (69-75) condition: “I’m afraid, thoroughly afraid of these mountains \ because their mouths are wide-open \ and I can easily slip into their void”. Thus “the mountains named Fear” also suggest a natural boundary which imparts a fear of crossing - into an alien culture. From the viewpoint of this displaced subjectivity, the fear of another displacement occurs again within the new territory which is itself officially divided by its socio-linguistic factors. An aggregate sense of fear thus informs the displacement which will consequently seek to alleviate her fear through the invocation of her own, revised, cultural claims. In the face of fearful conditions, the subject names the mother in her new, re-articulated matrilineal space¹¹⁵ - since the condition of exile has forced the shifting of a matrix framework.

¹¹⁵ There is a relevant significance to the concept of *patria*, meaning ‘of a mother’, as opposed to the rarely used *patrius*, which relates to the father. *Patria* thus implies the matrilineal force of certain cultures, those of the Romance cultures in particular, although this force tends to be subsumed or completely sublimated by the image of patriarchy

I'm an Easterner. God of the East, help me.
Which is the way home? I want my city back.
I want my hustle and bustle. I want my city lights.
I want my Montréal. Mother, I'm afraid of the God of
the West.

...

Remember the God of the East.
Its colors?
Green? Yellow? Yes.
Oxblood? Yes. French? Yes. Stop.
Exit. Exile. *Ma mère est morte.*

Considering all of this, it is no wonder that the realization of the desired child would re-insert the displaced presence into a vital matrix composition. This would provide a certain grounding in the new space since the sense of displacement itself is not displaced into the offspring - at least, not to a same degree as that of the procreator -, so that the child (as procreation from the displaced subjectivity) becomes a desired channel to a sense of grounding. In other words, the child would allow the recuperation of woman as procreator in the fearful new environment since the idea of a matrix finds its meaning in a successful succession.

The *OCP* immediately presents the risky position of the subjective displacement while simultaneously offering a resolution to the problem: again through procreation, yet in this instance the offshoot pertains to a lucrative existence partly through the literary sphere of the Other: "c) an unexpected career in the literary arts \ in the language of the greatest word \ *mafioso* of all times, Shakespeare himself." ("The O Canada Poems*" 117). And again as "a short story writer in the language of Shakespeare & Co." ("The Statute of Liberty" 126) In this case the recurrent appellation of the "alien" resides in the

diffident, mournful personality of the artist who can only psychologically anticipate an artistic embodiment through and in culture. "The Alien" (128) depicts the artist's deferred potential as she contemplates this future emancipation:

Maria promises herself
when she returns home from her (world) trip
she will write a short play on the theme:

immigration is like an alien with two heads.
Only in a comedy is the alien a good egg.

The poesis manifests the transparent, duplicitous thematics in the language that speaks through its fear, as if cutting through a fog, while exposing the "dire need of success stories" (126) to sort of exorcize her impending sense of failure and loss, and to finally emerge through the force of comparative strategies for her *a priori* artistic integration within the fearful environment. The language of fear in relation to these verses also relates the paradox of an irrational fear or anxiety towards immigrants on the part of the dominant society and a simultaneous indifference brought on by 1980's Thatcherism and Reaganism, altogether dispensing an anticipated resistance. This paradox also sets up the problem of space in terms of a virtual distance between two points: an anticipated positive affirmation through the attainment of a (middle-class society's) sense of safety and security (by the acknowledgment of the subject into the Canadian publishing institution) and a negative affirmation ("The PM is not in (for aliens)" 123) signaling disenfranchisement and a parallel with the poor ("Off the Boat" 118) which, for the immigrant protagonist of the *OCP*, translates as an isomorphic reality. In these terms, violence is the consequence of a lack of 'space' in which the transformation of the "I" could possibly occur. In the economic discourse, access to upward social mobility may reduce the identity conflict of the subject and "reduce the shock of expatriation", while the absence of this mobility potential can maintain the identity conflict within a

sense of failure.¹¹⁶

2. 17 Strategies for contemplating the self-in-culture

The struggle for the reproduction of a matri-narrative is mirrored in the consistent struggle for the reproduction of the self in (the displaced) culture. Yet this desire for reproduction is not meant to mirror, nor to reenact, the displaced condition. Melfi's poesis demonstrates a sense of self which is determined through an *a priori* sense of the 'us', that is, through an inclusionary discourse which evokes other displaced or otherwise minoritized discourses (for example, in "The Chair" 18-19) while reconsidering an adequate subjective configuration. In this context, the still unrealizable state of motherhood in *AQHMC* also partakes of a certain minority discourse within the broad sphere of feminine existence. This is apparent in the self-identification practice which addresses the authority of the body over and above a gravid signification of the self -

Around Children's Territory
(Ha Ha's Pastime)

...

Dear priceless Factory,
Your eyes are on fire
because you are beating me.
Their eyes are on fire
because they are beating me.
Your admirer,
1:2,000,000,000
(23)

The assimilation discourse (through the discourse of motherhood) is

¹¹⁶ See the essay by Françoise Avenas, "The role of ethnic identity in language maintenance and language change: the case of the Italian community in France" in *altreitalie* 18. Avenas adds that "the practice of the native language is a means to both adopt a cultural identity and also to be different from the native -born French". On the other hand, the practice of the native language may reflect the failure of the parents. Avenas' research demonstrates that identification to the native group increases in importance with increasing upward social mobility".

necessarily accompanied by “a picture of death” (“The Head” 33-34) since the question of reproduction implicates the assistance of the (male) Other (represented by his “2,000,000,000”, or quasi unlimited sperm count to her “1”, or limited egg production) in order to produce an offspring which in itself would represent a yet other, Other. The danger, it seems, does not so much derive from the male Other, as from the difficulty for the (female) self to surmount the obstacles generated within her own body - which is, at this point, a separated, or displaced entity - from the idea of the self. This subjective alienation thus prevents the resolution of a ‘heroic journey’ until the subject resolves within herself a subjective meaning of being.

The poem “Jealousy” (40) reiterates the attitude of helplessness: “The problem is this: I cannot avenge myself.” Yet, at the same time, it introduces a certain desire for a revindication of the self against potentially destructive elements in, and from, the relationship. The ritual of the assimilation process demonstrates that a certain sense of lightness of being is useful, or even, perhaps, necessary in effectuating a satisfactory sense of belonging, at least in the immediate environment. “An Old Musical” (42-43) depicts such performative strategies as part of the ritual by which those moments of ‘suspension of disbelief’ absorb identities into a uniform audience response.

You look like a prisoner,
...
It’s all a matter of mistaken identity.
You know how to make me laugh.

It’s all part of the ritual.
I’m wearing green velvet slippers
to enhance my supple nakedness,
yes, my agile nudity.
It gives color to our performance.

However, the “ritual” of the marital relationship serves to contain, in a sense, the

body of the (male) Other in his most essential signification, and towards another, more solidified form of relationship that would gestate inside the maternal space of lust and creation. "You Are As Close to My Body As My Lust" (44) announces an oncoming bio-psychological transformation through the quasi spiritual experience of creation bordering on the sublime.

...

Thank God, you fit inside my body
like color fits inside my eyes.

I'm tired of being lost inside the imperial darkness,
stranded in the big arms of the bitch, mother nature,
alone.

Allow me the comfort of knowing you are
more perfect than a visit to Mount Fuji
more delicious than my ambition to be honest in all
things

because you are as close to my body as can be.

The body thus virtually becomes "my own house" and even "my country", which lies "outside [the] crazy borders" that formulate the difference between the self and the Other. ("Welcome" 47) Moreover, the body is identified as the heroic environment to be conquered by woman herself. (By extension, Canada, as the object to be conquered, is collapsed onto the body itself; this would then denominate the ritual that child-bearing would perform.) In other words, the body environment and the self seek to become one through the (heroicized) potential of transformation in and of the self. "An Appetite for Life" (49-51) indicates the paradox between body ownership and a precarious sense of control over one's own bodily identity. A sense of belonging to the self is generated by a need for more of the self - through the successful procreative act - in order to be, or feel, whole.

I want a baby to come and clutter up my body.

...

I love my round face.

It's an everyday face.

It's familiar.

I can do what I like with my property.

I can bite my lips until they bleed.

I love the cracks in the walls of my house

because I know them for what they are.

I've grown old with them.

I hate new cities.

The baby is the new clock I want for my bedroom.

...

The baby is a new untameable animal, the new me.

It is simple enough: we are what we construct, yet we are also constructed, in a manner of speaking. Moreover, we can love what we know, but we cannot love what we cannot know. The knowledge that the baby will impose new temporal limits as well as subjective freedom indicates a willfull readiness, or better, the desire for self-renewal where, ironically, the new less controlled self will finally achieve the previously impossible goal. Hence giving life to the Other will bring life to the giver herself. ("Here in My Arms" 54) The sense of continuity is achieved and will reside within the matrix memory which constitutes the subject. From hereon the roles of "a trespasser" or even of "a fugitive" ("The Carousal" 58-63) are shown to be a quasi nihilistic game leading nowhere, except round and round in a solipsistic pseudo existence.

The self-in-culture appears through the image or imaginary of the self within a socio-linguistic space which has forced a process of recognitions and/or misrecognitions of the self in a (new) cultural space of displacement. The re-cognition of the self in displacement also brings a shift in the matrix of memory (and of the imaginary) in order to accommodate the new and significant experiences that have occurred within the space of displacement. The French language which now signifies the displaced presence in "An Exile" (69-75) does so within the broader, Anglo-national picture of displacement. The French language indicating "Montréal" as "*ma mère*" evokes, as well as invokes, the comfort and safety of the "mother's womb" in a non-English environment - even though Melfi's vehicular language of the poesis is in fact, English. Thus this literature of displacement defines the 'multicultural subject' as that subjectivity which is capable of gaining knowledge of the self through an activity of recognition, and misrecognition, of the self in the Other.¹¹⁷ In contrast to this, any real sense of multiculturalism must be misplaced for those - namely, the Anglo Canadian as monocultural subject¹¹⁸ - who do not, or cannot, know and understand cultural displacement as a personal praxis.

The *OCP* present the image of the self-in-displacement (in the metaphorical figure of the stripper) as an object of fantasy for an apprehensive audience which reciprocates with the removal of the displaced subjectivity from her own libidinal ego - so that a possible recognition of the self-in-culture is made available through a consistent negative channel of information leading to antagonistic fields of identification. This retro-specular activity causes the repression of the subjective "I" into a third-person narrative of the self as immigrant Other. Such mechanisms of disrecognition hold some important meanings in the re-formation of the cultural subjectivity in displacement. For one, it means that the subjective point of reference is re-experienced through an

¹¹⁷ This notion correlates with Todorov's thesis of recognition and misrecognition in *La conquête de l'Amérique*.

¹¹⁸ I will not add to this definition the 'bilingual' Anglo Canadian who, coming from the dominant culture, learns the French language through a methodology of 'immersion', and for self-interests, i.e. for career or professional purposes, and therefore cannot experience displacement within their common sphere of activity. My argument is that the immersion methodology focuses on sounds so that 'sounding' French becomes a mask for displacing any real knowledge of the French Canadian language and culture.

extended traumatic moment of cultural displacement. In addition, positive formative structures are contingently deferred into virtual states of desire. Hence in the reformulated aspect of the self, that is, in displacement, the representation of woman as a paradoxical image of pleasurable form and threatening content (Mulvey 367) holds out, at least until the threatening aspect is suppressed through performative signals of familiarity for her 'audience'. Thus the 'audience' is never required to reach out, so to speak, towards an understanding of the displaced other, rather, it is the displaced other who is expected to seek proper means of entrance into another space of existence.

The allegorical narrative of the stripping performance is intended to grab the attention of the Other through his instinctual desires, yet this activity causes the fascination of the audience to be maintained within an illusory space of communication. This narrational activity by the performer risks resulting in a solipsistic exercise where the possible channels of encounter are obstructed by the self-reflecting desires of the audience, and the subjectivity herself risks becoming a mere shadow presence which holds a radically reduced meaning in the broad historical reality. (Yet the picaresque journey signifies a consistent upward movement through various sectors of society, and toward the mechanisms of re-cognition of the self. To this end, we might surmise that memory is the essential element, or the matrix, that propels the picaresque subjectivity towards higher objectives.) As "The Costume" (129) demonstrates, the tensile matrix of memory performs in, and through, its own space of articulation which would potentially allow a mind-body balance: "Maria's smile is fixed on a childhood memory: \ a doll in native costume. \ \ Its synthetic threads \ seem to hold her thoughts together."

Both *AQHMC* and the *OCP* lean on a sub-textual notion of parental narcissism wherein the 'child', even before being born, is present in the mind of an Other; that is, it has been thought or dreamed of before it begins to exist. Freud related this parental narcissistic activation which precedes the birth of the child, anticipating it in their own image or likeness. (A desirable conciliation between expectation and event which is typical of modernity.) Therefore in

terms of immigration and Multiculturalism, we must ask how the “I” of the child or newcomer can possibly emerge and be accepted as the new and unforeseeable person that it is meant to be. The discourse of procreation in Melfi’s texts recognizes the subjection of the *bios* factor to the indeterminacy of nature while at the same time, the leitmotiv of the ‘smile’ identifies the problematic of restoring consistency to those indeterminate contents of the personal experience. The procreation motif relates a disposition in the female subjectivity to transform the self by risking the self (body and/or mind) through uncertain terrains within the self and in the space of the Other. The biopolitical experience as a means to redemption (through an internal antagonism) seeks to bring forward an alternative form of being which would serve as a central force against the potential threat of a dystopic experience. In contrast to the impossible, or dystopic, quality of the experience of redemption enunciated by Agamben in *La comunità che viene*, redemption in the case of Benjamin’s angel (based on his interpretation of Klee’s painting “*Angelus Novus*”)¹¹⁹ might be interpreted as a possibility of looking at the present, beyond the piling debris of a past that threateningly proposes itself as repetition. In this way, the angel’s backward glance, towards that “one catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage in front of his feet”, can be reinterpreted in displacement to demonstrate the past dimension as having a different value and signification in the realm of its reflection in the present - which could be explained by the broken wings of the stripper by a “Canadian drunk” (*OCP* 120). In these terms, critical displacement turns the backward look toward the present and the future, showing the latter as being something *else*, and not as linear ‘progress’ in the modern understanding of the word. In order to create a future, one must appropriate one’s past, yet the present of each individual critical text creates a required space for knowledge and interpretation of the past. This reinterpretation of the self in displacement entails a possible distancing from the self which then becomes a critical part of the writer in displacement.

2.18 Encounters with Shakespeare: unsettling limits and standards of English literature

¹¹⁹ See Benjamin’s ninth (IX): “Thesis on the Philosophy of History”.

The bio-psychological narrative of the displaced subjectivity is set within the parameters of an English hegemony which overlays and contains disparate (and quasi token) spaces of heterogeneous encounter and communication, hence the poietic praxis of displacement performs discursive encounters with the political aspects of displacement. The desired baby in *AQHMC* would function as a measure of existence which, at the same time, could introduce a different, yet familiar, rhythm of existence. "I want a newborn to clutter up my life. ... \ The baby is the new clock..." ("An Appetite for Life" 49-51) In other words, the baby discourse interpolates the question of limiting factors on subjectivity in general, since it represents another, comprehensive form of displacement, this time, as the (female) self flows into a new subjectivity, thus re/creating, or restoring, an environment of familiarity. The idea of "the new clock" indicates new rhythms, thus new beginnings in time, and the capacity for self-renewal, that is, of a renewal of the self through the body - with a certain illusion of control which is really contingent to limiting factors of the body itself. The appeal to the condition of "chaos inside my body, that superb enigma" (51), solicits an extended, or even indefinite, catalytic¹²⁰ moment which, having initiated in the will of the subject, becomes a subjective means of re-cognition through an analogous reproduction. In this sense, the poetic discursivity risks becoming cataphoric in as much as it takes its reference from a (possible) future realization. An added appeal to that "new untameable animal, the new me" (50) reiterates the title of this poem ("An Appetite for Life") through the expressed desire to escape perceived restrictions on existence which would lead to a final *thanatos*. "I'm better off than a necrophiliac..." (50) The violence of displacement could thus be counter-balanced by the gratifying 'violence' of giving life (*eros*) to "a tiny stranger" who would help reinstate a lost sense of familiarity. "Once the loafer will swell up my body I will love it \ because it's mess, the half round mess, will be familiar \ to me." (51) Thus the child becomes the guiding entity toward the recuperation of the maternal subject in the space of displacement.

¹²⁰ The intended definition of "catalytic" in this instance is that of an agent that provokes or speeds significant change of action. [MW Collegiate Dictionary]. This definitive qualifier is not to be misunderstood as the Aristotelian notion of catharsis in its sense of a purge or 'purification'.

In the political sense of multiculturalism, the notion of giving life in displacement takes its special significance in the creation of a (supposedly) non-displaced, alternative existence. The fact that the combined 'authorship' of this new existence may consist of divergent derivations is only implied here since the poems of *AQHMC* reconstitute lineage *ex novo*, yet it does so matrilineally. The "mother" component of the succession line is endorsed by a certain sacredness of the matri-memory, as indicated in "Peace and Joy Free of Charge" (55):

My mother is superior to all the cathedrals
I saw on my last European trip.

In comparison to my mother
the cathedral's Renaissance Madonnas are as sacred as
a parade of Hollywood movie stars at the Academy
Awards,

and as for their early Christian mosaics
my memory is able to compose better ones
of my mother sitting at the kitchen table.

Heaven is nowhere to be seen inside those cathedrals.
Heaven is akin to a durable womb.

These verses deconstruct by insinuation the notion of a patriarchal legitimacy (and the popular, displaced fascination with its hollow constructions) by summoning the sacredness of the mother-daughter relationship by which the integrity of memory prevails. Thus this kindred memory marks a sort of custodial border from tensive standards and limitations. From this standpoint, the subject assumes at least partial control of her world, of herself and of her progeny so

that, anything outside of these borders can be viewed in its artificiality, as expressed in the prose poem "In the Crowd's Image" (83-86). The defiance expressed in this poem substantiates the subjective stronghold: "Im ready. Don't be shy. Recreate me. Reconstruct me." (86)

In contrast to this, the *O Canada Poems* refuse to remain neutral or dispassionate regarding the condition of displacement; nor does a *bios* narrative (the baby discourse) in the style of *AQHMC* enter the context the *OCP*. Instead the *OCP* engage a precise socio-political dialogue with the introductory identification of a manifold and all-encompassing displacement besides the more evident geo-cultural displacement, respectively, into civic, socio-marital and professional classifications of her subjective being:

...

end with almost everything an
ex-stripper in a Toronto joint
could have wished for (in random order):

- a) Canadian citizenship,
- b) matrimony to an aging oil baron and
- c) an unexpected career in the literary arts

in the language of the greatest word
mafioso of all times, Shakespeare himself".

("The O Canada Poems*" 117)

The geo-central locality of Toronto - as the 'Canadian Wall Street' - conveniently signifies the city of Toronto as concentration of finance and power, while its central location within the East-West national borders is also interpretive of its dominating influence in the manufacture - and spectacularization - of a Canadian national image. Toronto - which is also one of the major entry points¹²¹ for immigrants arriving by air - also boasts the largest

¹²¹ The other principal entry points are Vancouver (mainly for immigrants arriving from the Asian countries) and Montreal (for immigrants from francophone countries such as Haiti and from southern or central European countries). These aerial points of entry have generally displaced Halifax as a main point of entry for those arriving by ship. The Pier 21 exhibit in Halifax is now commemorated as the spectacle of historical Canadian immigration policies - a smaller version of Ellis Island.

concentration of Italian immigrants, which might account for the poetic choice of Toronto as a starting point for the 'generic' Italian immigrant¹²² ("Maria F-"). More importantly, Toronto depicts the centre of financial power and operation¹²³ which is fundamentally English. Hence Toronto could be said to contain the image of multiculturalism through which is ironically deployed a homogenizing strategy of linguistic and cultural globalization .

The three indented qualifiers set up a sub-text of allegiance to the socio-political space of the English (as the Other) hegemonic realm. Yet the linguistic imposition seems to carry the heaviest irony, and this becomes even more evident when the sardonic allusion to "the language of Shakespeare & Co." reappears in "The Statute of Liberty" (126). The protagonist's self-identification - as a "(North) American" - proceeds from the linguistic reorganization that now constitutes her main channel of communication with the world. Yet the poetic apprehension of the new literary identity as "a short story writer in the language of Shakespeare & Co." alerts the reader to the stories (and histories) which are rendered in an episodic manner and signifying concealed (resistant?) recesses of historical memory. The animosity toward the acculturating force of English language and culture is apparent in the ironic tone of these lines. The journey of displacement for the Italian immigrant usually initiates in a time/space that is unconfined by theories of identity or a praxis of cultural differences, to generally end with the displaced subject being captive to multiple discourses of difference. In other words, the journey's end signifies a displacement into a field of conflict with English hegemony. The displacement into the English hegemonic territory casts the displaced subjectivity towards an ontological re-assessment of linguistic values, and 'Shakespeare' becomes an identifier by which the problem of hegemony is broached. In a broad sense, the notion of Shakespeare is an attribute of universality, and of an apparently possible infinity of language due to Shakespeare's faculty for innovative language (without assuming that all of Shakespeare's neologisms were authenticated in the linguistic evolution of the English language.) This indicates a bifold

¹²² In fact, images of Italian neighbourhoods of Toronto have often been used to illustrate the Canadian multicultural image.

¹²³ Perhaps for these reasons, Toronto is generally misrecognized as Canada's capital by other populations and especially by Americans.

problematic: first, the universality of the language indicates the continued dominance of British colonialism in the realm of a misleading multiculturalist language that assumes the mask of a *post*-colonial perspective. It is through endorsement from the English dominion that the official ethnic displays and festivals find their sponsored 'slots' in the Canadian annual calendar of events:¹²⁴ this is colonialism in a new disguise, signifying the morphologizing capacity of colonialistic capitalism itself. Secondly, the choice of language for the displaced subject reflects a complex link between ethnic identification and identification with the host country. Moreover, linguistic behaviour will be gauged according to the spheres of domination or inferiority. (This is a fact of the praxis of exclusion in the Canadian language: "You have an accent. Where are you from?" - to displace the sense of belonging away from a 'Canadian' identity) In addition, the use of language(s) generally signifies specific knowledges and forms of belonging regarding the originating linguistic space - a practice which is often perceived to be threatening to the English monolingual speaker. The language of assimilation can result in a perceived futility and/or superfluity of the mother tongue in the new space, even to the point of perceiving the mother tongue as a degrading attribute. The *OCP* in fact depicts Maria as being uncomfortably wedged between two negative forces of identification - moreover, the native language appears to have been relegated to the realm of a historical artifact.

The recurrent term "alien" to signify the self in displacement brings up the issue of the representation and the reception of new and different voices in the established and institutionalized realm of Canadian literature. Melfi's poetry exemplifies the yet unresolved tensions between representation and reception in the depiction of "immigration" as "an alien with two heads. \ Only in a comedy is the alien a good egg." ("The Alien" 128). The ironic language in the representations of the protagonist in these poems (The *OCP*) is set to jumpstart

¹²⁴ See Anselmi and Gouliamos in *Elusive Margins* concerning ethnic festivals: "...vital ethnic expressions are re-appropriated by the hegemonic discourse. Ethnicity is relegated to the category of folklore, tongue-burning foods, document, the 'other' or 'different'. As an example, consider the polarization that occurs between national literature(es) and ethnic writing, in which the ethnic element is considered a means of existential expression rather than having socio-cultural value." p. 15

the reader's perceptions through a highly ironic language in the context of designations and categorizations - as practices of containment developed in the nineteenth century by the English scientific and philosophical minds and which have continued to be perfected throughout the twentieth century. Melfi's poesis seeks a linguistic emancipation from, and within, the hegemonic imposition through the delivery of a politically charged irony and by drawing out new relationships of language through the poetic composition. In the tension between consciousness and the will to life, Melfi's poesis formulates the play of language between the two poles: of *eros* which pushes the linguistic consciousness beyond recognized limits of language, while *thanatos* signifies the (will to) death of language within its imposed limits.

2.19 The mechanisms of relationships: dialogues and dialectics

The irony of dialectical relationships is that the interlocutors cannot always control what each one projects, nor can either of them count on an accurate hermeneutic reciprocity. In this analytical context of the literature of displacement, the dialectical relationship between the writer and her protagonist (which also conceals a certain degree of surrogation) is compounded by the indirect address of the poetic voice, which expresses her resentment while she "unburdens herself \of all that is colorless and cheap". ("The Forecast", *OCP* 121) The projection of imported cultural traditions into unwanted baggage serves as an ironic device for offsetting the perceived atrophy of a multiculturalist construct at the centre of a monoculturalist hegemony. "Canada falls into another economic low." Moreover, the apperception of dialectical impossibilities is made explicit in "The Proposition" (123), with the declaration that "the PM is not in (for aliens)". Thus the poetic voice at this point cannot resolve the dilemma of displacement through a satisfactory praxis of dialectics, and she is left with the impression that "immigration is like an alien with two heads" - an adequate definition of this irony. So that, displacement raises the ironic quotient in the subjectivity, by emphasizing a public performance of complacency, while rounding up the 'non-

required' elements within an opposite, private sphere.

A multiculturalist language which does not recognize its neo-colonial foundations can hardly entertain a realistic perspective on itself, let alone on the dialectical asymmetry of its discourse. The poetic voice is privileged because it does not sacrifice the possibility of language (*parole*), and because it maintains an open quest for new meanings while at the same time creating its own adequate forms of signification. This opens up a space which is not absolutely definable by geographies of identity nor by languages of universalism, nor even by languages of community: indeed, there is no sense of Italian Canadian community in these textual spaces.

PART 3 - ANALYSIS : BREACH OF CONTRACT

A BRIDE IN THREE ACTS (1983) AND OFFICE POLITICS (1999)

As we have seen, Melfi's literary *corpus* elaborates a discourse along the notions of the 'contract' between two human beings in a spousal relationship. The spousal figure consistently embodies an English Canadian entity, while the 'immigrant' is represented in the protagonist figure who is depicted as the Other to the English dominant discourse. This notion of the contract represents "the two solitudes" in the Canadian history of an asymmetrical biculturalism where the dominant side exerts an effectual silencing of its other, so that the French Canadian voice is relegated to the realm of the 'immigrant' voice.¹⁷¹ The consequence of this is the aggregation of two pluralistic voices of displacement: one of which records new, or relatively new, experiences of arrival (the so-called immigrant), while the varied French Canadian voices are tacitly represented through the loss of their own discursive value in the multiculturalist context. The fictionalized spousal relationship, in the same way as the professional tenure in the "multinational", appears adequately suited for scrutinizing the functional rhetoric of a multiculturalist discourse.

The analysis of Melfi's work cannot ignore the situation of the author in her lifeworld: as an Italian Canadian writer writing in English in the French province. This context becomes one subtext informing *Office Politics* if we consider the use of the term "multinational" to denote the abstract entity which commands the material life of the "office worker" with the consideration of

¹⁷¹ Displaced artists who live in the Québécois sphere recognize the asymmetry and often include the discursive problem as part of their critical and/or creative writings. Besides Melfi, some of these writers include Fulvio Caccia and again, Marco Micone.

Charles Taylor's thoughts on *Multiculturalism*:

But the further demand we are looking at here is that we all *recognize* the equal value of different cultures; that we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their *worth*.

What sense can be made of this demand? In a way, it has been operative in an unformulated state for some time. The politics of nationalism has been powered for well over a century in part by the sense that people have had of being despised or respected by others around them. Multinational societies can break up, in large part because of a lack of (perceived) recognition of the equal worth of one group by another. This is at present, I believe, the case in Canada... (64)

It is interesting to note that Taylor refers to Canada as a 'multinational' society, rather than in our internalized term of 'multiculturalism', therefore emphasizing the factor of division over any impression of unity. Moreover, the foregrounding of this perspective opens up an important window into the analysis of *Office Politics (OP)*. Therefore this analysis will be undertaken through a multiple interpretation that will show an intertextual consistency with impressions of a multiple displacement within the Canadian experience. This section will present the analysis of two poetic collections by Mary Melfi: *A Bride in Three Acts* (1983) and *Office Politics* (1999) as texts displaying analogous elements in this extended analysis. The time span between these two works will demonstrate a certain evolution of Melfi's writing, which conspicuously carries a discussion of the imaginable contract and of its potential breach to the level of a political discourse.

In this context, it is interesting to note that the content of *A Bride in Three Acts*, (*ABTA*), earmarks this text as the poetic precursor to the novel *Infertility Rites* (1991), while the later text designates an explicit stage in the evolutionary discourse of Melfi's *corpus*. In other words, while the "bride" embraces the

promise, or contract, of marriage with the conspicuously nameless, and obscured figure of the English 'groom', the notion of 'infertility' in the title of the later novel holds a semantic plurality that has a farther reaching signification than the one that is superficially implied: *Infertility Rites* points to a serial impasse, to a ritual, or repeated breach of expectations. The texts present a narrative of the (female) body out of which are anticipated meaningful changes, yet the subject's continuously foiled prospects result in frustration and even, in a sense of hopelessness. This analysis will investigate the protagonists' discourses of desire(s) in relation to their perceived realities, in order to bring to light the contingencies between the 'ideal' and the 'real'. We have already established that Melfi makes a sharp use of the device of irony through a discourse of the body and the implied question of free will. It has also been established that this dissertation does not embark on a critical analysis based on gender studies; rather, the focus is on the polysemic elements that take their cue from socio-political winks subtly camouflaged in the texts. Melfi's irony is inferential of potential forms of 'accomplishment', for example, the albeit antagonistic 'assimilation' such as we have seen in the *OCP*, or the finally successful pregnancy narrated in *Infertility Rites*, or the (Late Capitalistic) imperative of success in the highly competitive world of corporate globalization - translated into dystopic enslavement within the world of the multinational, as shall be discussed in the following analysis of *Office Politics*. Ultimately the idea of success is also concurrent with a negotiable metamorphosis within a displaced environment that is conceived as a complex semiotic world.

At first glance, *ABTA* already poses a semiotic challenge in that the text's sequence of interpretation does not follow a conventional sequencing

of events, but this will be examined more closely at a later point in the analysis. At this point, the reader need only keep in mind that the presentation of the “acts” - due to the text’s appellative assumption of a dramatic form - is reversed so that “ACT THREE” is followed by “ACT TWO”, and ends with “ACT ONE”. In addition, the poetic drama is restricted to only a few selective “scenes”. Since this text simulates limited parametric criteria of the dramatic form, it might risk its own compromise as a misrepresentational exercise, yet a critical analysis will recuperate and re-target the misrepresentational designation toward the external discursive text, that is, in the socio-political perceptibility. *Office Politics*, on the other hand, presents a series of numbered poems indexically individualized by the first line of each poem (a practice reminiscent of the poets of the *dolce stil novo*)¹⁷². *OP* is highly instilled in the spirit of the time (at the end of the second millenium) in order to foreground the subjective predicament of individual rights and desires made anachronistic, or oddly out of place, in an age committed to economic success and to a re-assigned, or re-appropriated, status of divinity: after the Age of the Gods and the Age of Man, it seems that we are entering the Age of the Tyrant (in its various embodiments).¹⁷³

3. 1 Bracketed in irony

The ironical sensibility of the protagonist in Melfi’s texts is constantly foregrounded through the bracketing device, so that the textual discourse is continously interjected with supplemented words and phrases to undermine the frontal representation of the action. The initial poem “La Demi-Vierge” (in *ABTA*,

¹⁷² A lyric style used by Thirteenth- Century Italian poets i.e. Guido Cavalcanti and Dante himself. The term was used by Dante in the *Purgatorio* (IX) to describe this style and to locate it inside an artistic continuum.

¹⁷³ La Boëtie had already written of this menace in *Discours de la servitude, ou, le contr’un*. See in *Oeuvres complètes d’Estiene de la Boëtie*. (Sixteenth century)

9-10) conceptualizes the ironical performances which constitute an interpretive performance of irony.

It's your turn to be the blushing bride.
You don't blush (on cue) -
but everything else runs on time
(including your parents' relief).

Who says you're a clog in a wheel?
Don't be so Victorian.

You're an inconspicuous hand grenade
(with a life span of 'who knows?')
made to order for an inconspicuous/conspicuous'
computerized war (process).

God and the enemy are on holidays.
...

Irony is the instrument which allows a playing up, or rather a playing down, to conventional expectations: in this context of the marriage ritual, the expectation of "the blushing bride", as the traditional "Demi-Vierge", represents a subjectivity ideally deprived of her own free will and consciousness. Yet within the powerful imagery of the candidness - summoning the glowing whiteness and purity of Dante's *donna angelo* - of the "blushing bride", an equally forceful resistance is immediately perceived through the bracketed expressions of cynicism toward the whole notion of her performativity. The irony of the "Demi-Vierge" also interplays with Marcel Duchamp's artwork titled "*La Mariée Mise à Nu Par ses Célibataires, Même*". Duchamp's unfinished work (1915-1923), consisting of two glass panels one above the other and displaying a complex mechanical diagram, which was exhibited in Paris "bien qu'il ne soit ni terminé, ni même destiné à être regardé. ... Ce n'est même pas un tableau, c'est un amas d'idées." (in Sanouillet). But the cynicism is not directed solely at the

performance of the ceremony of marriage; rather, the ironic stance dominates a broader perspective in the “destiny” of the bride.

The groom takes over temporarily
but with an Arts degree
you don't trust his mechanical know-how
will change (exchange) your destiny.
(Was nuclear energy predestined (too)?
You wonder. You worry.)

With the virgin insolence of a mechanical genius
you watch yourself tamper with the exploding
population's equipment:
bodies: yours and his.

In due time no one is shocked to learn
of your difficult(ies)
pregnancy: some peace treaty (developed cheaply
over the centuries).

A subjective ironic removal from the events is immediately perceivable in the direct addressing of the self as Other, through a antithetical discourse in a dialectic of the self struggling against its own miscontextualization in an anachronistic and 'ana-topistic' (or incongruous) form of existence.

Displacement is experienced in relation to two different geo-historical dimensions: the one that was left behind and the one into which the subject has been plunged¹⁷⁴ so that the subject cannot completely know and/or belong to either one. The ironic stance is thus deployed as a possible channel of authenticity amid an overwhelming threat of subjective disappearance through the expected submission of the bride inside the world of her groom. In addition to an implicitly feminine discourse of disempowerment, the critical analysis also

¹⁷⁴ This notion of displacement means a readjustment of Heidegger's philosophy of being since his notion of *Dasein* fails to pick up on the historical, linguistic and social mediations that are sustained in the displaced subjectivity. For these reasons, an application of Adorno's theory which analyzes the present condition of the subject would be more relevant.

inquires into the relationship itself as an analytical focus point of cultural displacement. In this sense, the poems seek a space of free will between the ironic viewpoint and self-consciousness.

The complexity of the irony overflows the borders of the parenthesis to problematize the 'regular' discourse of the text. For example, virginity is something like pregnancy: either you are or you are not. The possibility of a "demi" existence within these two bodily states occupies a space of speculation and as such it does not (yet) constitute a knowledge. The relevant implication of this is the question of a subjective capacity to delineate subjectivity in displacement through a reformulated language that lays bare the function of misrepresentation in common language usage. The sense of distrust toward her spouse impresses upon the union the nearly identical qualities as those that have been discussed above in the *OCP*. In other words, as in the *OCP*, the union seems contingent upon circumstantial compulsions rather than upon personal desires, as we can see in "A Man" (11) - with a cynicism in the last line which enforces that of the poem "The Catch" in the *OCP*:

The sun comes down one day
in the shape of a man with a radioactive cape.

He follows you.
Try what you might
you can't hide from him.
You can't hide underneath the shade of a tree,
for one thing.
You can't hide in the basement of your bourgeois
apartment building.
You can't hide at night:
he follows you to bed.

So you marry him.

...
He stares at you and you think his stares are worse
than bullets.
You won't know what hit you for years.

In addition to the linguistic irony, the poetic imagery depends on related visual incongruities, for example in "The Gown" (53), where the image of virginal whiteness of the bridal attire is rearticulated as the image of "a hospital gown" to problematize the conjectural relationship. In *OP*, Melfi makes use of 'empty' spaces for the deployment of her irony, by means of her delaying technique of indentation which impregnates the adjacent discourse with a relative ironic content. Hence, Melfi's poetry formulates a possible world in the space of irony where the writer and the reader can meet in a possible recognition of the discrepancies between discourses and the factual lifeworld.

3. 2 Binding Masks

Different sets of power relations are discussed in *ABTA* and *OP*, yet both lifeworlds - that is, those of the marital and professional relationships - are shown to abide by rules of behaviour. Considering the first articulations of *ABTA*, the reader is acquainted with the supposedly happily-ever-after role of the bride who is no longer the glorified bride, but has fallen into the banality of her (still unproductive) everyday life. The life of intimacy within marriage is sensed as a theatrical production, as the construction of a false or fictitious life which attempts to represent real one. The ephemeral state of 'bride and groom' is eternalized into an icon which does not represent real life, yet it works as an index of normative society, and as such, it is a stereotype to which one's truths in representation are often made to resign themselves. The composition

of "Book II, Chapter I" (32-33) then dismantles the iconic mask of the bridal couple with a glimpse into the void of their daily life as man and wife. The title itself indicates a new phase ("Chapter I") in a severed corpus ("Book II"). A double frame of irony constructs this poem: firstly, it is framed internally by its pseudo multiple choice format, and secondly, its outer framing verses reveal the stasis of death within the relationship. In this poem, which would be the last one in a chronological sequence of the text, Melfi's irony shows the apparent aperture of the discourse as an actual critical breach in the relationship, leading to the petrification of the subjects:

"Happily-ever-after" is cut short.
The bride's and groom's "afterlife" is described in
morbid detail.

Why

a _____

b _____

&c _____

is sinisterly better in (chosen) pairs

why

a _____

b _____

c _____

&d _____

entertains/sustains (rarely disdains) his and hers

why

after a time always-the-same opulent disease:

love and aging boredom,

is a cut above lousy/louse's loneliness

and why

rigor mortis is seemingly content to take a longer

time in coming to both

(bitterness)

once / just married

193

In short, this marriage relationship is unmasked as a fallacious cloaking device, provided by the discourse of the man with a “radioactive cape” (“A Man”, 11-12):

He means well, the poor bastard with the radioactive
cape.

...

He puts your dreams in an envelope
and seals it with a radioactive kiss.

...

So you place his cape on your shoulders.
It's the only way to get out of the darkness.
Ad nauseam.

The “cape” - which closely resonates with the “cave” - provides the illusive shadow in which the protagonist seeks refuge, since “you can't hide underneath the shade of a tree” (11). The insinuated loss of the free instinct - “The groom follows you to the bathroom. \ You can't even be an animal and enjoy it anymore” - denotes a denaturalized state - under the constant surveillance of the proper Other even in privacy - which will become displaced into the memory of an original condition and generating the desire of a possible return, so that memory and desire feed off each other in a static loop, and in the shadow of its own ghost-like present. Hence, the poem “Act Three” (14-15), reiterates the critical stasis which forms the general impression of the married state through time (“Act Three, Scene Four”):

Paralyzed: you can't find spring entertaining.
It evaporates like some insignificant poison on your
doorsteps.

You are caged by an intolerable sense of going nowhere
special.

The rush of promises of a good life ends.

...

Winter warns you about something important
but you are lost in the barrens....

The text reveals an antagonistic value of the 'settled' relationship and the bride's sense of disillusionment serves as an expositional key to the drama. In other words, the idealized marital relationship presents a masking strategy which is meant to contain the bride's "obscene lack of hope, humor, faith" within its static framework. (The mask as discourse is forcibly static.) Hence the static iconic image of the presumed happy union is dismantled through a juxtaposition of the dynamic elements underlying the relationship, as can be attested in "The Match" (27-28): "Brides and grooms are labels for something: instincts. ... The instincts: love and hate, box each other. \ The bride and groom watch." Thus the ideal of the promise is quickly displaced by "Rage" (19-21) and despair over the bride's loss of illusions: "Till-death-do-you-part is a lost faith. \ She is furious over the fact that she had to lose a \ cavalcade of illusions... \ ...she'd live on to tell her tale \ of disillusionment at the divorce hearings." ("The Dart Game", 29-30). The framework of the "twentieth century" itself masks an antagonistic field for the construction and the eventual crushing of so-called liberal ideals: "More hunters in the twentieth century and so on than \ there are saints." If displacement breeds casualties rather than promoting freedom, then the concepts of twentieth-century Liberalism have failed us - and a critical contract is breached once more.¹⁷⁵ In the analogical context of the 'marital' union, the loss of illusions and loss of faith in the possibilities of the relationship becomes the "cage" inside which the subject "is trapped". The problem is a paradoxical belief in the permanence of superficial, and ephemeral, things, and a displaced

¹⁷⁵ Although the twentieth century has been defined as the century of displacement due to the numerous displacements brought on by economic migrations and the de-colonizing process, this does not signify that the process of cultural displacement is free of problematics. Moreover, the fact that modern criticism has identified this activity does not imply its effective resolution.

existence constructed around an enduring sense of hope for a future.

In the second section, "Act Two, Scene One & Two" - the wedding reception - , the beginning of the bride's new life means a new representation of the self in a re-written role: the new mask becomes her totality, through which she can barely perceive her (real) self. The bride's deep unhappiness juxtaposed against the moment of festive celebration reveals her paratactic sense of presence through the implicit incongruency of this new forced representation. This moment in the existence of the bride contains its own antithetical language: it is a clash of the sacred and the profane; a confrontation of the ephemeral versus the permanent; the contrast between the desire of illusion and the illusion of desires. Everything seems contradictory, all language is put into a confrontational slant, and everything appears negated through its Other. The contradictions are both implicit and explicit, and the present, as well as the future become more impossible to decipher, because it can no longer be actively imagined. The bride is suspended in an extended liminal moment, she is outside of time and she gives the impression of being in a dark abysmal state. Yet, "[a]t a masquerade everything is magical." ("On Cue", 38) The bride watches herself, acting happy, as a bride 'ought' to be, but her look of happiness is transparent, or at least she believes that it is, and that it must be so to others as well. Although she exists in this state of 'suspended animation', she is aware of her representation as a packaged cultural product, as a false image fixed in timelessness, to be perpetually recalled in a dream state. Within the powers of the traditional rite, the bride herself takes on a mythological dimension as a story to be retold indefinitely; and the future of the union is expected to narrate its own mythicized process (the "blank slate"). A

contemplation of "The Rose" (42-43) reveals the predominance of the "sacred"
promise incarnated in the aura of the bride:

The rose, prim and proper, a gift, on the table,
has something to say about the moment: the bride.
The rose, the smallest living item in the room,
says temporary beauty is enough if it's outside the
human race.

The rose is ready to pounce on the bride.
Is ready to punch her in the face with its beauty.
It hurts; its color hurts her
because it is better than the color of her skin.

Sacred, that's it. The rose is sacred.

The rose, the focal point, the axis, the center of the
world,
the savior, the foreshadowing of the messiah, the
messiah,
the satellite fixed in space, watches, spies on the bride,
records her behavior towards her guests.
The rose is one of the eyes of God.

...

The rose is a crystal ball
(serious and profound at its worst).
The bride wants the future she sees in it.

...

The rose is a key to escape.
The rose is an aphrodisiac.
Through it, because of it
the bride is inspired to forgive the world everything.

...

The rose is a creature with a magnificent brain,
a brain whose dullness protects it against everything
(n)everlasting.

...

"The End" (59) of the wedding reception relates a reversal of illusions and the
evanescence of even the sacred:

The party's ended. And rosy cut rose
is relieved of its duty to be beautiful.

...

To be relieved and frightened by one's fresh loneliness.
To be puzzled and delighted: one doesn't remember
who were friends
and who were enemies. Defenceless against such tactics as love
and hate.

The bridal representation, analogically with the ephemeral image of the rose, is
the brief materialization of the promise which remains confined within the
bounds of the ritual. The images of the wedding reception thus move into the
dreamy dimension of the social fable with an "[u]nlucky" ending, complete with
the interjection of "Snow White" and the "7 dwarfs push[ing] wheelbarrows \
filled with roses down a corridor..." ("The Wedding", 60, and "The Dwarfs", 61-
62).

Later, the prince with some hesitation and difficulty
transports the bride
(whose snowwhite-matching bra and panties were given
to her by the dwarfs)
to a level of forgetfulness (or a new level of
misunderstanding),
with the (un)decided help of a stag movie.

...

The dwarfs, her girlfriends (pill poppers) agree
happily-ever-after is lost on twentieth-century boys
who prefer to make paper airplanes out of Polaroid shots
of nondescript virgins (to them: to romance).

Moral: a bride is only a door the groom makes sure
to lock. Unlucky.

Good Nytol.

The traditional marriage ritual - the object of "Act One, Scene One", that is the
third section of the poetic text - is presented as a kind of buffer that would serve
to heal the social drama (or trauma) through the illusory, yet disempowering,

image that it proffers. "The bride is also someone you visit \ when you are in a hurry to believe in romance." ("The Transplant", 71-72) But more importantly,

The bride is an artificial organ
the twentieth century used in its open-heart surgery.

The bride is a defence against anxiety.
You look at her and forget
a war could do much wrong to you and yours.

The bride is a peace treaty
the twenty-first century may or may not throw into the
waste basket.

These verses anchor the poetry to the "inconspicuous / conspicuous \ computerized war (process)" of the first poem ("La Demi-Vierge", 9) with its linguistic allusions to a belligerent system. Therefore the value of appearances, wherein the faces on the wedding picture conceal the confrontation of contrasting realities ("The Picture", 73) and the illusion of "guarantees" is allowed to take tangible form in the ceremony itself. "A groom is like a fan, a fan made of guarantees: \ sex twice a week on hot nights." ("Some Spinster Believes", 79) But ultimately, the "guarantee" falls in with the eternal return of the mythical:

A beautiful woman is a wedding album.
Here comes the bride all over again.

...
She is always the promise of a fresh beginning,
the water you wash your face with after a disturbing
dream;
the well, desperate men draw their dreams from.

...
She is whatever you like most in life.
She is *Miss Whatever-she-wants-to-be*.
She wins the first prize: a trip to identity.

...
She is a saleswoman, selling faith, hope and charity.

Credible.

The idea of matrimony as “a trip to identity” identifies an illusory configuration of the female (disenfranchised) disposition who is taught to depend on her Other (the potential spouse) for the possibility of her total being, or even, for her own self-recognition as a being in society. The “spinster” of the title indicates another, perhaps less recognized form of marginalization and non-presence in society, yet this characteristic of invisibility still persists in the late modern imaginary. Moreover, this dreaded label prevails in the conventional female imaginary as a sign of failure and/or inadequacy.¹⁷⁶

Office Politics presents the donning of the mask as a requisite of the representational worker in the multinational structure. This text unmask the power relations in the hierarchized office space, i.e. “the office queen”, and also in relation to some abstracted or invisible commanding entity. The relationships among the workers are anchored within the established bounds of their masks - in a sort of cultural resonance with the *canovaccio* of the *Commedia dell'Arte* or as the characters of Goldoni's plays.

A good worker

must be like a painting with numbers --
each hour must fit a certain colour
(2, 6)

The conflictual social spheres between genders, as well as the extensive domain of interpersonal conflicts, point to a political perceptibility. The text seeks to bring out a dynamic vision of society, despite the ominous stasis of the

¹⁷⁶ The problem of 'spinsterhood' is also perceptible in the poetry of Mary Di Michele. See for example her poem “Tree of August: “...Under the tree of August, \ thirty and unwed, \ purple figs mature \ like mulatto suns \ overhead bursting”. In Morgan Di Giovanni, p.50-51.

mask, yet it shows dynamics of subjectivities that are frozen by the mask so that the strategies of social control become evident. In a consistent form, Melfi voices her distress and frustration through her irony and the use of brackets and footnotes, but these are not 'meta-devices' for showing the artificiality of her craft so much as the artificiality of the 'real' world depicted through the medium of the fictional text. The poetic voice formulates images through repetitive language that sets the subject's silent rage behind the mechanical function of servitude for the "machine" of the multinational. The subjective role is co-opted into the design of the machine for the survival of the system: "I am the machine for my company" (3, 7). "I am food for my machine, \ my body" (8). The discussion of the "mechanical" and the "machine" brings up the question of the "ghost in the machine", which traditionally maintains a dualistic division between consciousness (or the soul) and the body. However, this framework of division can be displaced into the consciousness of the nation which directs the hierarchized office individuals to various degrees according to their position in the multinational structure. In the discussion of *OP*, the ghost figure represents the extraneous forces of the multinational as the locus of free will that informs the pseudo-choices of its lower level workers.

The corporate mask is also formulated from tangible "signs" (1, 5):

This computer jungle is full of signs:
titles, name plates Pecking orders

Office queens carry their titles like spears
They hunt down dignity

Getting lost inside this amazon sign forest
can be life-threatening

Defenseless, the best thing to do
is fade into the woodwork (Or mutate)

Real pests don't show much respect for authority
Or read (faces)

WATCH OUT

Working can be awfully hazardous to your mental health

The overt warning sign at the end of this first poem sets a mental disposition which is reiterated throughout the text to set the motif of servitude: consider, for example, in poem 28 (36): "BEWARE OF (TOP) DOG" ... Bathroom graffiti \ DO NOT ENTER THE GATES OF PARADISE INC. UNARMED". This 'sign' shows an ironic link with the first poem of the *OCP* where the displaced subject claims her acceptance in the Canadian space of production ("...an expected career in the literary arts...", 117). In the light of this intertextuality, the above capitalized statements appear to loudly denounce the ironic fate of a subject displaced within her displacement or worse, abandoned in her multiple displacement. The intertextuality of the warning sign with Dante's "Lasciate ogne speranze, voi ch'intrate" [Abandon all hope ye who enter here] (*Inferno*, Canto III, 3) plays with a prefigurational idea of the impossibility of achievement of grace for the hero. Moreover, the warnings serve to confirm the circumscribed position of the protagonist and the perception of her virtual disappearance as an active subjectivity:

I wear someone else's face to work
to the sea shore
to concert halls
to bed & breakfast

I feign smiles
frowns

indifference
defiance
I have been well-trained in the Academy of Pretense
...
(77, 94)

3.3 Poetic composition

Looking into the table of contents of *ABTA*, we find that the author has overturned the conventional sequential order of the “acts” by putting the third act first, and the first act last. In addition, only certain “scenes” are manifested within the acts: the whole play exists through its metonymic selection of “acts”; for example, “Act Three” offers us “scene four”, while “Act Two” presents “scene one & two”, and “Act One” gives us only “scene one”. In this manner, it seems that the reader is offered only a partial and random representation within each one of the acts. Yet, although the normative sequence of the acts is disturbed, the contents of each act corresponds to a temporal order perceptible in the numerical ‘order’ of the acts themselves. This method adds to a surrealist quality which suggests this approach as the utmost means of representing the self, since any representation is an attempt to grasp a whole which in reality cannot be grasped; hence a surrealist form of representation, especially in poetry, offers the possibility of a fresh interpretation at every reading. In Melfi’s texts, the intangible requires a quasi surrealist representation in order to make it perceivable to the reader. This artistic approach extends to the representation of bodies - for example, of the bride as “a hand grenade” (9) or as “Rage” itself (19); the groom’s “stares” become “bullets”; the marital relationship is symbolized by a “Dart Game” (29), and so on.

However, *OP* shows a more strategic use of spacing than *ABTA*, showing that the text does not succumb to conventional imperatives neither in its form nor in its content. *OP* relies on repetitive imagery of apparent 'irrationality' in order to present the tension between the subject's knowledge and her needs. The declaration "I am the machine for my company" (7) immediately presents a reduced, or even neutralized identity through the subject's incorporation into the mechanical figure of the multinational: as a sort of office 'borg'. This disembodiment forces the human part of the subject to fit into a digital form as an attempt to convert human fallibility into machine precision and 'perfection'. The body which is "food for the machine" designates the threat of total consumption of the subject for the purposes of the multinational, while the subject herself struggles to find the beneficial point of articulation between the self (the "machine") and the "spirit" (the discourse of the multinational) in the broader context of a globalized lifeworld.

My machine eats of my spirit
It's edible
What luck
The machine is my Saviour I shall not want
(3, 8)

OP shows the negative impact of the multi-national's dependence on its mechanical discourse and the encroachment of the latter on the worker. This new perceivable reality would disprove 'modernist' myths of the early twentieth century that proposed an antithetical rapport between the subjectivity and her role in a mechanical society; the modernist escape out of this predicament was the conceptualization of the national subject in an avataristic framework of

nationalism.¹⁷⁷ In our own actuality this worker's world is constituted of contradictions which must be suffered for the prosperity of its greater (more powerful) Other.

One day the queen punishes an underling
for obeying her orders to the letter

The act ignites new and improved hatred
The hatred lights up the entire office tower (after hours)

Everyone can see it (except the queen)
The light is talked about in the foreign press

Some speculate its origin is radioactive
(Those closest to it might be scarred for life)

Soon the value of company stock is based
on the strength of its glow

And thus investor confidence
in this multi-national is maintained

There is a precarious sense of awareness on the part of the subjected worker, which relates the survival of the system at the expense of its victims. This perspective is juxtaposed with the impossibility of being seen through the glare of the (national) collective desire. The consciousness of this reality prompts a subjective attempt at subverting the system, in one form through the artistic composition. One means of undermining acknowledged conventions is by recuperating the subject from its paratextual cemetery so that it is no longer a contingency (a 'para' device) but an actual, incorporated section into the poem, as exemplified in poem 22 (30):

¹⁷⁷ See for example, Pound's *Cantos* which appropriates Eastern myths and T.S. Eliot's appropriation of Classical mythology. On the other hand, Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* is closer to Melfi's representation for its demonstrations of the dehumanizing effects of Fordism, which would evolve into the corporatistic form of dehumanization and deculturalization.

Man's favorite means of communication
is violence

To fully appreciate the language's nuances
one only need read tombstones as textbooks*

* Series title: *In Flanders' Fields*

[This 'paratextual' element represents an exact reproduction of the poem]

The reference to violence against resonates with the masculine Futuristic spirit. In a similar vein, Melfi's poetry also presents many images of violence against bodies, but in her case, the violence is being perpetrated against the self - the victim understands the language of violence better than her perpetrator does - as opposed to Marinetti's visions of a momentous 'rebirth' (in his first Manifest) -, and where the crash does not imply the physical death-¹⁷⁸ in fusion with the machine. Note for example, in Melfi's *OP* (21, 29):

A thief speaks the language of money	Like I do
He can speak it well	I can't
My wallet attracts him	My one selling point
He follows	In my footsteps
I stutter	I whisper for mercy
I whip myself into a frenzy	Injustice whips me too
Blood has its own rules of grammar	
It flows It pauses It stops	
I stop	and stain myself

¹⁷⁸ In fact, for Marinetti's driver, the car crash brings on a rush of sexuality and vitality, in a way similar to J.G.Ballard's characters in his novel *Crash* (1973).

It is obvious in this poem that the protagonist is not in the position of the dominator, but rather she is at 'his' complete mercy and she appears totally incapable of liberating herself from his power. In fact, she is compelled to demonstrate her resistance through the possibilities that are left to her, namely, through the technique of image juxtaposition and the freedom of the marginal space as seen in the examples already presented above and in this following one from poem 40 (49):

The queen offers presents to her staff
 She is in need of their love
 (Yet another service to be rendered)
Thank yous flow through the air like paper missiles

 And then one day
 the queen learns her presents
 have been sold for a song*
The revelation (of not being loved?) ages her in an instant

*Its title: "Never Underestimate the Power of the Victim"

For its part, the poetic language relates a consistent violence in the confrontation in polysemantic images in conflict with themselves as well as with the external hegemonic forces. Consequently, the subject's antagonistic thoughts remain enclosed as though in a state of siege (23, 31):

The city frowns
The colour of my thoughts don't match its own
Everywhere I turn walls shout at me Step back

The gardens of the rich wall in my ambition

The city frowns
My thoughts aren't pretty I see red

I smell of hate; want
My welcome mat: broken glass

The “red” anger and “hate” of the suppressed subjectivity conveys the continued juxtapositional stance which articulates the split between a freedom of being and the maintenance of an internal order. The “walls” of the “city” reiterate the sense of “alienation” and of siege(46, 56), and of the “ghetto” (51, 61) created by the multinational society. A neo-feudalistic system of relations is depicted in the impression of the absolute power of governing ranks over the workers, whose collective role is reduced to that of drones. An analogous interpretation predicated upon the sacrosanct quality of this graded system, is presented in poem 14 (21):

An office queen comes as close to the deities
as you can get in these parts

The one I work for
can qualify for the saint of the year award

The venerated creature
is always reappraising the value of her flock

In love with the sacred powers of divine rule
she fires, promotes/blesses (all in a day's work)

Spring can't be bought off though
The devil worshipper (?) entices our staff to sin

(Take days off for no
damn good reason)

The consistent juxtaposition of images pits the “strong” versus the “weak”, that is, the “rich” versus the “poor” - in short, those who hold the proper position (which does not necessarily translate into an adequate breadth of world vision) that will allow them admittance into the dominating ranks. Yet, ironically, this factor signifies that the ‘chosen’ also assume a borg-like existence in the conformity of their ‘success’. For the less-privileged working population, the possibilities appear somewhat bleak, as can be perceived by the staggering composition of the following verses, which convey a dual (but not quite dichotomous) voice of hopeful pretense versus a dejected reality.

The queen opens her mouth and all living things
collect another layer of her decisiveness

The strong offer themselves up as top executives
hatchet men (whatever) Provided there’s a payoff

The weak offer themselves up too - except
they expect nothing in return

Given the opportunity anyone can be caught
dancing under the spotlight:

brutality
It comes with the job
(24, 32)

Brutality is the fate of those who miss the (unconsciously) Pyrrhic opportunities of ascendance within the system and even middle management (equivalent to the “lords” of the feudalistic pre-society) is subject to the pressures of the higher discourses. “The queen is troubled: she’s expendable \ She seeks solace in the torture chamber: her office (25, 33).

A characteristic predicament of the multicultural discourse is displayed

through a simple statement: "Reality: a play where actors and audience \ are not quite sure where to sit" (79, 96). In this context, the absurd quality is continued in the artificiality of language through a new vernacular which represents a new, depleted encoding of existence in an artificialized world (36, 45):

Street fights suggest the language of the people
Loud and monosyllabic

The language of work incorporates action too
I am silent and I distinguish myself

Language is never sacred
Another ad campaign for tribal affiliations

Words always disturb my aesthetic sensibilities
Sin against my animal heritage

Language - once a golden calf and now Minister of Culture -
is having itself milked

Those who drink from It are poisoned
with promises

Each day I eat my words and grow fat
A true bureaucrat

Violence erupts within the private sphere as the everyday social language is force-fed a ration of words that do not reflect the individual multicultural subject but rather, it is a predispositional language appropriated in the service of a monolithic discourse. In other words, language and meaning precede and predetermine the displaced subjectivity. (41, 50):

...
because she knows (Oh what a clever patriot she is!)
that the Government of Canada welcomes
parrots and crocodiles and cardinals too in its offices
(Wasn't she hired on the expressed wishes
of our Prime Minister, himself a hawk?)

and so our enterprise cannot turn beastly
against our neighbor as it is already populated with beasts
who are on some secret mission -
(Something to do with doves)

Language, or the discourse, risks falling into the illusion of itself - if it has not
already done so -, a situation that is evocative of the violence, violation, and
emptying out of language which was discerned and expressed in the Italian
neoavanguardia of the 1960's. - a link which has already been established by
William Anselmi.¹⁷⁹ Hence the self-contradictive language in Melfi's poetry
reveals the paradoxical situations through which the subject is compelled to
move (44, 53):

Day 1: The secret scent of (im)perfection
hovers over the red light district
A drag queen sets out to find a client
A dog barks

Day 2: Blossoms advertise the promise of romance
The queen stands guard
Her trade secret: love me or else

...

Day 4: The queen sets out for a cave (a tourist trap) down under
The cave invites its trespassers to desecrate its walls

....

Day 6: The queen directs her gaze to the heavens,
trapped by her desire to change the spectrum of stagnation
The sky remains faithfully hers, roman candles and all.

The in-word contradiction or negation of "(im)perfection" and other internally
paradoxical images, i.e. "drag queen", combine with the poetically re-tailored
ideological stances of "The queen stands guard" - resonating in the Canadian

¹⁷⁹ William Anselmi has established the link between Italian Canadian writing and the Italian
avanguardia. See in "Rapportare la scrittura in dislocazione: avanguardia e letteratura italo-
canadese" in *L'Italia nella lingua e nel pensiero*. Tomo II. Quaderni di Libri e Riviste d'Italian 46 a
cura di Anthony Mollica e Riccardo Campa. Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2002.

imaginary with the words “we stand on guard for thee...” from the English version of the Canadian national anthem - and identifying the potency of the monarchist icon (even though satirized in the words “drag queen”) in a continuous hegemonic power of the English (British) so-called majority. In addition, the allusion to the Platonic “cave” solicits a backdrop of illusions to be maintained by the ‘visiting’ queen and which in reality maintains a certain status quo. The invitation to “desecrate” the walls of the cave is the ironical (bracketed) “(... tourist trap)” from which the “writer” must beware. The external viewpoint of the poetic voice, however, records a certain ‘writing on the wall’ that impedes any representative changes in the “spectrum of stagnation”- as in an eternal return of the same. The reference to “roman candles” has a strong resonance for Italian Canadian writing, since it represents the title of the first anthology - and first Canadian publication, in 1978 - of Italian Canadian poetry. There is a clear inference to classified spaces of expression for the Other voice as the “tourist”¹⁸⁰ voice and the expectation of restraining identity issues within categorical boundaries: (72, 89):

Remarkably my co-workers show no interest in the competition
They have the edge: they can think in the future tense -
concentrate on possibilities (week ends)
Ghosts can't

“Go back where you came from,” our office queen tells them

N.B. It is my job to see to it that they do.

¹⁸⁰ This inference also evokes the notion of Canadian literature as being primarily established English literature, by the canonical voice of Margaret Atwood, who stated that ‘immigrant’ literature does not matter since it is to be considered transient, or, because its writers have come into Canada at a relatively mature age (as opposed to being born in Canada and influenced by completely ‘Canadian’ values) and therefore they cannot represent a Canadian voice. See Scott Reid’s Comment “Survival according to Atwood”, in *The National Post*, B7, Saturday, april 10, 1999.

These verses reiterate those in the previous poem, "Canada Post... \ ... has a return-to-sender policy" \ Death doesn't Pity" [sic] (71, 88). The poetic voice of irony suggests that the artist is incapable of surviving¹⁸¹ unless she becomes part of the structure itself - and through her own cultural 'death' in the absurdity of the anti-life of the system. The implication of this is the inconceivable hope for an engaged literature that speaks from without the canonical system and its political standpoint.

The office queen is not pleased
I dared to fly into her sacred abode without an appointment

My outfit is inappropriate
My smile is too

Alienation is buzzing about
Its wings are transparent

I look out the window and see someone
throwing thistles at herself
(46, 56)

It would seem that critical thinking must be relegated outside the establishment, outside the "Academy of Pretense" (77, 94), resulting in the marginalization of the critical intellectual voice and/or its tumble into an exercise in futility.

Following this allegorical representation, the text presents another image juxtaposition, dealing with job tenure for the long established representatives of the multinational who feel threatened by incoming waves of different, revitalizing voices (writers) - perceived as "Youth". As all voices are signified by their capacity of usefulness in respect to the 'employer', rather than by their individual sense of value, the established voices feel the offensive of the new

¹⁸¹ Note the title of Atwood's anthologies of Canadian writing as: *Survival*.

ones coming in to displace them into “Old Age”, that is, tentatively forcing them into (sus)pension in order to yield the space to new voices (73, 90):

Old Age is working away at our office -
 a Lost and Found Centre
it thinks itself immune to economic downturns
 layoffs,
 unemployment crises
 catastrophes
 etc.
Dead on

 Youth conspires against Old Age,
urging it to pack up its bags (and wings)
 and head south -
 down to the sunshine state’s
24 hour playgrounds

 Old Age lets it be known
that it doesn’t wish to forgo the luxury of being
 useful

 Unlike Youth
it still has an important role to play:
comic relief

The protagonist voice thus enunciates the antagonistic spirit that pervades her existence in so far as the gravity of private existence is directly contingent upon its (sense of) usefulness in the public realm and for the “multinational”.

Ironically, the potential aspirations of success are curtailed and divested of their potential value, precipitating the voice into the nothingness of absurdity (74, 91):

My office tower was a giant whose familiar welcome
reduced the world to a postcard without a return address

It used to command success in my life
Then one day it packed all my successes into a suitcase

and left me alone with a ticket to Disneyland

3.4 Problems of exogamy: negotiating the Other me (or, the spectacle of the self)

In the context of displacement, the literature of the self as Other - and vice versa, of the Other as the Self - is an underlying consideration that informs the general reading of the texts. In *ABTA*, for example, the need for the reproduction of the self generates the attempt at a (re)presentation through the Other. The initial poem ("La Demi-Vierge", 9), representing the beginnings of matrimonial life, instills the image of a shaky ground upon which the "blushing bride" must re-negotiate the elements that will inform her future representation, beginning with the power relations that inject, implicitly or explicitly, any encounter between two human beings, and the possible effects of these relations on the different subjectivities:

...
The groom takes over temporarily
but with an Arts degree
you don't trust his mechanical know-how
will change (exchange) your destiny.
(Was nuclear energy predestined (too)?
You wonder. You worry.)

The first element of encounter is based on the negotiation of power relations. A sub-element of the encounter leads us to the subjective vision of the self within that encounter. In the context of the new wife - in the image of the everlasting "bride" - the new subjectivity interprets the self in a false, or incomplete, synecdoche:

It's something like this:

you're only a part of something special,
and not the whole amount.
Analogy: you are a series of raindrops
(falling off somebody's hat to his/her annoyance),
but you are never the rain, answer to somebody's prayers.

Hence the representation of the subject in displacement necessarily involves a relational image of this subject through the determining Other: a precarious subjective condition which risks the complete effacement of the cultural subject within the dominant Other:

Here you are happily married, with a bungalow,
and still you are a missing person

in the same way the good witch of the North
(Mom, a long time ago, colossal)
is now missing (on file).

The consignment of the self/subject to this Other leads to a conclusive breach of subjective being, effectively rendered as a form of paralysis and loss : "You find your old dreams, orphans, dead in a refugee camp."("Act Three", 14-15) The prospective "bridal" quality loses its charm with the anxious search of the self into the Other and consequently, "You can't find your raison d'être in the groom's \ complaint about the nature of things/ \ You can't find the groom."

The subjective de-substantialization of identity is not a condition that will instill itself gradually in the marital relationship but rather, it is already part of the ritual, almost as a requisite of the 'union' between the two diverse elements . At any rate the self-conscious sense of loss is realized sometime during the ritual moment, which includes the ritual component of (the wedding) reception into the community.

The bride opens the door and its handle becomes part
of her hand.
You shake it.

A whole procession of ideas follows:
IBM typewriters, typerwriters, type,
suicide by hard work, fast, faster, fastest.

The bride steals your identity.
Your salary depends on her blessing.

...

Fairy tale, twentieth century: union leaders drop out of
nowhere and save

the oppressed. Except you haven't paid your union dues.

You are helpless.
The bride is everpresent in your life like a phobia.

...

The priest at the wedding is an employer too.
Produce accordingly or you won't get a vacation leave.
("The Bride: Your Employer", 51-52)

The social, religious and professional conventions are garnered together in this single poem to present the concentrated efforts of institutional methods for subjective control through subjective forms of renouncement.¹⁸² Paradoxically, pronouncing the words "I Do" (90-92) appears as a logical step towards salvation from the anxiety of nothingness for the poetic voice: "Your face is a stop sign. \ It stops me from entering a country where \ there would be no liberty to be what I gracelessly am." The promise is envisioned in the "face" of the groom, insofar as the groom's "face" becomes a sort of magic mirror into which

¹⁸² The act of renouncement is also correlated to the requirements of Canadian citizenship which required that immigrants applying for citizenship renounce their previous national citizenship - and by extension, their identity - and allegiance. Hence in this context, the de-signified subject is forced to re-signify herself with the assistance of a non de-territorialized subject.

the bride displaces her dreams and anxieties:

Your face helps me get into life's good graces

Because your own face has a singular grace about it
like a great country,
has an exceptional grace like that country's museums,
has unprecedented authority like that country's supreme
court of law,
your face helps me believe in the revolutionary slogan,
justice for everyone, here and now, (please)

Your face poses itself like a no
Your face negates all my attempts to say no to love
Your face knows what I know
and can say no to me, and yes to me
because it knows how to pose like a no
...

Attempts at subjective authentication are mediated through the Other thereby re-creating the subject in a relationship of dependence: "Your words are like water: useful, better than water: \ addictive." Ultimately, the "bride" who permanently remains a "bride" fails to emancipate herself due to her inability to cross-over to the other side of her liminal role.

Office Politics appears to present a similar predicament for the "worker", yet an underlying antagonistic tone is perceptible in the poetic expression, for example in poem 12 (19):

Everyone is doing well in my office,
nicely progressing towards becoming an authority figure
Everyone, except me

I am singled-out - might be demoted too - all because
I wear the wrong clothes
Actually the wrong clothes wear me out

My suits are made of ivy
Poison ivy

This poem exposes a plain irony in the real context of an English-speaking poet working in predominantly French Montréal. The “Poison ivy” appellation for the (English) ivy of her clothing identifies the impact of the “...war of words, \ “language police, language borders” (8, 15) on the English-speaking Italian Canadian writer. A certain requirement of conformity is suggested upon the subjectivity, even though conformistic attitudes undermine the principle of subjective signification. The notion of individual development is shown as a paradoxical, and even hazardous axiom since it might entail mitigating the self. It seems that “progress” is made possible only if individualism is held in contempt in favour of a specific conformism: in the right context, demonstrating a proper (‘Ivy League’) attire might be the precondition to success. It goes without saying that the compulsion towards success in this predetermining environment will bring out various suggestive means of accession such as “through feats of non-verbal intercourse” (11, 18) for certain other personalities. (In other words: ‘it is not who you know...). Hence, the concept of integrity is envisioned through diverse facets - i.e. as a drive towards completeness or as incorruptibility - but more importantly, while integrity in itself plays a significant role in the re-formulation of the subject, it rarely reaches the level of critical discussion. Melfi’s poetry further problematizes the question of integrity in the context of body and mind which, paradoxically, must remain split for survival in the displaced time and space, and what is ultimately required of this objectified subject is the

spectacle of her “[h]ypocrisy” ¹⁸³ (64, 79-80):

I take orders on cue
I am the order to be carried out
the dish someone shouted for across cosmic space

Taste me Eat me Do what you please
I am not inside my body, you see
I am somewhere else

...
I don't mind
I have learned to develop a taste
for my non-existence

I can be a violinist
or a violin;
a servant of your imagination

Hypocrisy sits on my doorstep like a bulldog
It's there for my use,
my bodyguard

...
Slap me Whip me
I am not inside my body, you see
I am somewhere else

...
Hypocrisy is my twin,
my daughter, my mother
She will die for you, Darling

The first line of this poem, which also resonates with the “blushing bride” of *ABTA*, who does not “blush (on cue)” (“*La Demi-Vierge*”, 9), is recuperated by the last line of the same poem, where the satiric tone of the “Darling” is not meant as an endearment but rather, as a cautionary term. (This term also

¹⁸³ The term ‘hypocrisy’, from the Gk *hypokrisis*, refers to the act of playing a part on the stage. Yet a variant derivation of the term is found in *hypokrinein* indicating a lower state (*hypo-*) of certainty (*krinein*, to decide or judge). Thus the lack of certainty in a situation could be said to compel the subject towards a degree of hypocritical behaviour, or perhaps into a behaviour that is not allowed to be played out in its integral form. See *Merriam Webster* under ‘hypocrisy’ and ‘certain’.

permeates the sardonic dialogue of the two spousal participants in Melfi's *A Dialogue with Masks*.) The repeated statement "I am somewhere else" clearly expresses a sense of displacement yet it is difficult to ascertain the degree of autonomy in the displacement. In the question of the writer, the phrase carries a charged signification consisting of a constant cultural and economic subjection to a colonialist Other. An interesting resonance comes to light through the weight of the repeated expressions of division between mind and body, or of multiplication of being, in these verses. This trope which recalls the Pirandellian *sdoppiamento* - also due to the appearance of different and contrasting forms of behaviour in the poetic voice - is also the object of these comments by Joyce Hope Scott:

Images of twoness and inside / outside evoked by Zora Neale Hurston in her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, seem to capture in fictive representation what W.E.B. DuBois suggested in *Souls of Black Folk* as the dilemma facing the Black intellectual on the eve of the Harlem Renaissance, which took place in the early 1920's. The "color line", which DuBois identified as the problem of the 20th century, truly becomes the site of negotiation for artistic space for the African-American writer at this point in American literary history. Seeking to add their voices to the multi-faceted narrative of the American experience, literary artists of the Harlem Renaissance found themselves engaged in a discursive improvisation not unlike the model created by jazz, its musical corollary which is polyrhythmic and multi-instrumental. (124)

In the consideration of the fairly recent emergence of an Italian Canadian literature, this critical quotation points to a sort of common ground of struggle for minoritized literatures. The "color line" is a super-charged term also comprising the elaboration of a polyphonous "black" speech for the literary medium. Despite these particularities there are some definite similarities between the Harlem Renaissance emerging in the USA in the 1920's, and the Italian Canadian and other minoritized literature(s) seeking recognition in the

Canadian space in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

3.5 The spectacle of the self: towards self-recognition

In *ABTA*, the character of the “bride” is to be a performance in the dramatic sense of the word, yet this performance is shown as a series of fragmented pieces within a seemingly moveable structure. The inversion of the three “acts” suggests that this drama will be presented to the reader in the form of a flashback or as an archaeological method of introspection into the (re)formulation of the protagonist self - as such it must also be considered as a type of revised memory. Various viewpoints can be assumed, especially since intermediate scenes have been completely omitted from the artistic expression and are therefore left to the imagination of the reader or critic. In spite of this, the role of wife is articulated as an all-consuming role from which the poetic voice can hardly detach herself, also implying the impossibility of detaching herself from her partner, whom she refers to as “the groom” - hence as a referent half of the stock expression, ‘bride and groom’ - throughout the text. The bride identity becomes a central identity, yet her possibilities of authentication are centred on her identification with and through her Other - hence the rite signifies a form of entrapment within a performativity through a perennial activity of ‘socialized’ behaviour. The text exposes the remaining feelings of solitude as the role takes over every aspect of the bride’s life, and the false security which helps maintain her performative behaviour by creating a deceitful sense of protection.

The “bride” as wife seeks her identity in this misrepresentational setting

which encloses her in her role to the point where she is unable to distinguish between fact and fiction - or between the real and the 'surreal' - in her existence. She ultimately swings to and fro in the space between her own idealized reality and the normative. This causes a tension between social duty and the ingenuous act, so that the spontaneity of the impulsive 'child' and the sensuous adventurer become lost in the world of conventionality, resulting in her withdrawal into a subjectively repressed anger and a sense of abnormality. In short, the bride espouses an antithetical state of being through her impossibility of recognizing the individual self in her lifeworld. The poetic voice presents a multiple split: sometimes addressing the "bride" directly, and sometimes referring to her in the third person - while the "groom" is always a third presence. The self can be further split by the externalization, and the effective neutralization of the potential of her inner components, so that, "An instinct is a third person in a personal argument: an observer to be loved and hated." ("The Match", 27-28) The ambivalence towards subjective 'truth' or knowledge is relegated to the realm of the Super Ego [Freud] as the subject hands her trust over to external mediation: "The referee between love and hate isn't \ a top ranking religious person (nor is it hellfire). \ The referee between love and hate is \ the instinct to think in the future tense." This would seem to be the only way to continue developing in the new circumstances. However, the presence of bracketed irony in the critical contemplation of the subjective lifeworld denounces a higher, synoptic standpoint to problematize the deferment of self-recognition in correlation with demands and expectations. The complex irony of the poetic expression plays a 'conjugal' role, so to speak, which serves to maintain a certain unity of the subject throughout these varied syntactical representations. The syntactic element is applicable to the individual

as well as to the group ("Wigs", 58):

Wedding guests feed you with safety.
They save you from being scalped by unpleasant news

(e.g., political animals can survive anything tragic).

Each guest is a page of an award-winning book.
The bride is the binding.

Each guest is a letter of the alphabet (and not any old
number).

You have meaning only in relationship to each other
(nailpolish only means something to homo sapiens).

Hair falls off all the time
but a wig is important and should stay in place.

A wedding party is a wig on a collective head.

The semiotic relativity of the group reveals a politic body manifested through the
imaginary of anthropological (versus merely cultural) ties wherein the individual
represents a syntactical element of the group and the memory of the group
exists through the meaning of the ritual.

The expressionistic reference to the "mechanical process" of human
interaction - i.e. the groom's "mechanical know-how" in *ABTA* ("La Demi-
Vierge", 9) - is picked up again in *Office Politics* with an image of the worker -
as a drone to the queen bee - that recalls Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* and
Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, as in poem 47 (57):

The queen, out to do her duty to her ancestors,
pulls the right levers
and the result is an increase in productivity (of a sort)

Someone's dignity is sacrificed
Someone else is booted out
(Nothing personal now)

The queen has few choices
She continues with the mechanical process
of being a victim of her position

Her subjects take note of her decisions
Sort/label/catalogue/record
mistakes

Also on the assembly line: revolt;
revulsion
Conspiracy is the (veritable) paycheck of the exploited

Mobility appears to be possible yet deterministic within its context. This seems to uphold a Hegelian process of discrimination. Hegel's theory about slave consciousness ultimately coming to recognize its own individuality comes up short in this particular context since Melfi's 'hero' becomes visible inasmuch as the 'hero' senses the shock of recognizing that she is a slave, and that she remains in a state of servitude, even in her new context: the subaltern identity of the originating context (the voice's "peasant" origins in Italy) is paradoxically reinforced in her new context, as a member of the subordinated, 'white collar' working class created by the 'new economy' and the technological lifeworld.¹⁸⁴

There is no recognizable individuality in the dystopic reality of the late Capitalist

¹⁸⁴ In this respect, I reproduce below a section of an article by Matteo Sanfilippo on the relationship between Canada and its Italian Canadian writers: "...John Zucchi ha tracciato un panorama della storiografia più recente sull'immigrazione italiana, sottolineando come questa sia stata dominio quasi incontrastato di "ethnic and labour historians". Ha quindi affermato che i concetti di etnicità e classe sono strumenti utilissimi per lo studio delle comunità di origine europea stabilitesi in Canada, ma risultano inadeguati per un'esatta comprensione di alcune scelte degli immigrati. Non spiegano infatti perché alcuni gruppi, in genere fortemente coesi per comune origine etnica, se non regionale e addirittura paesana, emigrino nella stessa città canadese, si stabiliscano nello stesso quartiere, intraprendano le stesse attività commerciali. Per sciogliere questi enigmi Zucchi ha quindi proposto di vedere l'immigrazione italiana, come più in generale quella europea od asiatica, nel quadro della dialettica "città-campagna" e di analizzarla con le metodologie sperimentale nello studio dell'emigrazione rurale verso le città." In Rassegna.

corporation (48, 58):

As expected the slaughter took place at the office
The bureaucrats in charge of the clean-up operation
are efficient

The corpses of creative spirits
look more than ever ridiculous
Their deaths justified

The computers responsible
rest next to the cacti (Christmas presents)
Nothing is out of place

The office queen herself attends to the victims
Dresses them up
No one can tell which of her employees was hit

We all wear the same uniform
Have the same habits Jokes
Counterfeit smiles fly about

Survivors race against each other
Running someone down:
the top prize

My Speed & Accuracy guarantees me a place
in the sacred book of records:
the payroll

3.6 Assimilation by death

A Futuristic resonance of mutilation and death images informs the subjective representation in the initial poem of ABTA ("La Demi-Vierge", 9-10), where the poetic projection of the self-image in her new element presents a highly hazardous charge:

You're an inconspicuous hand grenade
(with a life span of 'who knows?')

made to order for an inconspicuous / conspicuous
computerized war (process)

...

With the virgin insolence of a mechanical genius
you watch yourself tamper with the exploding
population's equipment:
bodies: yours and his.

The environment of the relationship assumedly settled into a happy image of domesticity paradoxically contains - in both senses of the term, that is 'to consist of' and 'to repress' - its own problematics, since the conventional notion of domesticity between the two distinct identities does not easily acknowledge the presence of disorder within a supposedly mutually consensual relationship. This female identity, whose displaced existence depends on the power of her Other, the "man with a radioactive cape", is the one who will surrender herself (through her body) in a conciliatory attempt: "pregnancy: some peace treaty (developed cheaply \ over the centuries)." (10) (We also note the confining quality of the assonant "cape"/ "cave", and in the semantics of "pregnancy".)

The process of assimilation generates an invasion of the private sphere, as demonstrated in *ABTA*, as well as the public sphere, as in *OP*. In *ABTA*, the spouse, "A Man" (11-12) embodies this invasion:

The sun comes down one day
in the shape of a man with a radioactive cape.

He follows you.
Try what you might
you can't hide from him.
You can't hide underneath the shade of a tree,
for one thing.
You can't hide in the basement of your bourgeois
apartment building.

You can't hide at night:
he follows you to bed.

So you marry him.

The groom follows you to the bathroom.
You can't even be an animal and enjoy it anymore.

He stares at you and you think his stares are worse
than bullets.
You won't know what hit you for years.

The spousal relationship is recognized as a politic standard that 'oversees' the behaviour of the subject in her private sphere. In the continuation of this poem, the retrospective voice seeks to justify her personal choices - and passive processing - of her altered subjectivity:

He means well, the poor bastard with the radioactive
cape.
He's romantic. He's a heavyweight champion.
He loves you dearly.
After all, he did ask you to follow him till death
do you part.
Following is so tragic.
You believe tragedy is the only ending suitable for a dull
life.

Radioactivity, like romance:
in the beginning it makes things right; makes things
grow; sex and all that.
In the end you're much too close for your own good.

Two discursive points emerge from this segment: first, there is an obvious relation with the poem "The Alien" (in *The O Canada Poems*, 128), and particularly in the lines: "immigration is like an alien with two heads. \ Only in a comedy is the alien a good egg." The reference to the "tragedy", implied in the lines of the *OCP* and explicitly articulated here in the line, "Following is so

tragic”, foregrounds a notion of life *as if* lived on a stage¹⁸⁵, wherein (and here is the second point) the drama of displacement marks the difficulty for the displaced subject, of conceiving a private ‘ideal sphere’ around her individual being (Goffman, 69) so that the process of assimilation is recognized as a totalizing appropriation of the displaced subjectivity - indicating as well a practice which, perhaps, is a little too close to the American melting-pot theory. From the representational viewpoint of the displaced subject, assimilation indicates a performative assumption of and through the Other, especially when we consider radioactive contamination as lethal for human beings:

Sometime afterwards the groom
follows you into your dreams,
more valuable than uranium.
He puts your dreams in an envelope
and seals it with a radioactive kiss.
Your dreams are radioactive.
No one will touch them with a ten-foot pole.

So you place his cape on your shoulders.
It's the only way to get out of the darkness.
Ad nauseam.

Following this, it is not particularly surprising to come upon the poem titled “Mercy Killing” (16-17) in the multi-dimensional discussion of the spousal relationship. The object of the “killing” in this poem is the bride’s “somewhat primitive dream”, coming into contention with the “vacuum cleaner” that “sucks up the bride’s somewhat second-rate dream”. The reader perceives an apparent allusion to the medical procedure of dilation and curetage (in blunt terms: the abortion and the clean-up) - the “vacuum cleaner” that removes the object of the “dream”: the desired “pregnancy” mentioned above. Yet this

¹⁸⁵ If Shakespeare introduced the dictum: “life is a stage”, could the poetic expression in this present discussion also explain Melfi’s antagonistic disposition towards Shakespeare, in addition to the language question? We must also keep in mind the title *Stages* in which is assembled a wide collection of Melfi’s poetry.

“vacuum cleaner” which “somewhat satisfies her appetites to be ever so perfect” paradoxically signifies a reduced condition of her self-consciousness to the extent that “the commoner’s wife barely notices its mean \ (somehow, sexual) hold on her... Her old, somewhat second rate, primitive, vanilla-colored \ dream, \ is hopelessly entangled in the machine. Nevermore.” The “machine” displaces the libidinal instinct and steps in to replace it with its own voice of authority.

The notion of identity for the displaced subject is related to the theme of death and/or silence - that is, the death of the ‘voice’ -, in varying degrees and according to individual viewpoints. For the poetic voice in *OP*, the disappearance of the subjective voice is equated with a state of nothingness in the private sphere of the union which extends to the public sphere, as we have already mentioned (51, 61):

The woman carries a bouquet of invisible flowers
 Thrown out of work, she throws herself

 into the arms of her childhood sweetheart,
the Government itself, the sought after invisible husband

The two mate and thereafter the woman is nowhere to be seen
 A ghetto princess

 she never complains though
There would be no point

 Someone takes a picture of her family
A woman she doesn’t recognize appears in her place

Another allusion to the *OCP* can be discerned in this context, in so far as the protagonist seeking representational visibility is denied a “just” representation outside the framework of a photograph. “The Proposition” (*OCP*,123) interprets

a subjective dis-articulation in the lines:

...
The PM is not in (for aliens).
To top it all she falls down
the steps of Parliament, sightseeing.

A guy from Calgary takes a picture (of her).

The photograph is meant to capture the subject within a particular disarticulated space and into a fixed image of herself. In the *OCP*, this fixating image renders the subject in her failings. In "Act One" (93-96), the final poem of *ABTA*, the image of the "smile" composes the bridal picture.

...
Smiles the bride and the cathedral; the groom
and the office building.

...
The smile resembles a woman cleansed of all mean
thoughts.

...
The smile is out to rediscover the meaning of life.
The smile is out to make one forget the meaning of life.

...
The smile advertises life everlasting. Ho ho ho.

This last line relies on the irony of its last words: "Ho ho ho" - inferring the jovial optimism of the fictitious Santa Claus figure and suggesting: ' and if you believe this one...' - to undermine the promissory statement indicating "life" in the immediately preceding sentence. Hence in all three of these texts, the notion of the photographic framework demonstrates an attempt at conserving a certain performative image of the subject while simultaneously maintaining the subjective reality of the displaced subject outside the established image of the photograph. This process thus reveals itself to the subject as a practice of

subjective dis-identification - or of subjective spoliation, if we consider the metaphor of the "Stripper" (*cfr.* in Italian, *la spogliarellista*) of the *OCP*, and picked up again in poem 52 (62-62) of *OP*:

She made it!
She's No One

...
Every night No One tells her children
lies about unconditional love

They don't listen
Her heart is an empty space

...
No One is content to stay away
from office towers, church towers and the like

They're reserved for the living
and No One has crossed over to the other side

and found her husband, God
Such a handsome wild flower

She speaks his language:
silence

"Death" signifies the impossibility of returning to the life-giving sense of home. (71, 88) "Death" also eliminates the possibility of "think[ing] in the future". Thus "death" signifies an eternal present, yet not necessarily a *presence*. "Ghosts" lack the ability to "concentrate on possibilities" and are thus relegated to nostalgic appearances. Yet "Go back where you came from" is an exorcising litany often heard by the living "ghosts" of displacement, even in the multicultural arena. (72, 89)

So I called a cab
Death & Co. promptly came to my rescue

The driver ordered me to count
the # of grains of sand scattered on his back seat -

promising to take me somewhere special (for free)
if the # of grains equalled the # of days

I might have lived (hopelessly) on earth
if I hadn't chosen his particular company
(75, 92)

“Death” by displacement is shown to carry its own exercises in futility.

3.7 Semantics of ambivalence

Melfi's poetry makes consistent use of the technique of enjambements to foreground an ironic stance in her poiesis (as discussed in a previous chapter). These verse breaks contain and deploy ambivalences in meanings in order to render ambiguously plural images even in subtle forms, for example in the poem titled “Act Three” (14)

You are caged by an intolerable sense of going nowhere
special.

The reader is given the direct sensation of immobility in the first line, only to have this impression semantically revised to an impression of mobility, although this may be an undirected, and possibly erratic, mobility. The irony conveyed in the reading of these two lines carries a plurality of image semantics which does not adhere to a primary meaning of irony. In other words, the reality of this subject cannot be contained within a specific irony of opposites, but rather it falls into a larger field of ambiguity so that the reader is also made to recognize

the ambiguousness of our existence in (often, abused) language; and this expanded field of ambiguity simultaneously contains and deploys the condition of displacement.

A different means of problematizing the question of semantics is by presenting the conflict within the semantics of a title, such as "The Match" (27-28) which, due to the plural meaning of the term - as a marriage union, a 'suitable association' or 'exact counterpart', as well as its meaning as a contest, game or rivalry - combines with the precedent readings to maintain the reader's expectations in a state of displacement. The dominance of the title is then contested again in the content of the poem itself, which maintains the meaning of the spousal relationship within the looped concepts of "love and hate", and with a repetitive appearance of Catholic "guilt" thrown in:

Brides and grooms are labels for something: instincts.
Everyone, sometimes, challenges the purpose of an
instinct in the twentieth century.

An instinct is a third person in a personal argument:
an observer to be loved and hated.

The instincts: love and hate, box each other.

...

The referee between love and hate isn't
a top ranking religious person (nor is it hellfire).

The referee between love and hate is
the instinct to think in the future tense.

...

When the bride and groom fight they're as unpredictable
as slot machines.
Except they run on guilt, and not on anything else.

...
Love fits like a jewel, but hate fits like a saw
which means hate isn't fitting, or logical.

The bride and groom are urged to perform in accordance with the socializing demands of their iconic significations, rather than according to their more personal or "instinctual" selves. The relationship itself is "caged" within a polarizing tension where the two extreme elements of "love and hate, box each other" - "box", that is, in its pugilistic meaning and/or in the sense of encasing something. In addition to openly challenging the conventional or familiar meanings of language, the poetry proffers a reading that will also challenge accepted knowledges through this technique of polysemantic images and notions.

The scene of the wedding reception presents another picture of ambivalent semantics in "The Ugly Guest 1" (54) and "The Ugly Guest 2" (55). The first description refers to a female participant while the second one describes a male guest. The descriptions of these two "guests" display the refractory potential of the ironic voice which presents the players as polysemantic beings, wherein the female figure is represented as a baroque figure containing both elements of "beauty" and the "grotesque", as expressed in the first of the two poems:

Her face is out of fashion.

It's made out of the wrong material.
It's patterned to look like something grotesque.

She is crippled by her birthright to have such a face.
It's a sign of weakness on her part to be ugly like that.
It's a sign her sex is virtually dead.

She is the antithesis of the bride.

If only she repatterned her face to fit the times.
If only a plastic surgeon could lay her hands on her.
If only.

...

You have no right to forget beauty is only skin deep.

...

(54)

The mention of the “plastic surgeon” recalls the poem “Camouflage”: “ her native-born plastic surgeon \ insists it is highly un-ethical \ for immigrants to match their natural surroundings” (*OCP* 127), bringing up the performative aspect of the sense of belonging. The voice perceives the bride and groom in their transparent role of impersonators through the prism of the celebratory rite. The incantation “If only” (recalling the ‘if clauses’ of *AQHMC*) maintains a significant ironic stance which imbues the formality of the rite with a parodic slant so that the polysemantic value of the poesis depends on an irony which simultaneously holds up and dismantles the meaning of the performative subject. In this manner, the last lines of the poem reflect a complex ambiguity of imagery: “ There’s something exceptional about her. \ She could be a saint from the last century. \ \ But she’s shaped like a vacuum cleaner. \ She sucks the goodness out of you”. While these lines bring to mind the previous mention of the bride as the sexual wife, “hopelessly entangled” in the “vacuum cleaner” (“Mercy Killing”, 16-17), here they collapse the ironic correspondence between two images of woman as simultaneously virginal or asexual (“It’s a sign her sex is virtually dead”), and sexual (or the “demi-vierge” figure, and recalling here also a *speculum* quality of the comparison) within that of the beautiful “bride” and the “ugly guest”. A similar process occurs with the consideration of the male “Ugly Guest” (55):

His fame is his ugliness.
It makes you respect him.

You look at him the way you'd look
at a famous personality (in a coffin).

Still, there's something comical about him.
The man's a cartoon version of the Pieta.

...
His face comprises the face of an automobile accident
victim
and the face responsible for the accident.

...

You can't do a bloody thing to help anyone miss hitting
injustice.

The visual "grotesque" despoils the aesthetic perfection which generally
accompanies the ritual concept of the wedding with the interjection of satiric
representations, such as the "cartoon" image, to undermine the gravity of the
rite. These poems are followed by a continuing ambivalence of images and
conditional phrases to subvert the decorum of the event, as the bride
contemplates another figure characterized as "The Mental Defective" (56-57):

Growing out of the mental defective's back: a cage of
little monkeys.

The mob at the wedding is aghast by the little monkeys'
lack of etiquette.

..

Can't ask the head waiter to throw the monkeys out,
though.
The defective's mother is sharing the burden of shame.

Wouldn't it have been nice if the monkeys had come out
of her womb --
out out like a good bowel movement -- dead and

dignified?
Wouldn't it have been nice if science had invented a way
to kill off the monkeys and not the boy
like Vanquinn kills off worms in one's guts?

But there is something human about the monkeys in the
boy's cage.
Take a good look and men and women in wheelchairs, in
cancer's grip,
schizophrenics, alcoholics, the dregs of society, appear
out of nowhere.

Damn. It's not fair to the bride who's supposed to be
crowned
with fertility tonight (and every other night).
May she not possess non-human (humorless)
chromosomes. Of monkeys. Amen.

What is human? Ask a dog.
Excrement by another other (no)name is of human.
Exactly.

The monkeys in the cage are dangerous.
They are poking out the eyes of justice.
Call the police.
Justice is defective.

The mob zero in on the bride's smile.
The monkey's smiles, merciful like a heroine addict's
needles,
zero in on the wedding cake.

All is quiet on the western front.

The reader expectations of a perfect celebratory moment are brutally displaced
by the bride's vision and all the fears of her future life in this union. In this sense,
the extended moment of the (desired) union discharges the whole spectrum of
possible meanings ranging from the "injustice" of "ugliness" - and vice versa,
the ugliness of injustice, "Justice is defective" - in an interplay with verses from
OCP (123): "But only in Canada, a just bureaucracy \ (if not a just society)" so

that injustice itself is the mental defective. Society is depicted as the “mob” that soils the perception of the ideal picture with its generic waste matter: “Excrement by another other (no)name is of human.)” The trope of excrement, as discharge (or loss, as Freud or Lacan might say) from a body, shows an ambivalent linguistic play¹⁸⁶ against the potential of an *increment*, as something gained or added, and by extension, against the potential of incrementalism - a fairly recent notion (the term was coined in 1966, *cf.* *MWCD*) as “a policy or advocacy of a policy of political or social change by degrees”. The polysemantic value of Melfi’s verses re-orientates and deploys a socio-political subtext against the illusory characteristics of implied categorical imperatives such as the incarnation of the “beautiful” bride, who remains fixed in the eternal return of the rite (“A Beautiful Woman”, 80-81):

A beautiful woman is a wedding album.
Here comes the bride all over again.

She is the woman on a tapestry,
...

Simultaneously, she is the best virgin of the century,
(when virgins are in demand)
and the best sex symbol of the century (when sex is in
greater demand).

She is the promise of a fresh beginning,
the water you wash your face with after a disturbing
dream;
the well, desperate men draw their dreams from.

She is a folk song, a classical piece, rock-and-roll, jazz.
She is a feast, the horn of plenty, a menu for
connoisseurs.

¹⁸⁶ The linguistic interplay with the word “excrement” does not ignore the term ‘bullshit’, especially in the consideration of “defective justice”, and in the delusive practices of a society which, in its denotation of a “mob”, depicts its negative aspects.

She is whatever you like most in life.
She is Miss Whatever-she-wants-to-be.
She wins the first prize: a trip to identity.

...

She sells you cars, perfumes, hair dyes, shoes, trips to
nowhere special (on TV),
and you like her a lot.
She is a saleswoman, selling faith, hope and charity.
Credible.

...

In her multiple, and arbitrary, significations the subjective voice fluctuates between what she believes she represents to herself and what she thinks she represents to others, and the ironic disposition of images is tightly interwoven with her words, creating a plurality of semantics within the complexified image of the bride, and including the popularly (and culturally) disseminated image of the bride in her dichotomized performance as “the best virgin” and the “best sex symbol” (or in the popular imagination, a perfect blend of the ‘virgin and the whore’ figures).

These contrapuntal theming strategies again engage the reader through a semiotic reading beginning with the first lines of Office Politics (1, 5):

This computer jungle is full of signs:
titles, name plates ...

...

Getting lost inside this amazon sign forest
can be life-threatening

The idea of “getting lost” in a “jungle” of information may sound oxymoronic, yet it appears as a real possibility to the ‘semiotically challenged’. This problem is compounded for those who encounter the pressure of acculturation in their

private sphere as well as in the public, or working, arena. The threatening “jungle” of the poem is a comprehensive, ‘man-made’ - and tragically synoptic - development which forcefully asserts the occupancy of a late Capitalistic society over the privacy of the subject. The consequences are significant for the subjectivity which already senses its condition of displacement:

Defenseless, the best thing to do
is fade into the woodwork (or mutate)

A subjective conflict surfaces to the self-consciousness of the identity-in-formation, through images revealing the corporate ‘borg’ reality of the new work ethics (2, 6):

A good worker

must be like a painting with numbers
each hour must fit a certain colour

The feeling of resentment is expounded throughout *OP* by the clashing combination of images pitting (fallible) human existence against its own subjection to technology. The Futuristic sub-text avails itself of a contradictory stance which implicitly denounces - rather than celebrates, as does Futurism - the degenerative effects of the technological age (3, 7-8):

I am the machine for my company
My company, the machine for God knows what

Each day I shake hands with my powerhouse
and get on with the business of translating
human errors into machine readable form

...
It's an accomplishment of the highest order
 A union Mind and Matter
The machine ejects fresh-looking paper youngsters
 for all to see What pleasure

...
 I am food for my machine,
my body

 My machine eats of my spirit
It's edible
 What luck
The machine is my Saviour I shall not want

The contradictions are made directly obvious through simple contradictory terms as well as through the highly cynical tone of the voice criticizing the treacherously dystopic outcome of technologized society. The "union" is no longer articulated between two human beings, but rather, in this context the "Mind" of the human being working with the machine of the Other risks becoming identified through the "matter" of the machine which overtakes her lifeworld. The idea of technological liberation - the "Saviour" - which has been cultivated among modern societies since the 1960's shows its actual immobilization practices for the subordinated worker. The new technology translates into the loss of the worker's dignity and a sort of prolonged death in this state of nothingness. But worse than this, computer memory is used to work against, or for effectively replacing, human memory. "You just pull out our files (any which day), \ point out our mistakes \ (Your memory is as honest as a computer's)". Work (or making a living), is depicted as the space of death: the death of human memory signifies the advent of silence as the space of identity (7, 13):

Drowning in a sea of office queens barking orders
The rosary beads around my neck are decoration
They can't be traded in for a life vest

SOS

I'm lost in someone else's country,
wrapped in a flag of invisibility -
another present for the brutal rich

who wait on shore calculating the amount of overtime
someone needs to work in order to come back to life

The garden of self-love has been flooded
My rescue ship: silence

As the sea is one of humanity's oldest metaphors for (the journey of) life, then this image of "drowning" reconfigurates the order of a progressive journey of the subject into the impossible continuity of the 'shipwrecked' subjective journey, so that those who could previously just watch from their spectatorial safety zone are no longer just witnesses to the shipwrecks of the Other but they now remain fixed in their knowledge of being ambiguous non-players in their own shipwrecked states. But Melfi elaborates a metaphoric language through her technique of irony to deduce the human element from its formalized frameworks of existence. Communication problems are reintroduced in the ambiguous question of language and silence, wherein language no longer belongs to the human being but to the machine, while the language that makes us human is reduced to the "silence" that promises to sustain us. We are thus divided by and through different linguistic worlds, while the threat of dis-communication overshadows the potential exchange of information (8, 14-15):

My bosses speak one language,
and I another

...
Hate has its own grammar and syntax

I dream about guns,
 making a statement,
 erasing words,
 bad thoughts
I dream about dreaming in a new language: joy

 No one listens when I speak
Someone calls it the language of complaint
 Better to say nothing
The assembly line feeds on silence,
 complicity,
 Obedience

 What luck
 I work in telecommunications
 We turn words into electronic impulses
(Dis)information is offered at cut-rate prices

...
 Smiles do not say much either
Smiles are a lazy man's answer to fraud
 Body language: con-artistry
 So there
the underdog doesn't have a language to call her own

If only God could come and speak through me
 I would be protected
 No more war of words,
language police, language borders
 No more self-betrayals
 Coffin ships

I dream about breaking into the global village;
 cutting its wires with my fangs
 I dream about poetic justice
I imagine myself waking up one morning and speaking
 in binary code
 I dream I am you
 The leader of the pack

 "Ms Rosetta Stone
will you hurry and come in here please

people's traditional means of defining their meaning of life itself (*pace* Marx).

I take my Prozac
- instant religion -
and sail through life

Yet another poor soul trying to walk on water.
(15, 22)

And again in poem 17 (24-25):

...
My pills, my new partners-in-life, my heroes
how do I love thee?"

...
Christianity lies in a pill box
I speak in tongues
Everything is possible
I can feed myself again

The subject, like Alice in Wonderland, is consistently faced with the new paradoxa that inform her dystopic (non)lifeworld where everything seems turned on its head, for example, if the term "justice is blind" (18, 26) is be reconsidered as the meaning that "No one is safe" (19, 27); and where the notion of work as a means of survival has been turned into the image of work as servility and exposure to potentially nefarious elements: "My computer barks too; its bytes are cancer-causing" (27, 35); and where "Smiles, laced with cyanide" (29, 37) describe the competitive atmosphere of the survival arena. Hence the notion of survival itself is infused with "signs" which have nothing to do with the traditional problematics of displacement affecting the incoming community. In fact, Melfi introduces the amalgamation of *displacements*, that is, in its plural form, so that the literal xenophobic phrase "Go back where you

An allusion to the oriental 'trick' of the *fakir* whose rope extending into the sky presents an illusion of escape (for the tourist spectator) is quickly dissipated into the occidental image of mythical wings and the notion of agency for she who dares to fly.

3.8 Seduced by power: classism and hierarchy

The text of *ABTA* (as only one among Melfi's works) projects an overwhelming sense of isolation, which transforms the need to re-produce the self into an attempt at a (re)representation through the Other (as previously mentioned). The bride does not belong to herself but rather, and as in a re-adapted anthropological system of exchange (Lévi-Strauss), she is promised to a social community who takes on the judicial role of audience and witness. The third section of the text, "Act One, Scene One" summons the exegetic chronology relating the induction of the bride into her new social role. This section depicts a subjective apprehension of the situation during the wedding ceremony. The bride in her acquired image becomes an interpretive projection of various sublimating meanings, as demonstrated in the first poem, "The Transplant" (71-72):

A bride is like a mountain.

...

A bride like a river.

...

You look at the bride and think
a bride is more like a cow than a clock: friendly-like.

...

The bride is also someone you visit
when you are in a hurry to believe in romance.

The bride is a farmer who has to work in the morning.

The bride is an artificial organ

...

The bride is a defence against anxiety.

...

The bride is a peace treaty

...

This extended moment of the matrimonial rite obviously expresses the multiple liminal potential of the entity during the course of her cross-over. Yet the outcome in the bride's perception of the self undermines the image of happiness that typifies the wedding ceremony. The bride's detached outlook on the self is disavowingly cynical as she sees herself going "Down the Church Steps: a Divorcée" (74-75) in echoes of Duchamp's mechanical bride:

...

Nobody loves you either, dear, so somehow you feel forgotten:

deadwood, deadbeat, dead duck, dead - manikin-like.
But not like Pinocchio, mind you, who had a chance to be somebody.

You're a manikin invisible to the naked eye: humanoid and cold.

You look up at the sky and see an advertisement meant only for your eyes:

"You may fancy yourself successful but you're not.

...

Maybe all you need to come back to (terms with) life is love in the shape of a dildo made in Taiwan.

Such a thing, guaranteed to last a lifetime, is hidden behind the groom's wax smile. Didn't you know?

...

You bet (underneath all that make-up) she's only rich

and alive like a dead star
you don't know is dead because it shines in your face.

The status of marriage is perceived through a distressing impression that the future is hardly perceivable beyond the mask of objects. The guaranteed "dildo", "the groom's wax smile", the heavy "make-up", the disguise of the "dead star", all of these signal the impersonality of appearances. For these reasons, the bride's vision concentrates on various significant figures at the ceremony ("1:3", 76-78): "the priest who married the couple", a "psychiatrist, invited to attend his patient's wedding", "one of the witnesses is an orderly, ready to use his ambulance...", the "other witness is a divorce lawyer". These figures hang in the background of the illusory forever-after happiness that is projected through the figure of the groom who, reduced to his economic value, "is better than a winning lottery ticket because \ the prize money \ is alive. A groom is better than unemployment \ insurance." ("Some Spinster Believes", 79) For her part, the figure of the bride projects the image of "A Beautiful Woman" who "sells you promises: marry the beauty and the beast all will be well with the world. Halleluja." (80-81) The ceremony endows the bridal couple with the illusions of perfection required by the witness community. "It's a solemn moment. ...Now is the time to be civilized. \ Pull the wool over one's eyes." ("B-Flat Major", 84-86). As the new reality overtakes the consciousness of the bride, her previous notion of self is relegated to memory, or into another reality altogether ("I Remember", 87-89):

...
Grandma, my protectress,
Grandma, the lady in waiting who introduced me
to the queen: myself,
...
Grandma is worn out. Worn out like a nineteenth-century

idiom. Dead. A heroine.

...
I see you hiding behind the altar, behind
the pews, behind great grandsons' smiles,
while this (that) bride promises away everything
to a groom. Peekaboo.
Love-and-death is only a peekaboo game.

...
Grandma, the woman who gave me a lovely sense
of myself and Italian history,
Grandma, the woman who made sure this (that) bride
would not be missing on earth,
Grandma, I remember.

Hello Ms. Love-object, first and most important.
Welcome to the wedding.

It seems that any positive idea of the self is contained in the smile of her Other
as the bride's gaze turns to the groom to pronounce the words "I Do" (90-91):
"With your smile for my eyes, ears, mouth... \ my own face, at times, lost, in your
face \ like wrinkle, scar, birthmark". Yet this smile is offered as "a symbol for all
that is right with the world. ... \ To smile is to decorate one's life \ with the search
for happiness. \ To smile is to give civilization its obligatory dowry." ("Act One",
93-96)

The first lines of the middle "act" of *ABTA*, "Act Two, Scene One & Two",
already formulate an atmosphere of alienation at the wedding reception ("Act
Two", 37): "A small round desert: the wedding party. \ Cigaret [sic] butts poke
their heads into a hot hostile air. ... How to welcome cancer with a smile? \ Invite
your boss to your wedding." These lines suggest an analogy between this
explicit union with the "groom" and an implicit one with the figure of a "boss" so
that "The bride owes her allegiance to a multinational. \ When she's not a bride
she's an IBM key puncher. \ Her boss is a nasty chain smoker." This dual

subjective condition prompts the question: "...Why is someone always the hunter and \ someone else always the hunted in the game of life?" \ ... Doctor, help me. \ I'm not happy like Noel at my sister's wedding." ("On Cue", 38) As the ritual moment demonstrated the high point of the union, the proximity of the downfall is subjectively perceived during the post-ceremonial celebration ("The Tribe", 39): "The whole tribe is at the wedding. \ It loves you for no reason. \ The world is a global village: safe as a nutshell. \ It's illogical... \ Beware (you know): all membership rights terminate at \ the end of the party." A superficial image of perfection of the perpetual bride is consistently undermined by the textual content, where the poetic voice expresses some insights on her new status. The phobic realization of being anchored in the image of a 'perfect' bride is accompanied by a realization that she is subordinated to all the figural representations that have made the marriage union possible, including the self as "bride", and ultimately "The priest at the wedding is an employer too. \ Produce accordingly or you won't get a vacation leave." ("The Bride: Your Employer", 51-52)

The bride now belongs to the Other, represented in his various forms, as the bride is coerced into new performances, for example, for her "employer": "To help consummate his third marriage \ the employer asks his young bride to dress up \ like one of his birds. " ("Like One of His Birds", 67). She has no choice but to acquiesce since in her new role, "The bride is a potential target for creation. \ She vows she won't be a waitress at A&W no more." ("A&W", 68) The bride's sense of a destiny is apparently instructed by her overwhelming new "identity" which relies heavily on the position of her groom. In the first section of the text, "Act Three, Scene Four", which relates the established relationship as a

married couple, it becomes obvious at this point that the bride has reduced her own personality in the shadow of her Other and she must now justify her position, at least to herself ("A Man", 11-12):

The sun comes down one day
in the shape of a man with a radioactive cape.

He follows you.
Try what you might
you can't hide from him.
You can't hide underneath the shade of a tree,
for one thing.

...

He stares at you and you think his stares are worse than bullets.
You won't know what hit you for years.
He means well, the poor bastard with the radioactive
cape.

...

He loves you dearly.
After all, he did ask you to follow him till death
do you part.
Following is so tragic.
You believe tragedy is the only ending suitable for a dull life.

...

Radioactivity, like romance:
in the beginning it makes things right; makes things
grow; sex and all that.
In the end you're much too close for your own good.
He puts your dreams in an envelope
and seals it with a radioactive kiss.

...

So you place his cape on your shoulders.
It's the only way to get out of the darkness.
Ad nauseam.

The matrimonial process traditionally carries the wife 'across the threshold', that is, into the realm of her Other, and the possibility of refuge in illusory shadows (in "the shade of a tree") is disavowed by the realistic facts of a cloaked

existence under the “cape” of the Other (or as mentioned earlier, we might locate the bride in the “cave” of the Other). Thus assuming the dreams of her Other, the bride assimilates into an image that is not determined by the self, but by the expectations of her Other, as well as by the social, conventional expectations of the marriage union. As the bride’s private space is invaded and overtaken by “the groom” (she is contained in and by the Other’s gaze), her thoughts and behaviour become subject to fear and to the controlling gaze, “worse than bullets”, of her “man”. An ambiguous situation is created by the antithetical elements that comprise this relationship. The claim that “After all... he loves you dearly” only absolves the patriarchal system from any wrongful or unfair practices, yet the conscious irony of the situation takes time to emerge: “You won’t know what hit you for years.”

The magic of the ritual moment has quickly taken a downturn for the bride’s subjectivity as that moment is converted into a distressing reality of married life (“On File” , 13):

Life is something like a movie with a lot of brides in it.
Then somebody edits the movie to make it commercial
and only one bride is left in it and it’s not you.

Here you are happily married, with a bungalow,
and still you are a missing person

The surface representation of the spousal relationship does not correspond to the reality of the situation. The metaphorical disappearance of the “bride” is effectuated inside an official representation (in the public sphere: “On File”) that effectively conceals her reduced position: “Analogy: you are a series of

raindrops \ (falling off somebody's hat to his/her annoyance), \ but you are never the rain, answer to somebody's prayers." A systemic process of hierarchization is analogized through forms of traditional notions in the spousal relationship, demonstrating how the defenseless identity is seduced into her own surrender and made to 'disappear' inside an official representation exercised by her stronger mate. This analogy implies a hazardous vulnerability for the displaced subject.

Office Politics takes the concepts of being and meaning into consideration through the analogical representation of the subordinate worker in the service of the "multinational company" - indicating the uncompromising displacement of Capital into the sphere of invisibility. Whereas the existence of the "bride" in *ABTA* is controlled by the social and private conventionalities of marriage, the "worker" in *OP* demonstrates a similar system of hierarchy although this one demonstrates a classist form of monopoly of the subject. The *OP* text relies on a reading of semiotics of the everyday working life inside corporate Capitalism. The work place uses this verbal, written, and visual semiotic practice to identify the worker, thereby determining her position within the hierarchical "computer jungle" (1, 5):

This computer jungle is full of signs:
titles, name plates Pecking orders

Office queens carry their titles like spears
They hunt down dignity

Getting lost in this amazon sign forest
can be life-threatening

Defenseless, the best thing to do

is fade into the woodwork (Or mutate)

Real pests don't show much respect for authority
Or read (faces)

WATCH OUT

Working can be awfully hazardous to your mental health

As previously mentioned in this analysis, the literal sign in the last lines of this poem recalls the third canto of Dante's *Inferno*, the first book of the *Divina Commedia*, where Dante as protagonist encounters the warning sign over the entrance to the dark and threatening world. The requirements of the "good worker" (2, 6) translate as an ethics of conventionality: the worker must behave according to the demands of her duties, and always in a field of relative subjection to her bosses, and in union with the machine that identifies her borg servility to the "company".

I am the machine for my company
My company, the machine for God knows what

Each day I shake hands with my powerhouse
and get on with the business of translating
human errors into machine readable form

Each day I sit and enter my spirit
 into my private machine,
 enjoying the minute sounds
the undistinguished purrs my spirit makes
 as I copy and copy and copy and copy
someone's idea of a bad joke
...

My spirit makes sense of it all
 It gives birth to top secret documents
It's an accomplishment of the highest order
 A union Mind and Matter

...

How I love thee, machine,
my mate
My eligible bachelor
Without you I would have no place
to tap dance on
Without you my fingers would be given
away to Salvation Futility
How I need you to touch me
Feed me
Order out:
my paycheck

It sings about food
about heads of companies,
main dishes spiced with saffron,
expensive treats

I am food for my machine,
my body

My machine eats of my spirit
It's edible
What luck
The machine is my Saviour I shall not want
(3, 7-8)

This poem reveals an analogous process between the “work” world being addressed in the poetic text and another sub-text consisting of the appropriation of the subject through a discursive process of displacement. The demands of the “company” mechanism requires the conversion of human fallibility into the digital precision of its “machine”, ironically at the cost of the subordinated worker’s subjectivity. In other words, the mandate of the “company” is to display its official public image in order to maintain its competitive edge in the eyes of the broader, “multi-national” corporation. The inner workings of the “company” however, divulge the cannibalistic tendencies of a system which requires the “body” and “spirit” of its subjects in deference to its official, pseudo-generative,

discourse - in a re-formulated dualism of the 'ghost in the machine' concept from the idealism of the Enlightenment. A superficial reading of the text presents the dystopia of globalization for a sector of society that does not 'run with the powerful' but instead that must continuously feed its more powerful Other. The globalization process has produced a new form of subjective displacement for the majority of workers, and this newly recognized state of displacement represents a discourse that accosts a less acknowledged condition of displacement for new Canadians in regard to the multiculturalist discourse. The correspondence between these analogical processes will become evident through a textual analysis which picks up from the notions of subjective meaning within the implied mechanism of power.

The analogical workplace is depicted as an undeclared war zone ("You ought to wear war paint")¹⁸⁸ wherein the subordinated worker is identified in her sedentary lifeworld, or rather, by her lack of potential - and loss of dignity, hence of a 'real' life - , and vis-à-vis the dynamic possibilities of her bosses. The identity of the worker exists only insofar as she represents a receptacle for the blame of others, so that her lower casting translates into a prolonged death process. The homologous connection between the 'workplace' and the consciousness of a nation is highly discernible in poem 5 (10-11):

You ought to wear war paint
when a performance review is afoot
to prepare us for the (emotional) scalping

but you never give us warning -
never even spray the air beforehand with a disinfectant
(There's one on your desk)

¹⁸⁸ The sign of "war paint" is well-known sign in popular culture for an identification of the Native North American, whose cultures were considered inferior to those of the white man, and who have been consistently maintained in an antagonistic relationship with the 'white' cultures.

You just pull out our files (any which day),
point out our mistakes
(Your memory is as honest as a computer's)

and then with your ferocious little scribbles
set out to prove
the pen is mightier than the sword

I would rather you put my head inside your drawer
and give it a nice shove
There's no blade there after all

but the one in your mouth sure cuts right through
You're not supposed to disfigure -
make life-long scars!

We're not foes after all
We're members of the same (corporate) tribe
and you're just a minor chief -

who is supposed to reflect on our mistakes
like a mirror might
(with no intent to execute)

If I were on your Board of Review, Ma'am
I would send you off
for retraining

Head hunters are in demand

In fact, one only has to read the national newspapers to find, practically "(any which day)", some negative article or editorial comment which holds some specific cultural group or even the 'generic' immigrant responsible for the real or constructed problematic issues of the country as a whole. This constant barrage of insult and injury in the Canadian mediatic hegemony is easily recognizable, especially by the large majority of citizens who are not identifiable within the colonialist white, Anglo-Saxon origin.¹⁸⁹ The belligerent expression in the

¹⁸⁹ See Frances Henry and Carol Tator's book *Discourses of Domination: Racial Bias in the Canadian English-Language Press*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002.

various media (including the francophone media) sometimes shifts the degree of its offensive yet its discourse persists despite a paradoxical mediatic discourse which appears to uphold the official image of harmonious multiculturalism.¹⁹⁰ As the majority of Canadian citizens are, or have at one time been displaced through immigration processes - the label of immigrant is one that does not fade easily from the imagination, even in consecutive generations - we might say that this Italian-Canadian literature exposes some serious problems that are not being addressed in most critical writings that tend to avoid the political content of these works. Thus the 'real' sub-text does not disturb the official discourse, and the dictum: "if you can't beat them, join them" rewrites the manual to an acceptable citizenship, mainly for the service of "the company".

The queen, out to do her duty to her ancestors,
pulls the right levers
and the result is an increase in productivity (of a sort)

Someone's dignity is sacrificed
Someone else is booted out
(Nothing personal now)

The queen has few choices
She continues with the mechanical process
of being a victim of her position

Her subjects take note of her decisions
Sort/label/catalogue/record
mistakes

Also on the assembly line: revolt;
revulsion

Conspiracy is the (veritable) paycheck of the exploited

¹⁹⁰ For example, one has only to read the comments of Diane Francis - herself an immigrant to Canada, although she is a white, anglo-saxon ex-American - in the National Post to see how the "immigrant" sectors of Canadian society are constantly thrust into this blameful state for the nation's problems, and especially for the expectations of the globalizing process. In addition, the Globe and Mail often prints articles concerning survey results that mirror the racist attitude of the mass population. This mediatic influence shows all the signs of an undeclared oppression by dominant cultures, here in Canada.

The alternative of revolt is passé and frankly impossible as far as the (post)modern world is concerned, even though the definition of exploitation has survived its transition into the world of post-colonialism. The dystopic reality weaves its way through the Late Capitalistic system, since Capitalism is essentially 'balanced' by its exploited sectors, or else it cannot exist (at least as we know it). However, a new definition of "exploited" is also attached to the middle sector, and to the 'embedded' workers of the Capitalist system, since they too become unconscious "victims", annexed to the "mechanical process" required for the survival of the "company". The revolutionary spirit has long been appropriated by the ruling classes so that any real praxis is quickly neutralized and emptied into the image of itself. (The Futurist movement also demonstrates the strategic appropriation of avant-garde, revolutionary tendencies by the Fascist regime in its infancy.)

The poor seek solace in churches,
in dream factories,
each other Kisses

The rich do the same
Plus, they get opera and live theatre
Revolutions are always nicely staged for their benefit

The poor close their iron petals
and hide their delicious appetite
for revenge

(59, 73)

The class system exists in an economic discourse which allows for a certain mobility in such a way that one may lose one's signs of ethnicity, if one plays according to the rules of the dominant game. (However, this process acquires

specific forms of *a priori* identification for players of Italian origin, whose identities are often pre-determined by implicit or explicit labelling practices of *mafioso* operation.) The point is that, by ascending these economic rungs, one is allowed to acquire a positive sense of “identity” as well as a continued mobility, laterally and vertically.

The image of the urban sphere provides a sensation of besieged immobility within the rhetorical potentials of globalization, and specifically for those who are un-indentured in the world of the upper classes:

This city has so many walls,
 obstacle paths,
 glass ceilings,
they make the former Berlin Wall
 (or the long-standing Great Wall of China)
look like a graffiti board

 They're everywhere around me
Walls: reminders of how things are
 for those who aren't rich
for those who don't belong
 to government-approved families
Appearance(s), titles, pet pedigrees count for a hell of a lot
 in the Walled Capital of the World
 They have to
They're a new nation's building blocks

 Without money in my pocket,
without a *chapeau* on my head,
 without a job,
without a knife for comfort,
without identity

 I go from one wall to another
 Beg for mercy
(Or is it attention I'm after?)
 The walls in this city
offer nothing

(for free)

Hate literature
comes packaged in many different forms
Sometimes it's written onto an employment insurance check
but most of the time
the writing is on the wall
In this city
the illiterate can get the message too
Our walls speak (in tongues)

The walls of my house use standard English
"You are not welcome here," they tell me
"Rent due"
No matter how hard I try
I can't shut any of the walls up
Can you?

(60, 74-75)

It seems that the non-Anglo citizen is deterministically subjected to this particular state of poverty, and being constantly reminded of it, as "the language is on the wall". The sensitivity of the displaced subjectivity picks up on the semiotics that serve to maintain her in a state of eternal indebtedness and the fear of eviction. (We recall the last lines of "The Catch" in *OCP* (124): "Love and marriage for Maria \ (an illegal alien, alias Donna Prima) \ is a far cry from being exploited and/or deported".) Identity becomes a space determined by one's economic status¹⁹¹, while the poor (largely made up of immigrants) are subject to spatial definition and determination. Thus economic status provides a degree of mobility which permits it to overcome spatial boundaries (in the same way that the European "aristocracy" does not conform to spatial boundaries). Worse, while the corporate culture is allowed to widen its parameters, the ghettoed 'poor' become increasingly alienated within a deterministic form. Moreover, the metaphor of the city depicts a stifling frame signifying "hate" towards its "poor".

¹⁹¹ Cfr. *Il novellino* (14th century) where the character's economic status defines his identity. See also the Hogan and Anselmi collaborative paper "Italy as Displaced Experience: A Construction by Proxy", presented at SSHRC Congress at Université Laval, 2001.

Consequently, subjectivity is demoted to the definition of an 'object' for servile purposes only, so that the subject is forced to outwardly display her acquiescence of her Others' desires while she learns to survive in the underground of her own imagination.

I take orders on cue
I am the order to be carried out,
the dish someone shouted for across cosmic space

Taste me Eat me Do what you please
I am not inside my body, you see
I am somewhere else

You won't find me at the office,
at home, in this city, in this
autocracy of Others

It's always the Others
who are the power-brokers, the office queens,
the DNA police Torture artists

I don't mind
I have learned to develop a taste
for my non-existence

I can be a violinist
or a violin;
a servant of your imagination

Hypocrisy sits on my doostep like a bulldog
It's there for my use,
my bodyguard

I respond to the movement of your lips
Your hooves
Kick me for all I care

I (always) turn the other cheek
The act protects me from taking a gun and shooting you
A drug-free alternative to (self-) murder

...

Hypocrisy is my twin,
my daughter, my mother
She will die for you, Darling
(64, 79-80)

The repeated line “I am somewhere else” reinforces the recognized state of “non-existence” while it simultaneously frames and emphasizes the real frustration and desire for ‘revenge’ that is internalized against the self. The poetic space becomes the space of negotiation which remains personal, even though the voice speaks for all “oppressed minorities” (67, 83) - unless critical works of this type are made visible on a national level by the literary industry.¹⁹² But if the poor are shown to live in fear, Melfi’s poetry is fearless in its sardonic criticism of the reality beneath our national image. See for example, poem 66 (82):

The rich are counting their blessings -
dividing their inheritance:
jobs for their sons and daughters
Bread lines for the others
What a country

The rich go about their business (undisturbed)
and the poor go about theirs:
watching the rich on the idiot box
opening doors to new opportunities,
promotions, jewelry stores; self-respect

What a country: the rich work; the poor are idle

The passion according to the Unemployed
Crucifixions unnecessary

¹⁹² One need only open anthological representations of Canadian writing (usually in the care of Margaret Atwood, a self-described nationalist) to see that the majority of its content (and actually, almost its whole content) represents writers of Anglo-saxon origin. In addition to this, one should pay particular attention to the title of the best known anthology, *Survival*, which is used as a textbook in the English curriculum.

No blood need be shed
Mental torture is more cost-effective

Don't give me another dime, Ma'am
Give me your job!
An American princess married to her paycheck (Me too!)

What a country
replies the Minister of Double-Digit Unemployment
and
yawns

Someone is plotting the next revolution
inside a (data) bank
You can be sure
it's not a member of an oppressed minority,
or a recent victim of layoffs,
rollbacks,
restructuring (you name it)
It's the Devil himself: Sir Greed

The critique of "Greed" in relation to the "revolution" being plotted "inside a (data) bank", along with the sardonically reiterative phrase "What a country" is an ironic reference to the fact that Canada's independence did not involve a revolution, nor did it bring about a change in the ruling hierarchy. The verses also suggest a neglectful attitude at the national level, and the complicity of the latter in the issue of the IMF and world globalization. Moreover, the cynicism of the poem critiques a welfare society which is created and reinforced by the dominant class while, by extension, it simultaneously declares that integration into Capitalistic power requires the subject to agree to a sort of 'marital' relationship between the self and the Capitalistic entity.

Melfi uses frameworks of non-identity to criticize corporate culture and the displacement of self and/or identity through globalized practices, i.e. with the

gratuitous spectacularization of violence against the “poor” - “...anyone who wants to witness my rape \ should pay for it”. Indeed, the spectacle of globalization does not need ‘identities’ per se in order to show its strength; rather, it facilitates the emptying out of the concept of identity, in a similar way to its emptying out of language itself. In this sense, if identity belongs to language, and language is evacuated through the appropriation process, then language and identity must find new ways to re-connect with the real. For this reason, semiology may be an important communicative agent among displaced and otherwise sensitive subjects. As things stand, the option to “non-existence” is shown to be slavery to the “company”, presented as something to aspire to because it permits survival (if not ‘life’): “...compared \ to getting punched in the eye \ punching a time clock is a dream come true” (70, 87). The workplace which is supposed to provide some sort of identity to the subject, is then abruptly removed from the subject at the time of her retirement, so that “Freedom at 55” (74, 91) reveals the removal of the subject from her identity - as more victims are added to the list. The work world of ‘Freedom 55’ demonstrates a present which is obliterated towards the ‘idea’ of a fulfilling future, which translates into an emptied out present for the ‘promise’ of a future. Capitalism is shown to exploit the subject and then set her out to pasture; in short, the subject is masticated and regurgitated by the system.

The critical or sensitive displaced subjectivity carries this inner knowledge as she moves through the system (77, 94-95):

This planet could be God’s yo-yo for all I care

My toys were blown to bits years ago
So were my rosy cheeks

I wear someone else's face to work
to the sea shore
to concert halls
to bed & breakfast

I feign smiles
frowns
indifference
defiance
I have been well-trained in the Academy of Pretense

Too bad you can't catch me playacting
unless your own face
is secondhand too

At least I take off my rosy cheeks when I think
When I smell my non-existence
and yours
Upcoming abstractions

Your hat(e) is slightly out of place
Be a good sport
Take it off and show your skull

everyday
i passed a statue
everyday
i passed a statue
everyday
i passed a statue without a head,
the head having sat upon my neck

The notion of success imposes a stony form of representation over the
subjectivity. If there are any remnants of a truly private, ideal sphere (and the
"certainty" of one's identity), these are soon shattered by the voice of the
"company", even on private time, as can be sensed in poem number 85 (102):

Certainty blooms in my garden
I take a good look and am rewarded

with an unexpected dose of the Divine
It comes in all colors

The telephone rings
Uncertainty springs up

Is someone seeking me out for a chat (good fortune)?
Or is it my boss calling long distance

(week-end rates -
to save on money and mercy)?

I look to my plants for protection
Have a nice day someone orders

The workings of power do not always work so visibly to encroach upon the life of the subject, indeed the power discourse has been refined into subliminality, through strategies of promises and propositions of 'making the team', often unverballed for its self-protection. Crossing over takes the aspect of a subjective sell-out (88, 106-107):

...
My mate, my faith healer, my body tamer, squeezes me a little
and a gorgeous perfume is emitted (household magic)
Its sweetness poisons my sense of reality;
sweetens up the everyday;
suddenly I'm forgiven for my bad taste,
being average - an ancestral sin
I want to be married
to this foul god of indecision,
be mated for life; I want him to be around
my body: enclosing my greed, my lust in their
proper places - a live belt of sorts, a decoration
to be worn to work - re-activating old-fashioned
sensibilities (stability)

...

Let's begin a wedding ceremony
between freedom and bondage,
between plant and animal substance,
Let's abide by the rules of the dictator: togetherness
I deliver myself to its openings
My heart takes a quantum leap (Better buckle up)

The urge "to exist" paradoxically carries the subject to another scale of non-existence, which is existence inside the "company" system: "Anything to exist \ ...Self-expression is difficult too \ when you're afraid death is showing up on \ the hem of your thoughts and God is lurking elsewhere \ Does survival have a quiet thrill to it and why?" (90, 109-110).

3.9 Paradoxical spaces of silence

The common dichotomy of language and silence is merged together to demonstrate the complex meanings of these factors through their linguistic relationship. The various indicative values can be comprehended through the analysis of the poetic expression: as previously mentioned, the second poem of *ABTA* ("A Man", 11-12) manifests a loss of private space for the "bride" as she retrospectively contemplates the determinant points of her alliance with her "groom":

He follows you.
Try what you might
you can't hide from him.
You can't hide underneath the shade of a tree,
for one thing.
You can't hide in the basement of your bourgeois
apartment building.
You can't hide at night:
he follows you to bed.

So you marry him.

The groom follows you to the bathroom.
You can't even be an animal and enjoy it anymore.

He stares at you and you think his stares are worse
than bullets.

...

Sometime afterwards the groom
follows you into your dreams,

...

He puts your dreams in an envelope
and seals it with a radioactive kiss.
Your dreams are radioactive.
No one will touch them with a ten-foot pole.

So you place his cape on your shoulders.
It's the only way to get out of the darkness.
Ad nauseam.

The repetition of the phrase "You can't hide..." reinforces the sense of loss of the private self even in internal, subconscious expression. A strategic self-censorship instills the relationship that has led the couple to matrimony, manifesting an unequal measure of discursive power within the relationship. The rhetoric of disempowerment is accompanied by a non-verbal rhetoric which can be detected in the strategic spacing between the lines of the poem, where the blank spaces framing the line "So you marry him" paradoxically communicates an implied cynicism as a tactical counterpart to Melfi's technique of bracketed irony. Moreover, the assumption of "his cape on your shoulders" supposes a totalizing process by the male counterpart as a sole alternative for the female subject. This idea is reinforced in the following poem ("On File", 13), particularly with the lines:

It's something like this:
you're only a part of something special,

and not the whole amount.

...

You always miss the boat.

Life is something like a movie with a lot of brides in it.
Then somebody edits the movie to make it commercial
and only one bride is left in it and it's not you.

Here you are happily married, with a bungalow,
and still you are a missing person

in the same way the good witch of the North
(Mom, a long time ago, colossal)
is now missing (on file).

These lines depict the bride's lack of free will inasmuch as an undiscernible, generic "somebody", other than herself, is represented as the power that "edits" the bride's "life". In fact, the bride's presence is overshadowed by her pseudo synecdochic form, "in the same way" that her personal history is assigned to the framework of memory. Hence the external, typical image of the happy housewife is invested with an internal effacement in an expression which sets a cynical tone to the poetic discourse. A resulting sense of paralysis ensues in the following poem "Act Three" (14-15): "Paralyzed: you can't find spring entertaining" - as the bride's apparent subordination as a 'traditional' housewife whose "dream to be \ especially, rich and famous" is sublimated not only within the figure of her Other, but also within the objects that define her new, sexual role, as denoted by the "(somehow, sexual) hold" of the vacuum cleaner over her daily existence (in "Mercy Killing", 16-17)

Another statement framed by the blank spaces of cynicism: "You marry Success." ("Leaving Home", 18) is quickly followed by a restorative recourse to the self, yet this reconstitution of her silenced subjectivity takes place through

the restitution of her fighting spirit, invoked through a personal encounter with her own "Rage" (19-21) as a sign of emergence of the self. An allusion to the primordial cries of Marinetti's early Futurist *manifesti*¹⁹³ - can be discerned in some of these verses, such as the following:

Rage, the bride whose dress is made up of military badges
and whose groom is wearing deep scars,
will fight for justice for all - death being
the only ultimate justice she knows of.

...

Rage, the daughter of a woman whose intestines were
replaced by a mechanical device, is suspected
of having pulled
the mechanical device apart
(because she had wanted to eliminate the disease
from the face of the earth
but found she could do nothing at all).

Rage, the employee of death, rage nobody's friend
rage, the employer employs vandals to destroy
museum pieces.
Why bother to place art in some cage
when most of the world is starving
particularly, when she's starving for something
intangible?
Maybe love.

...

Rage once witnessed an automobile accident
and decided to set an automobile factory aflame the next
day
(an eye for an eye, says the Old Testament).

This poetic acclamation sets out to destroy the paradigms of normativity which support destructive subjective roles. The word "Rage", reiterated seventeen

¹⁹³ Marinetti's published his first manifesto on February 20, 1909 in *Le Figaro*, during his journey in Paris. Several other manifests followed, i.e. *Tuons le Clair de Lune!* Moreover, fundamental issues included the Futurists' consideration of the city and (Western) civilization as a state of 'paralysis'.

times in this poem alone, is most often placed at the beginning of the poetic lines so that the antagonistic power of the image is compounded by its capitalized expression. - signaling the state of rage as the lifeworld of Capitalized society.¹⁹⁴ The word thus becomes an incantation invoking its own possible self-destruction through the intervention of the Other: “Despair, the blackmailer, the rapist, the alcoholic, rapes her ... rage, the antagonist, the protagonist, rage who wants everything \ will be devirginized and pacified by the groom once and for all.” “Rage” and the subjective “rape” articulate negative processes depicted in the image of “death”; while the idea of “rage” in correlation with devirginization relates to vital “calls for compassion” and for “understanding”, and a “concept of justice”. At this point, the subject’s muted conviction of existence is thus contingent upon the expressive action of her Other. Moreover, the failed attempt at dismantling “the mechanical device” suggests the impossibility of controlling the (bodily) apparatus that would supposedly change her life “once and for all”. Thus the silence of the body (also due to failed attempts at pregnancy) is retaliated with the frustrated outcry of the voice. Moreover, the image of death conjures up a dreadful stasis through destroyed “museum pieces”, that is, the destruction of subjective memories which are already threatened by displacement - or again, in the manner of Marcel Duchamp’s concept of *objets trouvés*, by the disconnection of memory (as object) from its ‘meaningful’ environment and its transposition into the realm of artifice.

“The Best Friend” (23-24) represents the bride in her “loneliness”, through her namelessness, “The bride walks down a hospital corridor. \ Her

¹⁹⁴ Note the proliferation of “rage” in terms such as ‘road rage’ and other such acknowledgements that define our contemporary societal temperament.

loneliness is being operated on by the groom. \ \ The bride's name tag says she's Ms. Suicide. \ She believes her life has been reduced to an X-ray of her womb. It's ugly." The powerful image of the "X-ray" pertains to a scientific (and hygienic) knowledge about the patient, a knowledge that is not usually perceptible to the patient herself, and which is used for making a 'scientific' reading of her condition. This also means that decisions about her existence rest in the hands of her (scientific) Other and in the meanings deduced from this reductive picture of the patient. This reference also brings up the problem of institutions, such as the social sciences, that pretend to possess the scientific knowledge about the Other and the power to officiate over (silent) subjectivities. In these terms, 'science' generates the 'silence' of the subjective voice. Like the other "mental patients" in the "psychiatric hospital", the subjective voice exists marginalized, isolated, and effectively rendered as unperceivable as her silent and unfertilized womb, except to her (female) "best friend": the only person who seems to understand the bride's need for reproduction of the self through the successful production of an Other who would also embody the voice of its mother - hence, the voice as *mother*, instead of the voice as *Other*.

Silence is countered by "Gossip" (44-46) where the speakable is indiscriminately spoken:

Let's trade secrets.
Let's trade revelations.
It's a party.
How come the bride's so quiet tonight?

Silence is a textbook in any foreign tongue.
Conversation is a picture book. Go on.

Let's trade food for thought

whims
memories
stories
tragedies
violence repulses entertains scintillates accomplishes
something.

Let's trade jokes
songs
ideas
sins
surprises
psychiatrists
restaurants.

Let's be patient with each other .
Delighted " " "
Sarcastic " " "
Wise " " "
Compassionate " " "

Exchange we-told-you-so glances.
Huddle close like ducks and ducklings.
Gain a feather in one's cap by exchanging Christian love.

Let's trade books, movies, performances in bed:
statistics: when, where and how? Good or bad?
Let's trade in our mechanical know-how to the bride.

Let's pour out our secrets like carbon monoxide.
Trade is what makes North America so great, old pal!

Words can infect or disinfect.
War with words: war dances.

Dance away fears, phobias, understatements.
Research says cancer is caused by
Research says cancer is accelerated by
Research says cancer is contagious
Watch out everybody will die one day like a guinea pig:
abused.
Lily had a mastoidectomy. Gossip.

...

These elements of language and of non-language pertain for the most part to undecipherable 'truths' in everyday life. The use of ditto marks in the fourth verse records the ennui of language in the context of senseless and/or deflective language. In this same context, the notion of "Gain[ing] a feather in one's cap by exchanging Christian love" is in direct contradiction of dogmatic ordinances, and therefore manifests the incongruity between theory and actual praxis. The sarcastic irony is made evident in the allusion to the NAFTA agreement, to show how the praxis has undermined the political ideals of its 'weaker' constituents, including Canada. "Words can infect and disinfect" (see poem above) - language is a virus, with a purpose to reproduce itself rather than communicate new knowledges as William Burroughs also indicated. Moreover, it is deployed as a pseudo knowledge by some against the Other, while any material content is emptied or undecipherable, even in language. The subject - and by contextual analogy, the nation - is sensed as an experiment. But in addition, "the guinea pig" condition depicts an ironically dehumanizing effect if it is considered in the bride's attempts to achieve her most fundamental human function: to produce another being. Ultimately, the bride's voice belongs to the control of her Others, including the social, religious, and other professional entities and institutions that frame her being ("The Bride: Your Employer", 51-52):

...

You are helpless.

The bride is ever present in your life like a phobia.

Like your impulse to disobey the Highway Code.

The priest at the wedding is an employer too.

Produce accordingly or you won't get a vacation leave.

The *statics* of the situation - that is, the mechanics dealing with the relations of

forces that produce equilibrium among material bodies¹⁹⁵ - is unequally distributed so that control is in the hands of Others, which would explain why the “bride” remains a “bride”: a static representation arrested in time, and thereby effectively silenced.

In the context of *Office Politics*, the work place becomes the space of stasis, and of a foreboding sense of death (7, 13):

Drowning in a sea of office queens barking orders
The rosary beads around my neck are decoration
They can't be traded for a life vest

SOS

I'm lost in someone else's country,
wrapped in a flag of invisibility -
another present for the brutal rich

who wait on shore calculating the amount of overtime
someone needs to work in order to come back to life

The garden of self-love has been flooded
My rescue ship: silence

The displaced subjective presence is documented through the device of the shipwreck,¹⁹⁶ by which a sharp distinction is perceptible between the ‘shipwrecked’ immigrant worker and her tacitly oppressive Spectator Other. In this apocalyptic (non)existence for the displaced subjectivity, “invisibility” and “silence” appear essential for survival, yet these imposed forms of disappearance are simultaneously being undermined by the poetic expression itself so that the line “My rescue ship: silence” bears an antithetical interpretation by means of its own antagonistic articulation - that is, as long as

¹⁹⁵ This definition is from the Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth edition).

¹⁹⁶ Cfr. Blumenberg.

its expression can be democratically acknowledged. In other words, the critical poetic text opens a political 'can of worms' for the multiculturalist society amid globalizing shifts and the post-modernistic risks of subjective disappearance. Moreover, if post-modernism pre-supposes a sort of fluidity for the subject - also represented as an empowering 'nomadism' -, then the image of the shipwreck pertaining to the immigrant subject demonstrates the inaccessibility of this mode of being by locking the displaced subjectivity in an unpermissive form that portends her possible "[d]rowning" in an amorphous sea of uncertainties.¹⁹⁷ By this consideration, a critical form of displacement is demonstrated by the late Capitalistic "multinational" that displaces workers into its own strategy.

The metaphorical death through silence for the subjected worker is reiterated through a hierarchical juxtaposition denoting audible language as a rhetorical possession of the "rich" (the non-immigrant). Poem number 8 (14-15) is reproduced in its entirety to describe this rhetoric:

My bosses speak one language,
and I another

I turn around and there is another
vice-president of (in)human resources,
another magistrate,
another rich person
fanning himself with his stocks and bonds

Hate has its own grammar and syntax

I dream about guns,
making a statement,
erasing words,
bad thoughts

¹⁹⁷ Cfr. Zygmunt Bauman, *Society under Siege*, (2002) which elaborates the plight of the modern subject caught within the notion of 'society' formulated by the nation-state and the global arena which imprisons the subject with no possibility of escape, and giving way to a new breed of 'reconnaissance wars'.

I dream about dreaming in a new language: joy

No one listens when I speak
Someone calls it the language of complaint
Better to say nothing
The assembly line feeds on silence,
complicity,
Obedience

What luck
I work in telecommunications
We turn words into electronic impulses
(Dis)information is offered at cut-rate prices

My fellow wordsmiths open their mouths
and someone makes a profit
The background noises drum out what they say
They make love with their machines
and leave me out

My husband though is always ready
to demand a kiss
My children do the same
Love is a service industry
No words need be exchanged
My lips are sealed

Smiles do not say much either
Smiles are a lazy man's answer to fraud
Body language: con-artistry
So there
the underdog doesn't have a language to call her own

If only God could come and speak through me
I would be protected
No more war of words,
language police, language borders
No more self-betrayals
Coffin ships

I dream about breaking into the global village;
cutting its wires with my fangs
I dream about poetic justice
I imagine myself waking up one morning and speaking
in binary code

I dream I am you
The leader of the pack

“Ms Rosetta Stone
will you hurry and come in here please
Give us a clue to what is going on
Bring out another company manual this time tomorrow!
Give us meaning The last word or else
You’re history”

This poem is extremely eloquent in terms of the conceivable yet unrealized possibilities of “language” and communication, and consequently, of “meaning” juxtaposed with the ironic use of the pop cultural term “You’re history”, signifying an end to being.¹⁹⁸ Any possibility of being resides in the realm of “dreams”, or worse, in the nightmare of “silence”. Melfi’s poetry does not merely express one personal problem, but rather, it can easily be perceived as one ‘minor’ discourse, - that of “minority” literatures - addressing the broader, national discourse of a publishing industry which refuses to “listen” to the discourses of its immigrant ‘Other’ - “Someone calls it the language of complaint” - hence refusing to recognize any antagonistic communication as a significant part of its own literary corpus. Thus this Other, critical literature is compelled into an ironic “complicity” and “Obedience” to a tacit code of false harmony. The silencing of these works is particularly evident by their exclusion from categorical exemplars of Canadian literature, especially through its adulterated anthological representation. For the critical voice that refutes its own dummied up by its stronger Other, the result is a subjective struggle against an officially unspoken, yet deeply understood, language communicating “Hate” - “My fellow wordsmiths open their mouths \ ... \ The background noises drum out what they say”. For a

¹⁹⁸ The term “You’re history” ironically interplays with Francis Fukuyama’s theory of *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), (first published in article form for the magazine *The National Interest* in 1989) and its Hegelian prospective of an evolutionary goal of modern society.

nation that has learned to determine its own identity through its difference from a more powerful Other - i.e., 'I am Canadian', 'we are not Americans', - the emergence of an antagonistic literature within its own literary walls may present a problem too risky to allow it into the open. For these reasons, an end to the "war of words" prevails as an uncertainty ("If only God could come and speak through me \ I would be protected"), and the poetic expression is displaced into the silent realm of dreams which only speak to the dreamer: "I dream about poetic justice".

This obedience to the hegemonic system rewrites a Marxian precept for this post-modernity, through the nullifying of subjective activism by means of the revised bifold 'opium' of the people: "I take my Prozac \ - instant religion - \ and sail through life \ \ Yet another poor soul trying to walk on water". This 'final' solution is given by our trusted religious institution paired with a general trust in the pharmaceutical industry (in synergy with the scientific voice of the physician) as 'the' alternatives to a desired yet impossible "revolution" (15, 22):

"Revolution is messy," Father replies
 "Better to shop for forgiveness
 than to plant phantom bombs
 Say nine *Hail Marys*
and be sure to take all your pills"

The resulting death-in-life is defined by other behavioural developments, including (we cannot deny it) the false gratification of ideals through the notion of "shopping",¹⁹⁹ yet (16, 23):

While the rich shop for sailboats

¹⁹⁹ This poetic expression uncannily pre-verberates President George Bush Jr's admonition to the citizens of the United States immediately following the crisis of the 9/11 events in 2002, "Go shopping!" was the general diktat in order to overcome the grief, as well as the means to salvage the economic domination of the nation over the rest of the world.

I shop for answers

My psychiatrist replies with a prescription
(Thank God medicare will cover the cost)

The Minister of Health should take note:

churches are more cost-effective than hospitals
They dispense hope capsules for free

It is obvious that the 'paternal' advice upon which we have been conditioned has been reduced to a cover up for the patronizing forces of the pharmaceutical industry (among others) which has replaced the usual institutions for its behaviourist impact - thus foregrounding the dominance of the sciences (even religion itself claims a scientific knowledge in terms of theology as the study of 'religious sciences') over human creativity and imagination. Pharmaceutical sciences and the consistently self-refining technology - which is creating another sub-class of society who is unable to gain access to information through its inability to obtain the required technology and therefore modifying the statistics of 'literacy' in the technological realm - ultimately take the subject outside of time and/or history so that the subject is forced to exist in a possible world of (dis)contented enslavement in everyday life²⁰⁰ as much as in the work world. The new indoctrination of the subject for maintaining this system is so effective - "The servile know how to please" (30, 38) - as to forebode the end of resistance through the deferred attainment of happiness (31, 39):

The queen's staff take a second look
In her hair: tropical flowers; grace

²⁰⁰ This method of de-activizing and de-politicizing the subject has already been experimentalized in the turbulent Italy of the 1970s where heroin (supplied by the mafia) appeared among the youth in the early period of the decade and well into *Movimento 77* as a means to evict them once and for all from the political scene - thereby freeing the way for domination by capitalism, and effectively removing any form of dissension from its progress.

Bouquets of smiles all around
When the queen leaves the room: silence

The scent of Paradise may have damaged
her staff's vocal cords for good

The critical voice may be seen as particularly damaging to a country that prides itself on its image of peacekeeper on the international stage, and that does not openly condone criticisms of the North American culture nor of American policies - as if these latter did not affect the Canadian socio-political scape.

There are parrots typing in our office
but as you can well imagine parrots don't know how to type
(even our word processors imported all the way from Japan
make little difference to their performance)
but that does not mean mind you that our office queen -
a crocodile in her own right -
has made an effort to train the parrots how to type
for she is well aware that parrots and crocodiles
have no business typing letters to the
United States of America
because she knows (Oh what a clever patriot she is!)
that the Government of Canada welcomes
parrots and crocodiles and cardinals too in its offices
(Wasn't she hired on the expresses wishes
of our Prime Minister, himself a hawk?)
and so our enterprise cannot turn beastly
against our neighbor as it is already populated with beasts
who are on some secret mission -
(Something to do with doves)
(41, 50)

The peace-keeping image translates to a neutral (and neutralizing) silence even as the American-style Corporate Culture invades, umbrella-like, its neighbouring territories. The crossing-over into silence promotes an ironic

success burying the voice of the subject into the silence of “No One” (52, 63):

She made it!
She’s No One

Every night On One sets the dinner table
and gets away with it

Her children nod: it’s a reflex action
It doesn’t say much

Every night No One tells her children
lies about unconditional love

They don’t listen
Her heart is an empty space

The doctors can’t fix it
That’s O.K.

No One is content to stay away
from office towers, church towers and the like

They’re reserved for the living
and No One has crossed over to the other side

and found her first husband, God
Such a handsome wild flower

She speaks his language:
silence

No One has the advantage over her now
She can wish away the world

“Be gone,” she says
And it is

Every verse in this poem speaks of silence, even body language is silent or ignored; being “No One”, the subject has no voice and as such she can have no part in the world and she can only follow, like a sheep in her re-theologized existence. However, this new reworked theology has also reworked its dogma

But - wouldn't you know it? -
the sun races down from the sky
and paints my face a brave colour

The revised post-society (from Post-Capitalism to Post-Modernism) has 'refined' the division between the economic sectors of society so that those who own the technology also own the language. The "Leaning Tower of Babel" - indicating the polyglot reality of Italy - foretells its own fall in the context of societies that are mediated by monolithic Capitalism ("Cash") and its mediatic apparatus. In this sense the poor and the immigrant can have no say, rather, they are spoken for, through uni-directional mediatic representations and other official sanctions regarding Multiculturalism. And the acceptable response from the fear-induced subject is a purely Christian one: "turn the other cheek" (and repeated again in poem 64, 79: "I (always) turn the other cheek") in compliant silence. Yet "silence is a weapon too" if it has the capacity to be comprehended as a rhetorical slingshot against the giant voice. The fragmentation of the personality which is so prevalent in post-modernistic thought may be viewed here as the subjective split between the speaking and the spoken subject in such a way that the critically thinking subject must find a sort of refuge where she may freely "speak" outside the language of silence and through the critical artwork. Moreover, the linguistic discourse of this poem relates a concrete sub-text with the alliterative pronunciation of the word "French" to replace, or rather, to equate the word "fear". Escape from the denigrating reality is possible through the maintaining of the imagination (1968: *L'imagination au pouvoir!*) and the voice in the artwork.²⁰¹ This appears to be the only way for the critical mind to resist

²⁰¹ This alternative response to the real threat of silencing follows another parallel in the Italian literature (Enrico Palandri, Pino Cacucci) and films (Gabriele Salvatores) of the 1980 -90s. These critical expressions have been identified in a collaborative paper by William Anselmi and Lise Hogan, originally presented at the Canadian Humanities Congress in 1997 and in process of publication by the University of Toronto at the time of this writing.

any harm (64, 79-80):

...
Taste me Eat me Do what you please
 I am not inside my body, you see
 I am somewhere else

...
 I don't mind
 I have learned to develop a taste
for my non-existence

...
 Slap me Whip me
I am not inside my body, you see
 I am somewhere else

...

While the body plays out the requirement of silence, the absent inner being may be able to resist pain and threats. The repetition of "I am somewhere else" suggests a kind of mantra for survival, while the utopian ring of the phrase permits an ironical distancing from the outside situation that forebodes a totalizing dystopia (90, 109-110):

Silence covers the city

Clerks, crybabies, old cronies go about
unheard, unsung, unattended to

Classified ads howl for attention: love me to-(K)night

...
Anything to exist

...
Possibilities for enchantment are limited
Prayer is a lost art

Self-expression is difficult too
when you're afraid death is showing up on
the hem of your thoughts and God is lurking elsewhere

Does survival have a quiet thrill to it and why?

...

Come charm me, transient citizen of this cosmos,
my partner in alienation, blood relative
Good to be here with you
where the blackberry bushes thrive on being depleted

Harvest me too
Pick me out and cover me with your words

Cover me with your Judas kiss
but cover me with acknowledgment

The sin of non-existence blossoms in my grandfather's
grave

...

Listen a queen (mother?) is laughing
somewhere right this moment
So can, so should, so will I

There is an impression of *Dr. Strangelove*²⁰² - 'or how I learned to stop worrying and love Capitalism': "Classified ads howl for attention: love me to-(K)night". It also brings up again the impossibility of the fairy tale ending in the Capitalistic world which consumes, rather than loves, its subjects. But the question "Does survival have a quiet thrill to it and why?" along with the reference to the "transient citizen of this cosmos" bears a strong allusion to the anthological work *Survival* and its editor Margaret Atwood who has commented about the inadmissibility in her anthology of literary works of "all Canadian immigrant authors because 'it seems to me dangerous to talk about 'Canadian' patterns of sensibility in the work of people who entered and/or entered-and-left the country

²⁰² *Dr Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, the 1964 film by Stanley Kubrick, from the novel *Red Alert* by Peter George. The film (with Peter Sellers and George C. Scott) was described as a 'nightmare comedy'. According to David Shipman, "its purpose is less to warn of the nuclear pile-up than to expose the mentality in charge or our destinies." Moreover, the film points out that the "scientists, politicians and high-ranking soldiers are unaware of the enormity of killing". Shipman, *The Story of Cinema*, p. 1173.

at a developmentally late stage of their lives.’ ” (in Reid, column 3) Therefore works of this type remain in their “alienated” “non-existence” by this simple brush-off and the “Judas kiss” of the primary Anglo-Saxon (“a queen (mother?)”) voice.

3.10 The language of dreams: expectations and revelations

The matrimonial representation indicates a liminal space where dreams and expectations forged in the past meet up against their potential of realization in the future and as they are re-assessed through the transparency of the ritualistic, extended moment. *ABTA* represents these fleeting stages of perception throughout the “three acts” of the text. Once again, the textual chronology must be ‘reversed’ into its temporal order so that the sequential order of the bride’s subjective perception into her dreams and expectations may be determined. “Act One, Scene One” expresses the bride’s rather ingenuous conviction of the realization of her dreams through her performative part: “A bride is like a mountain. \ Empires rise and fall but she’s unmoved by it all.” (“The Transplant”, 71-72) The figure of the bride is that model image which persists in symbolizing the solidification of her dreams formed in the past - and as such the “bride” should be viewed as a most deceptive and phantasmagorical figure: “The bride is also someone you visit \ when you are in a hurry to believe in romance.\ ... The bride is an artificial organ \... You look at her and forget ...” Amid the ritual drama of the wedding ceremony, the subjective being inside this figural body intuits a split between the substratal self and the performative image being projected (“Down the Church Steps: a Divorcée”, 74-75):

The bride accepts roses for a bad performance.
Nobody knows it was a bad performance except the critic
nobody loves.

Nobody loves you either, dear, so somehow you feel
forgotten:
deadwood, deadbeat, dead duck, dead - manikin-like;
But not like Pinocchio, mind you, who had a chance to
be somebody.

You're a manikin invisible to the naked eye: humanoid
and cold.

You look up at the sky and see an advertisement meant
only for your eyes:
"You may fancy yourself successful but you're not.
You're only a puzzled failure whose life is falling
piece by piece all over the bride's dress (bird
droppings)."

Nobody notices the bride's dress is soiled
like nobody notices birdshit on a highway anyway.
Somehow you also feel like a highway accident you once
heard about on a radio.
Maybe all you need to come back to (terms with) life
is love in the shape of a dildo made in Taiwan.

Such a thing, guaranteed to last a lifetime,
is hidden behind the groom's wax smile. Didn't you
know?
That's why the bride's gay and all-a-flutter today, like a
ballerina, today.

You bet (underneath all that make-up) she's only rich
and alive like a dead star
you don't know is dead because it shines in your face.

Somehow you take charge of your (better / bitter / biting)
self
(someone you once knew successfully divorced it from
marital bliss)
and run to get your car.

The poor thing's hungry;

looking forward to the wedding banquet
(roast on the menu).

In this moment immediately following the matrimonial ceremony comes the first impression of a sublimation of the self in view of the demands of an 'objective' - in both senses of "cold" or detached and of pointing towards a purpose - performance. The "wedding photographer's camera has a "radioactive lens" which captures the stories of the wedding guests - including "the bride's mother", "the priest", "a disturbed youth", "the singer", a "psychiatrist", "an orderly", "a divorce lawyer", the "fans", an "ex-mechanic" - suspending these as ideas at the same time in the cryonic space of the wedding album. The idea of marriage is denoted as "a good fix" for men and women, even though the expectation of divorce, "(one out of three chances they will be)", constantly jeopardizes the couple's existence together. ("1:3", 76-78) Despite this, the framework of "the bride" carries within it a sort of legendary covenant which takes off from the happily-ever-after of fairy tales and other tales of romance, and which easily fools witnesses to this ritual. ("A Beautiful Woman", 80-81)

A beautiful woman is a wedding album.
Here comes the bride all over again.

She is the woman on a tapestry,
sometimes with a child on her lap as decoration,
sometimes embroidery.
Her maids do all the labor for her,

Simultaneously, she is the best virgin of the century,
(when virgins are in demand)
and the best sex symbol of the century (when sex is in
greater demand).

She is always the promise of a fresh beginning,
the water you wash your face with after a disturbing
dream;
the well, desperate men draw their dreams from.

She is a folk song, a classical piece, rock-and-roll, jazz.
She is a feast, a horn of plenty, a menu for
connoisseurs.

She is whatever you like most in life.
She is Miss Whatever-she-wants-to-be.
She wins the first prize: a trip to identity.

...

The “trip to identity” in the current context constitutes just another illusory interpretation of the image. The interpretation of the bride as “the promise of a fresh beginning” links up with the last verses of the poem to expose the deceptive quality of the image:

She is a surprise party.
She makes you forget about routines, appointments,
forget to hurry,
forget about corruptions in governments, bureaucracy,
old age.
She is an international lady,
a diplomat from some unrecognized heaven of sorts.

She sells you cars, perfumes, hair dyes, shoes, trips to
nowhere special (on TV),
and you like her a lot.
She is a saleswoman, selling faith, hope and charity.
Credible.

She sells you brides' clothes. On sale. Half-price.
She sells you promises: marry the beauty and the beast
and all will be well with the world. Halleluja.

The contract of marriage presupposes the espousal of common dreams and the illusive promise of making all things right. Yet the priest's “sermon reminds the congregation \ that marriage isn't part of a film rehearsal”, thus the immaculate image of the bride is continuously solicited as a cover-up for the imperfect reality of life as a couple (“The Sermon”, 82):

There's something cold and metallic about marriage.
It has to be metallic to last through sickness and all that.

It's a magician's job (sort of) to see to it
the metal and the sacred consummate properly.

This forced glimpse into reality mingles with the force of expectations (*"The Striptease"*, 83):

The marriage ceremony commences on an optimistic
note.

The minister is the hope for a brighter future.
The witness: history repeats itself.

The admittance of a historical viewpoint is not the indication of a certainty so much as a hopeful invocation which actually takes place in the mythical dimension of the rite. From here on, the bride begins to sense the surreal quality of her being as "bride", and of her expectations as well. At the same time, the glimpse into her future reality begins to reveal "(question marks on the meaning of life) \... The future's an unknown soldier, sometimes." "It's a solemn moment", where the mythical dimension overlaps with the perceived particles of reality through a cynical tone: "You'd think the bride and groom were a new bridge \ worth millions of dollars \ ...Now is the time to be civilized. Pull the wool over one's eyes." The modulation of the ritual provisorily offers: "a cushion for all of life's mistakes. Sexless." (*"B-Flat Major"* , 84-86)

The articulation "history repeats itself" is not an isolated statement; rather, its expression is brought into confrontation with the anxiety of an unknown future ("the future's an unknown soldier"). (This would also explain the

description of the bridal figure as “a defence against anxiety”, 71-72) Yet these two factors of past and future are consistently charged with meaning(s) emanating from, and relating to, a subjective desiring memory - “(question marks on the meaning of life)”. The meanings that anchor subjective desires for the future are actually anchored in, and derive from, subjective interpretations of the past. The poetic evocation of people and things in the bride’s past serve to connect the “magical moment” of the wedding with the harsher reality of death - which has its own ritual. And the loving eulogy in “I Remember” (87-89) evokes the meanings with which the bride has imbued her memories of her deceased grandmother, as a means of summoning her own historical being:

...
Grandma, my protectress,
Grandma, the lady in waiting who introduced me
to the queen: myself

...
Grandma, my heroine, your coffin was just a suitcase
with nothing in it

I see you hiding behind the altar, behind
the pews, behind great grandsons’ smiles,
while this (that) bride promises away everything
to a groom. Peekaboo.
Love-and-death is only a peekaboo game.

...
Grandma, the woman who gave me a lovely sense
of myself and Italian history,
Grandma, the woman who made sure this (that) bride
would not be missing on earth,
Grandma, I remember.

Hello Ms. Love-object, first and most important.
Welcome to the wedding.

The wedding space is perceived as a link to, as well as a rupture from, the past - indeed, the ritual act is the connective tissue among multiple divergent histories

(encompassing hers and his).²⁰³ For the bride specifically, the wedding marks a juncture point encompassing past, present and future in an individual hermeneutic process, showing the ritual process as an individual (vis-à-vis a collective) experience. The reality of displacement for the bride intensifies the individual quality of her experience, thereby enhancing the meaning of the rite as combined life (in the promise of a future in marriage to her Other) and death (in the ultimate relegation of her own history in another time/space to memory).

The re-attribution of meanings to her new life begins immediately after the ceremony, at the wedding reception, where the contemplation of a decorative “rose” at the wedding table becomes the space where the bride works out her ironic viewpoint through an antithetical language which posits “The Rose” (42-43) as a polysemantic “focal point” containing hope, desire and illusion:

The rose, the focal point, the axis, the center of the
world,
the savior, the foreshadowing of the messiah, the
messiah,
...

The rose tells its own story of creation;
a prehistoric backdrop, the heavenly rose: a stained-glass
window.

The rose is a crystal ball
(serious and profound at its worst).
The bride wants the future she sees in it.
Serenity. Its ridiculous sense of serenity. Its extravagance.
She wants it. Damn it. She insists:
the rose is my slave; pitiless.

²⁰³ However, this does not suggest an ‘end of history’ in Fukuyama’s definition since the ritual moment and the bride’s future do not entail the totalizing merger of histories, nor a Hegelian goal of synthesis, as sustained by Fukuyama’s argument.

The rose is a key to escape.
The rose is an aphrodisiac.
Through it, because of it
the bride is inspired to forgive the world everything.

The continuation of the fairy-tale dream and of its promise is encountered again in the semantics of hope proffered by the “Bluebirds, Unimportant to a Comdemned [sic] Man” (65-66). The fabulous bluebirds of happiness “pop out of the bride’s honeyed dreams: ... out of everything bridal”. However their meanings are eventually imbued with a historical significance:

...
out of three ads:
(No. 1) Drive the bluebird and you’ll drive like a blue-
bird: accident free;
(No. 2) Dial long distance (South) and you’ll live
through the winter loved like a bluebird;
(No. 3) Visit your municipal zoo and bluebirds
(flags of peace come to life, never soiled or poorly
designed)
will watch you question the meaning of someone’s yes to
war and destruction...

Of bluebirds imitate
the flight of the rain
and hum a potpourri of national hymns
in the cartoon dreams of the cartoon-like, all in white, bride,
asleep on a carton of political events

The ending ‘verse’ of this poem apparently mimics the style of Marinetti’s onomatopoeic poems expressing a Futuristic (and nationalistic) passion for war and destruction.²⁰⁴ However, the content of Melfi’s poetic expression invokes a contrapositive imagery that seeks life (for dormant “flags of peace”) and the re-politicization of violence, that is, the consciousness of violence as politically charged acts. And violence against the subject takes various subtle forms, including requirements of assimilation such as the “employer” who “asks

²⁰⁴ See Marinetti’s collection of poems *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914) which demonstrates his concepts of *Parole in libertà* and of *Immaginazione senza fili*. In Marinetti, pp. 561-710.

his young bride to dress up \ like one of his birds” (“Like One of His Birds”, 67). The employer-worker relationship alluded to sporadically in *ABTA* reveals another parallel characteristic of the metaphorical spousal relationship, illustrating perhaps more clearly the nature of the ‘contract’. In this analogous context, the varied contractual representations consist of economic inequalities between the entities: the employer’s economic position governs the worker’s life as the groom’s wealth brings the power of change for the bride’s existence. The spousal contract thus appears economically favourable to the bride by presenting her with promises of freedom (“A&W”, 68):

Boeing 747 decorates the bride.
The groom is part of her expensive outfit.

The passengers on the plane are only reflections
of her Christian mood.

Success is in the cockpit.
Play any game with the bride and she’s the winner.

The bride anticipates her honeymoon by the strange blue
sea
the way princesses (in pre-revolutionary times)
anticipated coronations.

The bride is a potential target for creation.
She vows she won’t be a waitress at A&W no more.

As the spousal relationship settles down (in the first section, ACT THREE, SCENE ONE, a sharp cynicism marks the expectations of the partners in marriage. Specifically, what is expected by the “groom” in the marriage is reflected in the irony of the bride’s voice, revealing a detrimental subsequence of her self-expectations and resulting in an immobilizing despair and the loss of the dream. “You find your old dreams, orphans, dead in a refugee camp. \

Despair tugs at your skirt... \ Struck numb by an obscene lack of hope, humor, faith..." ("Act Three", 14-15). The matrimonial state is framed as a "Mercy Killing" (16-17):

The bride stores an old, somewhat primitive dream to be especially, exceptionally rich and famous (oh, great, so to speak), next to an unappreciated wedding present: a vacuum cleaner. *Singer's*.

True to form, the vacuum cleaner, follows the pattern of every science-fiction story. It sucks up the bride's somewhat second-rate dream (like so many pins and needles).

...
The machine attends to the lady in question, daily; somewhat satisfies her appetites to be ever so perfect.

The commoner's wife barely notices its mean (somehow, sexual) hold on her. Her on / off days rush into the unknown.

Her old, somewhat second rate, primitive, vanilla-colored dream, is hopelessly entangled in the machine. Nevermore.

The "old, somewhat second rate, primitive, vanilla-colored dream" is reiterated in an ascending irony that witnesses the displacement of personal memory or history into a "vacuum" state forcing the "bride" to adapt to a new, unknown rhythm (she "solo dances to the beat of cacophonous music") that holds no meaning for her. As she is forced to renounce previous 'knowledges', she remains trapped in the influence of this "machine" which ultimately determines her existence and the new expectations of her role. The fact that she is no longer able to discern herself through her previous dreams is her real tragedy, a tragedy that cannot be completely known but only sensed through the poetic

language of images. For example, the poetic break after the word “mean” - where the “wife barely notices the mean \ (somewhat sexual) hold on her” - indicates a polysemantic sous-entendu wherein the word “mean” taken as a noun (substantive) denoting a ‘measure’ is juxtaposed with its adjectival meaning of ‘hostile’ or ‘malicious’, so that it can be semantically re-partnered as a ‘hostile or malicious measure’. This technique thus affirms a poetic consciousness as a foil to the protagonist’s statement that she “barely notices” her condition.

Office Politics also relies on the device of reiteration in regards to the “dream” and always in relation to her Other. In poem number 8 (14-15) the act of “dreaming” seeks a more active role invoking a desirable praxis of resistance and even sabotage against the technology of enslavement.

I dream about guns,
 making statements,
 erasing words,
 bad thoughts
 I dream about dreaming in a new language: joy

...
 I dream about breaking into the global village;
 cutting its wires with my fangs
 I dream about poetic justice
 I imagine myself waking up one morning and speaking
 in binary code
 I dream I am you
 The leader of the pack

 “Ms Rosetta Stone
 will you hurry and come in here please
 Give us a clue to what is going on
 Bring out another company manual this time tomorrow!
 Give us meaning The last word or else
 You’re history

This text updates the master-slave relationship into the late Capitalistic society, so that Hegel's theory meets Freud's reality principle (*Civilization and its Discontents*), transposing these into the paradoxical framework of a dystopic synthesis. Yet a semiotics of language is recognized as the instrument for the submission of the 'worker' into the system - "I imagine myself... speaking \ in binary code \ I dream I am you" -, a critical language can also take a protagonist stance in order to re-introduce "meaning" and "history" into the voided language of a post-modern 'pseudo-reality'. To this effect, the poetic voice vacillates precariously in the image of possible survival, as poem number 55 (67-69) relates:

...
i survive myself:
 a) true,
 b) false,
 c) only time will tell

...
And the answer is:
 a) i survive out of habit
 b) and you?

and the certain void of death:

The suicide stretched out her hand
 and gave me nothing

More importantly, the potential survival articulated above contains the ability of language - although the image of subjectivity may be reduced to a decapitalized "i" - while death, on the other hand, does not show a capacity for language. The encounter of displaced realities with the contingencies of

modern progress potentially short-circuits the dream making it instead
contingent to nightmare images, so that (70, 87):

Nightmares are wonderful catalysts
They speed up the enjoyment of waking life

Nightmares take the trouble to trouble me,
surprising me, reassuring me that compared

to getting punched in the eye
punching a time clock is a dream come true

Yet the irony of the voice in this poem is perceptible if the critic takes into
consideration the greater textual framework. Thus this next poem (91, 111)
does not merely represent an antithetical viewpoint from the one above, but
rather it can also be considered as a reasonable progression in the ludic
language of irony:

Flowers play by the rules
 but victims of high expectations
 know better than to wait to be cut down

 They uproot themselves
 Huddle together and complain
about celestial (im)probabilities

Needing, wanting, pleading
 Obedient/disobedient
 Looting/bootlicking

 Whatever it takes
 to walk out of the office
and blossom elsewhere.

3.11 Metamorphosis - or not

The protagonist of *ABTA* regards the role of the “bride” as a preparatory phase for her desired metamorphosis into the roles of wife and mother. Yet this metamorphosis does not unfold as expected: instead, the text retains the “bride’s” liminal identity throughout a complex series of self-representations that personify the changing expectations of the self, rather than her evolution in subjective roles. Thus the text presents a dynamic process of representation which relates the negated possibilities of metamorphosis for the displaced subject. In order to document this process, the analysis will follow the archeological presentation of the text in order to map this self-representational trajectory through the ironic discrepancies that differentiate the voice’s ‘final’, unsatisfactory situation from her initial expectations.

The image of “La Demi-Vierge” , as a definitive representation, introduces the failure of a desired subjective metamorphosis into the role of mother, in confrontation with expectations in and of “marriage”, as can be evidenced in the initial lines of the poem:

It’s your turn to be the blushing bride.
You dont’ blush (on cue)
but everything else runs on time
(including you parents’ relief).

The bracketed expression “(on cue)” shows up as the ironic title later on (“On Cue”, 38-39 in ACT TWO, SCENE ONE & TWO) to reinforce the irony of failed expectations. At another analytical level, the use of this expression in these two poems emphasizes the split irony of expected desires: that is, between private, individual desires and extraneous desires - that is, social or group pressure(s) on the individual self “(including your parent’s relief)”. The extraneous

expectations denote a subjective response that is not (entirely) self willed (“It’s your turn...”) so that the poetic voice is required to interpret its ironic split through a passively determined performative irony. This “bride” (who, at this chronological point, is in the third phase of her textual representation, that is, in her expectations as ‘wife’) has assumed a passive outlook on her situation: she is “an inconspicuous hand grenade...made to order for an inconspicuous/conspicuous \ computerized war (process).” She senses the impossibility of assuming personal control over her life, seeing her existence in the spousal relationship as an extrinsically determined ‘predestination’:

The groom takes over temporarily
but with an Arts degree
you don’t trust his mechanical know-how
will change (exchange) your destiny.
(Was nuclear energy predestined (too)?
You wonder. You worry.)

The spousal relationship is perceived as an asymmetrical union in terms of the relations of power, yet the ironic tone of the voice underscores her intrinsic distrust of the presumptive experience of her Other. Thus the compromised status of the relationship and the negation of an expected, and satisfactory, outcome is manifest:

In due time no one is shocked to learn
of your difficult(ies)
pregnancy: some peace treaty (developed cheaply
over the centuries).

The assimilation process with the “man with a radioactive cape” (cave) presents a metamorphological process although it may not necessarily be a desired form of metamorphosis, and moreover, it is more likely performed at the subliminal

level: "You won't know what hit you for years." ("A Man", 11-12). The result is a gradual disappearance of the subject from her initial expectations, as the voice describes her compromised existence as this failed synecdoche ("On File", 13):

It's something like this:

You're only a part of something special,
and not the whole amount.

Analogy: you are a series of raindrops
(falling off somebody's hat to his/her annoyance).
but are never the rain, answer to somebody's prayers.

...

Here you are happily married, with a bungalow,
and still you are a missing person

The perception of a failed metamorphosis thus renders an immobilized progression, "caged by an intolerable sense of going nowhere \ special. \ The rush of promises of a good life ends. \ It's intolerable: your losses are piled up...". Moreover, this poem ("Act Three", 14-15) considers the framing effect of the failure of self-expectations over the desiring subjectivity:

You find your old dreams, orphans,
dead in a refugee camp.

...

Failure is a motorcycle gang.
Gang raped, you carelessly look at yourself
in a rearview mirror.
The metal frame around it is the world;
the rest is good-bye.

The failed metamorphosis brings about a subjective sense of stasis while at the same time it announces the beginning of the end for the spousal relationship. As the voice "solo dances" and finds her old dream "hopelessly entangled in the machine", (the "vacuum cleaner", in "Mercy Killing", 16-17), the irony rises to an

acute cynicism in the deliberation of expected responsibilities of the spouses in this relationship. "One day, Mr. Necessary doesn't live up to his reputation \ (is reduced to a prop in a children's school play). \ \ You, an amateur (Ms. Laughingstock) wrestle \ failure by candlelight (no one's looking)". The subjective stages of the bride towards the self-consciousness of her status maps out a trajectory of loss as it is experienced in subjectivity: the attempt at justification "He means well, the poor bastard with the radioactive cape", followed by the beginnings of perception into the self and the situation, as explained above with the concept of the failed synecdoche ("On File", 13). Then comes the anxiety of the "losses" and of the "death" of the dream, and an overwhelming sense of solitude and despair ("Act Three", 14-15). The attempt at re-evaluating and re-justifying her existence in the knowledge of the "failure" ("Mercy Killing", 16-17) is followed by the sardonic voice ("Leaving Home", 18) which culminates in a highly expressive "Rage" (19-21) and perhaps worse: "The bride walks down a hospital corridor. \ ... \ The bride's name tag says she's Ms. Suicide." This raising of self-consciousness does not bring peace of mind, but rather it foregrounds the complicitous relationship between hope and self-delusion, "Hope is a woman with a gold watch chain, \ swinging it right and left, left and right . . . \ ordering everything to be under her control and to be dazzled by it" ("The Hypnotist", 25-26).

The remaining poems in this first section enunciate a detached resignation to the facts of representation ("The Match", 27-28):

Brides and grooms are labels for something: instincts.
 Everyone, sometimes, challenges the purpose of an
 instinct in the twentieth century.

An instinct is a third person in a personal argument:
an observer to be loved and hated.

The instincts: love and hate, box each other.
The bride and groom watch.

In the old days a bride and groom would say hate was
the devil himself.
Today they say it's only natural to hate (the xx/ xy
chromosome factor).

There's nothing to be done about it.

...

The relationship itself is jeopardized by the disclosure of a loss of ideals and the
bride's inability to surmount the limitations of her conditions ("The Dart Game",
29-30):

The loss encloses her, the way a cage encloses any animal.
She is trapped in it. It won't permit her to walk out
of her loss the way she can walk out of a bathroom.

...

Mercy killing in the reverse; she'd live on to tell her tale
of disillusionment at the divorce hearings.

...

The compromised circumstances of the "match" are epitomized in the
poem "Familiarity Breeds Contempt" (31), the title of which conjures up the
ironical viewpoint of 'defamiliarization' (Shklovskii's *ostranenie*)²⁰⁵ through a
realization of estrangement and of the differences separating the spouses.

Marriage is a twin set of plates and cutlery
conveniently placed in the center of life

²⁰⁵ See Shklovskii, V.B. "Iskusstvo kak priem." In *Poetika: Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo iazyka*. 1919. "Art as Device". In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Ed. L. Lemon and M.J. Reis. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P. 1965.

Marriage is a twin set of arguments (cagey & unnecessary)

Marriage is a twin pair of orgasms
stranded on opposite ends of the spectrum

One woman declaring love blindly
One man declaring love blindly
to opposite ends of the spectrum

Two halves of something important: love and all that,
quartered day in and day out by truisms and the
grotesque.

The encounter that was supposed to bring the desired metamorphosis is disclosed as a disjunction between the contrasting visions which sustained the illusory promises of the relationship. The auspicious idea of matrimony had formulated a compromise pieced together - like a mosaic - out of "truisms", and in the end, creating the incidental cohabitation of 'lovers and strangers'. The compromise of this 'artificial' union, co-opted from tacit promises and false guarantees, simultaneously produces an estrangement from the self, so that there is no possibility of historical praxis since the identities are eventually voided of their individual historical meaning(s). ("Book II, Chapter I", 32-33):

"Happily-ever-after" is cut short.
The bride's and groom's "afterlife" is described in
morbid detail.

Why

a _____

b _____

&c _____

is sinisterly better in (chosen) pairs

why

a _____

b _____

c _____

&d _____

entertains / sustains (rarely disdains) his and hers

why

after a time always-the-same opulent disease:
love and aging boredom,
is a cut above lousy / louse's loneliness

and why

rigor mortis is seemingly content to take a longer
time in coming to both

(bitterness)

once / just married¹

¹ Footnote

The apparent death - and latent "rigor mortis" - of identities leaves evidence of a voided paratextual discourse - indicated by the tentative "footnote" - that is left to intuition since it cannot be included in the main text. Yet, paradoxically, while the paratextual device of the "footnote" as displaced meaning indicates traces of a lacking text, the displacement of the signified (the 'disappeared' content) of the footnote into, and by, its signifier (the word "footnote") points to a tautology of the dominant discourse in the sense that this dominant discourse only reflects itself. What remains to be said is thus maintained as local knowledges, considered peripheral, surplus and/or "alien" to the principal discourse.

In "ACT TWO, SCENE ONE & TWO (the wedding reception), the voice contemplates her future in the first moments of her new civic status, commencing with the poem, "Act Two" (37):

A small round desert: the wedding party.

Cigaret butts poke their heads into a hostile air.
Bud.

Protagonists and antagonists both get a booby prize:
smoke.

Free cigaret cartons on the table: decorations. Pop art.

How to welcome cancer with a smile?
Invite your boss to your wedding.
Smoke like the sexpot on the cigaret commercials.
Smile like a perennial (you're not).

An ashtray: a book somebody left behind.
New ones will be written by multinationals.

The bride owes her allegiance to a multinational.
When she's not a bride she's an IBM key puncher.

Her boss is a nasty chain smoker.

The ritual celebration of induction - that is, of a new, beginning life - is described through a subjective awareness that perceives past the empty promises of illusions (the veil of "smoke"), and reveals instead an underlying premise of death for the subject ("How to welcome cancer with a smile?..."). This is a point where histories are cremated, displaced and replaced by extraneous forces: "An ashtray: a book somebody left behind. \ New ones will be written by multinationals". Hence the displaced historical subjectivity apprehends her own incapacity for self-regeneration since this capacity is appropriated by the predominant discourses: notably, those of her "boss" and "the multinationals". Moreover, and by extension, the significance of the term "multinationals" (also in its related usage in *OP*), inasmuch as it signifies an authoritative discourse, could be broken down to single out the component of

“nationals” and its synonymic correspondent of ‘culturals’ to denote, by extension, a ‘multicultural(ist)’ discourse: hence this would be the power to which the “bride” “owes her allegiance”. The poem following this one (“On Cue”, 38) continues the “cigaret” [sic] metaphor, indicating the precarious situation of the “bride”: “Faces: smoke pointed towards the bride. \ For fun: “Why is someone always a hunter and \ someone else always the hunted in the game of life?”” This suggestion of the confinement of identities in their inflexible and divisive roles of predators or preys is boosted by another tautological reference at the ending of the poem: “Words: ash and / or from dust to dust: remains of something not said.” The inclusion of a funeralistic rhetoric (“from dust to dust”) at the celebratory moment indicates a perceived impossibility of metamorphosis for the protagonist voice - except into her own demise. Yet the apparent solipsistic rhetoric of “from dust to dust” conceals within it a multiplicity of discourses reduced to silence, as “remains of something not said” - and as reiteration of the discourse of the “foonote” mentioned above (in the poem “Book II, Chapter I”, 32-33).

Metamorphosis depends on the element of time; without time, no changes can take place (and praxis cannot exist). Hence the anxiety of the “bride” when she finds that “she can’t get a hold of time” because “Time is on strike” (“On Strike”, 47). The anxiety of this situation is tentatively subverted by the ironic stance of the voice: “so how can she hope to make time do tricks for her \ (e.g., standstill)”. The irony of this line is in the accented articulation of the substantive (the noun) “standstill”, that is, (as opposed to the verbal term which separates the term into two words, as in to ‘stand still’) with the stress on the first syllable and depicting an impasse. This articulation of the impasse displaces

the expressive expectation of the “hope to make time do tricks for her” thus implying an other, separated articulation of ‘stand still’ as an indicative or imperative form. Hence the bracketed irony of “(e.g., standstill)” leaks a perceived representation of the self to subvert the external discourse of the self in her bridal representation. By the time of the preparation for the “honeymoon” (“The Suitcase”, 64), the enchantment of the liminal returns: “A suitcase is like a honeymoon \ and a honeymoon is like flag of peace: \ both promise to be passports to Exceptional Fun.” Yet the “bride” herself is signified by her role as the “space” through which the spouses will potentially encounter.

A suitcase is a royal we:
a potpourri of many strange things:
(boots and whips, for instance).

A bride is a space
and the groom is what often fills the blessed space:
a suitcase for kings and queens.

A suitcase is a sea of unknowns
a bride and groom swim in
until one of them gets cold feet.

...

Ultimately, a potential metamorphosis is possible for the “bride” but is shown to be contingent upon her role as this “space” to be filled by the desires of her Other. The end section of the text (which we know represents the matrimonial ceremony) contains a cautionary sub-text by citing statistical rates of failure of (marital) relationships: “Men and women come there to get themselves a good fix. \ Life goes on for one out of three (elsewhere).” (“1:3”, 76-78) This last line summarizes the continued attraction of various subjectivities to the appeal of the discursive ‘contract’ which would bestow the potential “good fix”. The use of the term “a good fix” is highly ironic, yet its irony can only be perceived

retrospectively, that is, in the aftermath of its journey:

The wedding photographer's camera has a radioactive lens.

Click. Click. One won't see the scars left on one's body for years.

Finally, in this context, the bride as text is a negative (neutralized) representational process.

Office Politics represent another arrested metamorphosis in the lifeworld of the protagonist worker. In this text, the desire for the change is incited by the awareness of alienation in the worker, even as she does form part of a working mechanism (33, 41-42):

I want attention
I want the office queen and all those in line to the throne
to love me
but no one even says hello when I come in
So I want vengeance!

Sometimes
I want to take the computer cable at my feet
and twist it
around our office queen's neck
(I don't want my chances for promotion
to be affected, mind you)
And sometimes I want
to twist the cable around my own neck

The thing is I want my soul back
It may be hidden behind the office queen's
good fortune
It can't be hidden behind
the door to my left (the supply room)
The office queen keeps hers in it

Sometimes

I want to be served with summer
 when it's winter
And sometimes when it's summer
 I want to transport myself to
 another world
and there enjoy the magnificent spectacle
 of being complete
 Often I look out the office window
and I want to be someone else
 Why sometimes I want to metamorphize,
 turn into a dove and
sing the praises of making do

Pennies for your thoughts

The expressive desire for “vengeance” derives from an awareness of a marginalized status, even within the domain of a “company” that strongly suggests a Faustian contract (“I want my soul back”), although the subject receives no ‘powers’ in return. The situation engenders a further utopic discourse of desire for totality which is not possible for this subject in her actual environment. And her expressed desires for “vengeance” or for metamorphosis “into a dove”, (a symbol of peace, or of peace of mind?) are forcibly fought out within, and even against, her own subjectivity while the lifeworld maintains its status quo. Even the notion of “Free Will” is retained as a privilege “reserved for employees \ with gold-embossed name plates” (34, 43) The world that was supposed to represent a realm of possible choices has suddenly closed itself off to those who do not form its elite. Thus the poetic voice re-directs her prayer to an official representative as the intermediary to the powers that be so that the world might be inverted, and its cold (achromatic) reality be permanently removed (80, 97):

Find me flowers and I won't buy them

It is not flowers I want this winter
but the transformation of our city
into a flower shop

May our mayor in his other life
become a florist with magical powers
and turn our Canadian February
into an Australian one

The thematic image of the “garden” in this text implies promises of renewal, yet
as we can see for example, in poem number 81 (98):

Mother Nature signs her name in my garden
Her autograph is worth a pretty penny to some: resurrection

She also signs her name on my skin
So I look a mess

Each time I look into the mirror I find my mother there
Another fishwife complaining about the state of her foliage

The image of the renewable garden as the possibility of “resurrection” for
“some” is redefined for the subject who cannot conceive of this future possibility
for herself. Instead she can only perceive herself caught within a framework of a
return of the same. (The possible sub-text of a return to an Eden state is
invalidated by the fact that this reflection is not expressed as a desirable one.) A
conflation of the sacred and the profane occurs with the image of the subject’s
Christian lineage (“my mother”... “[a]nother fishwife”) and the authoritative
representation of “Mother Nature”, as if attesting to the impossibility of
(anthropological) ontogenetic disturbances in the ‘order’ of being - at least, as
far the dystopia of the work place is concerned: “...Whatever it takes \ to walk
out of the office \ and blossom elsewhere. (91, 111) And a revealing
background panel states that “The sin of non-existence blossoms in my
grandfather’s grave” (90, 110).

3.12 Invitation to a ritual

The rite of change in *ABTA* is epitomized through the three chronological components of the marriage ceremony, with the human and the spiritual witnessing of the contract (Act One, Scene One), the celebration indicating the social acknowledgement of the couple as a married entity - or, the public memorialization of the contract (Act Two, Scene One & Two), and finally, the expected authentication of the spousal relationship through the ritualized consummation of the contract (Act Three, Scene Four). The text of *ABTA* represents the ritual components in their reverse chronology so that the third component, that is, the spousal relationship in its everyday actuality, signals the problematic space, the breach which occasions the retrospective drama. In the eyes of society and religion, marriage is organized around the object of procreation, as a code of performativity that would also manifest an observance of the contract. Without this achievement the two constituents of the relationship will not develop into an constitutional family composition. "...your difficult(ies) \ pregnancy: some peace treaty (developed cheaply \ over the centuries)." ("La Demi-Vierge", 10) The title "Familiarity Breeds Contempt" (31) is an ironic expression of the failure of the expected 'completion' of the ritual union. The content of the poem plays back the marital breach in dualistic terms indicating the irony of a dissociated conjugality.

Marriage is a twin set of plates and cutlery
conveniently placed in the center of life

Marriage is a twin set of arguments (cagey & unnecessary)

Marriage is a twin set of boredom perched everywhere

important

Marriage is a twin pair of orgasms
stranded on opposite ends of the spectrum

One woman declaring love blindly
One man declaring love blindly
to opposite ends of the spectrum

Two halves of something important: love and all that,
quartered day in and day out by truisms and the
grotesque

The mock conviviality of the first verse retains its irony through the poem and leaves it open at the point where “truisms and the grotesque” intersect: in a sanctioned distortion of reality. The blank lines of the following poem, titled “Book II, Chapter I” (32-33), are framed by the expression of the failed utopia of the union:

“Happily-ever-after” is cut short.
The bride’s and groom’s “afterlife” is described in
morbid detail.

The subsequential isolational reiteration of the word “why”, followed by blank lines for the most part, indicates the oppression of the failed consummation (the infertile womb) and the fatal impairment of the spousal relationship: “why \ after a time always-the-same opulent disease...\ and why \ rigor mortis is seemingly content...in coming to both...” .

The prequel recollection of the wedding reception pinpoints an anthropologized dimension of the ritual where the legitimating dance and rejoicing takes on the aspect of a primitive ritual through which the ‘wild’ behaviour of the dance will tame death itself. In this sense, the social

celebration after the wedding ceremony emphasizes the continuation of the rupture (enacted by the wedding ceremony) between what is left behind and what is assumed as the future ("How to Learn to Forget Important Matters", 50).

A herd of sexual (vs celestial) beings are on the dance floor stamping their feet to the beat of the music with the bride (Miss Jazz), a parachutist who once won first prize at something important.

A herd of innocence is on the dance floor stamping out all thoughts of death and destruction (centuries of bloodshed taken off as easily as sets of dirty clothes).

Watch the herd (of colors) celebrate on the dance floor, and you forget your ancient right to happiness is challenged (possibly) everyday.

The ritual dance requires a temporary suspension of reality, so that the figure of the bride, sustained by the surreal quality of the rite, is transported across the second virtual threshold, signifying the societal acknowledgment of the rite. This second, or middle, threshold - the first one being the wedding ceremony and the third one signified by the everyday living of the marriage - stands between the fictionalized or fantastic quality of the bridal figure and her precipitation into a new definitive reality. This part of the ritual thus embodies the displacement of subjective histories into the appearance of new historical alliances, if only for the moment of the ritualized event. (There is a risk at this point that the ritual will generate a homogeneous future, resulting in a total sublimation of the multiculturalist ideal into the melting pot principle.)

The wedding ceremony, which would normally, in the normal chronology

of life outside the textual representation, be identified as the symbolic rupture point, is reconsidered in its spectacularized form so that the cultural framework of the event may be identified as such: a construct of beautiful illusions and fantasies intended for buffering the social drama. Equal amounts of the sacred (the ceremony) and the profane (the post-ceremonial festivities) constitute the compound framework of the spectacle and will characterize the aesthetic appeal of the performance. Even the self-representation of the voice appears ritualized and subject to an invisible authority. The aesthetics of the ritual performance has such a powerful impact on memory as to sustain the figure of the bride outside of space and time, precipitating her into a mythological dimension - and as a story to be retold indefinitely. Thus the theatrical paradigm of the text is significant, not only for the representation of the wedding ritual, but also in its decontextualized form, as the representation of repeatable (cultural) displacements. For these reasons, the representational text in this analysis recontextualizes this event into its cultural framework by means of its analeptic representation.

3.13 Symbolic dispossession of the Self

The metaphorical self-representations of the bride (*ABTA*) as a “hand grenade...made to order” as the “groom takes over temporarily” in the first poem of the text (“La Demi-Vierge”, 9) discloses at the offset a thematic representation of loss - of the self and/or of cultural identity to that of the Other. To this effect, the image of the “radioactive cape” over the bride’s “shoulders” appropriately expresses the patern(al)izing quality of her spouse. The dispossession of the bride begins at a subjective level with the dispossession of her dreams, which

become subdued by the “radioactive” “envelope”, or in other words, under the control of the “groom” (“A Man”, 11-12). Then comes the ‘disappearance’ of the cultural self (“On File”, 13):

Here you are happily married, with a bungalow,
and still you are a missing person

in the same way the good witch of the North
(Mom, a long time ago, colossal)
is now missing (on file).

The realization of these losses is depicted throughout successive poems. “The rush of promises of a good life ends. \ It’s intolerable: your losses are piled up \ on the heads of your kids like prize-winning books.” (“Act Three”, 14-15) The poem “Leaving Home” (18-19) shows a correspondence with the *O Canada Poems* - particularly in the irony of the poems “The Proposition” (123) and “The Catch” (124) - , whereby a Phyrriic attainment of “Success” for the displaced subject is signified through her representations of the spouse, as we can see for example, in “Leaving Home”, as follows:

The only reason you don’t break you [sic] neck
is because the groom-to-be appears on the scene.

Mr. Nice Guy stops you from sleeping with men
you don’t like
stops you from eating too much junk food
stops you from misbehaving (against Mommy).

You marry Success.

One day Mr. Necessary doesn’t live up to his reputation
(is reduced to a prop in a children’s school play).

You, an amateur (Ms, Laughingstock) wrestle
failure by candlelight (no one’s looking).

This can be compared with the “The Catch” (*OCP*): “Maria finally gets it: \ a good catch (and/or love).” The high cynicism of these poems sets the tone for an intimate critical reading of these relationships. As the awareness of superimposition by the Other and by the new performativity pervades the sensitivity of the “bride”, the circumstantial language of loss and loneliness is simultaneously counterchecked with a language of resistance, principally manifested through the voice’s irony and cynicism.

These texts do not lament the lost realization of an American Dream²⁰⁶ so much as they seek to uncover the disorienting and treacherous processes of illusory quests based in pseudo-didactic tales such as the Disneyesque fairy-tale existences and/or happy endings. See for example “The Bride: Your Employer” (51-52)

The bride steals your identity.

...

Fairy tale, anonymous: a peasant’s tears becomes skilled laborers overnight.

Fairy tale, twentieth century: union leaders drop out of nowhere and save

the oppressed. Except you haven’t paid your union dues.

You are helpless.

the bride is ever present in your life like a phobia.

Like your impulse to disobey the Highway Code.

...

Within this poietic frame of mind the protagonist voice is compelled to constantly

²⁰⁶ The influence of the American Dream in relation to the question of immigration is represented in the writings of other Italian Canadian authors, and most notably in Frank Paci’s four novel series beginning with *Black Blood* (1991), and continuing with *Under the Bridge* (1992), *Sex and Character* (1993) and *The Rooming-House* (1996). See also Pier Giorgio DiCicco’s “Remembering Baltimore, Arezzo” in *Roman Candles*, 37.

revise, subjectively and objectively (to its possible extent), a self-definition as she is propelled through a series of performative implications. Yet the numerous predicative lines of the text delineate the protagonist through the extraneous tensions that identify her socio-political position.

Office Politics represents the voice in a static - as opposed to the pseudo dynamics of *ABTA* - subjective position which constrains the identity of the voice. As a 'drone' in the corporate work place, the voice deplors the lack of possibilities for development or advancement (33, 41-42):

The thing is I want my soul back

...

I want to transport myself to
another world
and there enjoy the magnificent spectacle
of being complete
Often I look out the office window
and I want to be someone else

...

The loss of the "soul"²⁰⁷ implies the complete schism of the subjectivity in such a way as to render the cultural identity apparently unretrievable outside of this Other, utopic time/space. Her underpinnings in the worker identity foreclose her attempts at the retrieval of her cultural identity outside of this pseudo identity which reduces her to the expression of a decapitalized ego (55, 67-69):

i do not survive by:

- a) whistling (i'm tone deaf),
- b) examining a take-home exam on the diabolic nature of self-abasement
- c) writing a how-to-suicide booklet (a promised braille edition is in the works),

²⁰⁷ Refer to the previous discussion on the "ghost in the machine".

- d) exploring mechanisms of mass destruction,
- e) enrolling in a government-approved, job-retraining course on clowning around,
- f) all of the above

...

And the answer is:

- a) i survive out of habit
- b) and you?

This poem not only renders the effects of 'television realism' in formulating the anxiety of a "happy ending", but more importantly, it demonstrates a lack of options outside of the system which engulfs identities through its conditioning status of employment. The constitution of the poem appears in a multiple choice format which demonstrates a pseudo-democratic, and pseudo multicultural process at work, so that the possibility of discursive analysis is strategically eliminated - the deceptive illusion of choice and free agency is thereby rendered perceptible. Moreover, the invasion of a particular enslavement even into the private sphere of everyday life for the subject is emphasized. A clear comparison can be made with the poem "Book II, Chapter I" (*ABTA*, 32-33), where the blank lines which (besides previous interpretations) can be considered as a missing rationale for the "afterlife" of the estranged couple while also suggesting the voided identity of the "bride". The options are grim for the representational voices: "Humiliation" or "being nothing". Hence the necessity of the imagination is a vehicle for holding and transporting what risks annihilation, so that the imagination becomes a sort of Noah's Ark that holds the "dream" until better conditions appear again (61, 76):

SOS
My country is for sale
Heads of states are waiting

in line to buy it cheap

Lakes for fishing
Woods for hunting
Coats of arms, emblems, slogans available too
Half price

My home
on the island of Atlantis
was drowned in a tidal wave
Nothing to be done

My imagination:
my boat
will take me to another world
where the rich can't go on shopping sprees no more

As there is no possible community in the present, it must be imagined into the future.²⁰⁸ Moreover, the voice in the text does not solely refer to a specific cultural group in this predicament but rather she addresses the infringement of a globalized society on the life and the identity of the plebean subject.

3. 14 Transgression and the Origins of the Myth

The all-encompassing sense of loss does not merely refer to things that once were and are no more, but rather it refers to the breach between subjective “dreams” and the experienced reality. Hence the question of nostalgia is not the principal corollary in this analysis since the texts address a falling out over the larger community. The text of *ABTA* conveys sentiments of “Rage” and “despair” as “[t]he rush of promises of a good life ends” (“Act Three”, 14). What were once hopeful illusions are evaporating so that the text

²⁰⁸ See Giorgio Agamben's *La comunità che viene*. English trans. *The Coming Community*, M. Hardt Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

depicts the subject at the point of the dissolution of “dreams” and “illusions”. The resulting disillusionment is channelled through a relevant transgressive language of “Rage” (19-21). The “rage” anaphorically expresses an impossible desire to destroy the paradigms of normativity, and it is made apparent as a feeling of helplessness which cannot find resolution in the consummation with her Other. A subsequent loss of ideals appears unavoidable when the bride realizes that her constructed illusions no longer respond to her actual needs; and traditional codes cannot help her to surmount her entrapment within the illusion. The lost “faith” in the success of the spousal relationship is accompanied by a synchronous “guilt” emanating from an internalized love/hate relationship, as described in “The Match”: “When the bride and groom fight they’re as unpredictable as slot machines. \ Except they run on guilt, and not on anything else.” (28) At the moment of the allegorical Fall from utopian ideals, the subject looks back over her shoulder to question, and perhaps challenge, the Christian moral code that had instructed (or corrupted?) the failed ideals. The “sacred” ideal is thus crushed by a profane reality, yet a remaining irony brings up the sense of hope for surmounting the limitations of the body (“The Dart Game”, 29-30):

The bride puts up a picture of a once sacred man
on her wall.

She draws circles around his head, not a nimbus, mind
you, but circles.

Target practice.

The dart game has nothing to do with religion as such.
It is a symbol for all she once thought sacred
and which she had to abandon, lose,
in the process of aging in the twentieth century.

Till-death-do-you-part is a lost faith.

She is furious over the fact that she had to lose a

cavalcade of illusions
just because she is clever and all that; a working girl.

The loss encloses her, the way a cage encloses any animal.
She is trapped in it. It won't permit her to walk out
of her loss the way she can walk out of a bathroom.

...
Likely, the bride (who enjoys games and sports) will walk
out of the cage,
out of her loss (one day) like an animal
walks out of a trap, with the trap on his foot - bleeding.
St. Jerome, the man who is supposed to remove the trap
is dead
and so are his clone-like descendants.
More hunters in the twentieth century and so on than
there are saints.

For while she misses her faith in till death-do-you-part
(a glass menagerie, a stable for the Christmas season
only)
the loss helps her work harder to keep herself in good
physical shape.

And young.

The tension between "loss" and Free Will feeds the determination of the
subjectivity and informs the reader/critic of a refutation of defeat in spite of a
surface textual discourse that consistently alludes to "failure". This subject
would "live on to tell her tale of disillusionment" (30) in an imaginable future - or
in the poetic text. In contrast to this, "Grandma's Missing" presents an
unknowable past (or, a defective nostalgia) by means of a voiding of personal
histories, the effects of which also reveal the possible breaches of historical
"memory" (40-41):

Her chair is occupied by a space.
The space is like a decayed tooth.

The space is like indigestion.

No meaning in life because your taste buds aren't in
working order.

The space is like a donkey and other domestic animals
you'll never get to know on a friendly basis
because you are a city person.

The space is like a new highway built at the back of
your house.
It clutters up your life with new noise.

The space is like an accident you see on the road.
You see the wreck and become afraid for yourself.

The space is like a friend who becomes a traitor.
You didn't think you had space in your life for a
traitor, but you do.

The space is like a world war you were lucky enough
to miss.

The space is like a world war anyway -
the space you leave open, afraid,
a war will fill up all the spaces in your life.

The space is like the continent of Africa.
You'll never see it because you're poor.

The space is a memory.
A memory is like a theatre the fire department says
is a fire hazard.
It has to come down.

This poem brings up the anxiety of Benjamin's angel of history, with the poetic references to the space as "a world war", and in conjunction with the subjective look over the shoulder at the moment of the Fall (as mentioned above), so that the anxiety of a fearful past creates an insecure basis for an unknowable future.²⁰⁹ The empty space of history also relates to the empty womb (voided by miscarriages) which has not yet been able to fulfill its own requirements for the

²⁰⁹ This state of fear repudiates Fukuyama's thesis of the "end of History", at least in the case of the displaced. Fukuyama, like his idol Hegel, removes from his thesis all those who do not 'fit' into the WASP definition. Hence the critical literature of displacement disqualifies Fukuyama's theory by insisting on the presence of antagonistic elements in a present history.

historical continuity of the subject. In this context, the female body might itself be considered as the material object that constitutes the breach of a continuous history - although this is only conjecture at this point.

The composite metaphorical images of this “space” divulge the negative effects due to the “missing” cultural element embodied in the matriarchal figure of “Grandma” and such negative effects, in turn, create a personal and cultural conflict. These are evidenced in this sequential order of the metaphors in this poem, the “space” means pain (“like a decayed tooth”); it suggests a dysfunctional relation between the body and “life” (“indigestion”) ; it indicates alienation from “nature” (as “a city person”); it imposes the “clutter” of “noise” on the subjectivity (*cfr.* “Mercy Killing” (16), “The housewife... solo dances to the beat of cacophonous music”) ; the empty space signifies an apprehensible fear (“you see the wreck and become afraid for yourself”); it reveals a reality that hinges on betrayal (“like a friend who becomes a traitor...”); it leaves a deep anxiety for her personal future (“afraid, \ a war will fill up all the spaces in your life”); the “space” is depicted as an unknowable, dark space (“like the continent of Africa...”)²¹⁰ ; finally, this “space of memory” is considered as a zone condemned by (institutional) authorities (“like a theatre the fire department says is a fire hazard. \ It has to come down.”). These metaphors relate subjective disorders occurring (not exclusively) in displacement. In this case, the violation, or breach of the cultural subject is ‘performed’ through her occluded cultural transition.

²¹⁰ A resonance with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can be discerned in the sense that the dark and unknowable lifeworld represents a cataclysmic gap that renders a ‘true’ knowledge and representation of the Other impossible and undesirable, especially through the jaundiced eye of the dominating, and still colonializing, culture. By extension, the poetry demonstrates the ‘survival’ of this neo-colonializing mindset in the Canadian hegemony.

3.15 Languages of disillusion

The transgressive forces against the subject are approached through the defiance of the ironic voice in various degrees of subtlety. The rhetorical device of anaphoric escalation of irony is obvious in the previous poem as well as in other poems of this text, i.e. "Rage" (19-20), "The Hypnotist" (25-26), "The Match" (27-28), "I Remember", (87-89), "I Do" (90-92), "Act One" (93-96). The irony often avails itself of a strong imagology to enunciate the passage and the ironic embracing (or rather, the Judas' kiss) of the self in her new alliance ("The End", 59):

The party's ended....

To be relieved and frightened by one's fresh loneliness.
To be puzzled and delighted: one doesn't remember
who were friends
and who were enemies. Defenceless against such tactics as love
and hate.

To be relieved and frightened by the turn of events.
One exposes one's secrets (like feces is exposd [sic] in a
hospital lab).

Death is the ultimate excretion of all that is obsolete.
The whole body becomes an idiot's bowel movement.

Time to move on to another room with a better view:
sleep - a whitewashed toilet for partisan ghosts. Lazy.

This poem again shows a correlation with the poem "Camouflage" (127) in the *O Canada Poems*, and a specifically connotative relation with "whitewashed" containers of cultural memory: "The Statue of Liberty \ beckons Maria to follow her lead \ and have her face re-done, ...". However, the language conveys a fluctuating but tenacious irony aimed towards the Other yet it does so through

the channeling of the self - hence a transgressive irony passes through of the body of the displaced subject so that the ironic self-representation depicts a cultural oppression by a dominant Other - a tactic also used by Canadian writer and performer Calogero (Charly) Chiarelli.²¹¹ Ultimately, the subjective senses of betrayal and disillusionment expedite the ironic voice, and the temper of the irony appears determined by the immediacy of the threat. Though the occurrence of betrayal and of disillusionment will characteristically propel their victims towards a nostalgic, or Edenistic conception of well-being, the poetic voice in these text (in *ABTA* and *OP*) lucidly acknowledges the burnt bridges separating her being from another time/space and she perceives the necessity of her critical attention in the conflictual space of the *hunc et nunc* and in relation to a conceivable future. In short, the subjective past in these texts is considered as a normative aspect of the cultural subjectivity that, due to displacement, is required to reformulate itself and there is no critical room for regressive sentiments; instead, feelings such as that of the fear expressed in these texts focus on damages being incurred in a present situation but with a steady eye on the future. As for the past, it finds its space of existence through the maternal image contained in "the mirror". (Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is slightly reformulated to contain an ambivalent recognition of the cultural self, in addition to a simpler image of subjectivity.) "Each time I look into the mirror I find my mother there \ Another fishwife complaining about the state of her foliage" (*OP* 81, 98). There is a indistinct confluence of the maternal figure with the figure of "Mother Nature" in this poem which, taken in consideration with the image of her "mother" as "Another fishwife complaining about the state" of her condition. While this last image brings up a pre-emigrant existence in

²¹¹ Refer especially Chiarelli's ludically dramatic performance *Cu' Fu?: A Sicilian's response to life's perplexing moments*. (1995) Available on cassette from a recording of his performance at the Artwood Theatre, in Toronto on November 2 &3, 1996.

displacement by exclusion, due to the geographically defined, classist system of the Italian nation-state which excluded the poorer regions from the potential of modern 'progress', the naming of the mother as "Another fishwife" also returns to the Christian motif that sustains the hope of the subject. Hence, there is no possible nostalgic value except as motivation for a satisfactory existence in the future (which would also motivate the 'baby discourse').

The language of resistance, and even, of rebellion, in *OP* takes aim at institutions, in a confluence of the sacred and otherwise, for a critique of obedience to the sub-systems that in turn serve the greater, capitalistic system. See for example, poems number 15 and 16 (22, 25) reproduced below:

"Father," I ask, "Why am I poor?
And a poor sport to boot?"
Yet another broken spirit'
invisibly frowning,
invisibly crying for attention,
when what she really wants to do is blow up yachts?

"Revolution is messy," Father replies
"Better to shop for forgiveness
than to plant phantom bombs
Say nine *Hail Marys*
and be sure to take all your pills"

I take my Prosac
- instant religion -
and sail through life

Yet another poor soul trying to walk on water

And in poem 16 :

While the rich shop for sailboats
I shop for answers

My psychiatrist replies with a prescription
(Thank God medicare will cover the cost)

The Minister of Health should take note:

churches are more cost-effective than hospitals
They dispense hope capsules for free

It is quite clear that obedience to the system works through the traditional Catholic concept of gathering “souls” under a single ‘shepherd’ - signifying a paradoxical death-in-life for this enslaved subject who is repeatedly (dis)informed that the system ‘takes care’ of its “defenseless” (1, 5) subjects, in various ways. The image of a working system implies the internalization of conflicts through palliative behavioural practices: Prozac and shopping. Hence the most valued subject of the Capitalist System is demonstrated as being the economy, and not the individual. Poem number 50 (60) brings up a realistic point of controversy in the Canadian multicultural:²¹²

CLASSIFIED is full of UN-WANTED ads
and subliminal messages: (Go back where you came from!)

Forgive me, Dishonorable Minister of Unemployment,
but I can't seem to get anywhere these days

This coffin ship you call a country
has a big hole in it

As the critical artistic text delineates a communicative representation of the state

²¹² This poem could be said to address Diane Francis who consistently proclaims the negative economic fluctuations in Canada as a direct consequence of Canadian immigration policies, and even, as a direct effect of the immigrants and post-immigrants who are already established in Canada.

of things in the multicultural arena, the proverbial 'canary' in this case appears to be singing from a multicultural 'shaft'. The Canadian mine (and mind) is consistently (mis)represented by a Canadian canonical corpus that indulges an unconscionable image of multiculturalism.²¹³ The validity of critical dissent seems to be explicitly ignored, especially in regard to the question of multiculturalism, and particularly for a country that takes international pride in its diversity policies. The invisible status of the critical text ends up representing a failed attempt at communicating a more complete vision of being in the actual practices of the Canadian multicultural society. In the same way that the composition of *ABTA* exposes the bare bones of an (un)finished product - in as much as this product is determined by the total of its perceived (bodily) expressions and special effects which make up the dramatic totality of the play - , the poem cited above represents a refractometry of existing tensions and conflicts that are overlooked in the Canadian image of multiculturalism - hence the metaphor of the "radioactive cape" (*ABTA*, "A Man", 11) superimposed on the displaced subjectivity is ironically apropos.

3.16 Overstepping boundaries: obedience, fear and failures

The 'audience' of *ABTA* is made to view the fantastic quality in the consequences to the event and a continued sensation of anxiety in the bride - as if she begins to feel the restrictions of a new identity acting upon her - and a language of cynicism and uncertainty becomes more explicit. New potentials

²¹³ Italian Canadian literature and poetry texts are mostly absent from the shelves of Canadian bookstores, and even from university library shelves. In addition, these texts are difficult to find even in Canadian book warehouses and if the titles are found, the texts themselves are often "unavailable".

and new anticipations are being created, but the insecurity of these expectations is also strongly felt. While attempting to apprehend her own reality, the bride will search for a corrective remedy within the comfort of traditional knowledges that she can only access with difficulty. But there is no possibility of discounting her contrasting reality and the bride consequently feels the anxiety of failure due to a sense of her impaired performance. The attempted encounter with the self emphasizes the increasing uncertainties of the bride as she tries to perceive her own power of representation - "On File" (13):

...
Life is something like a movie with a lot of brides in it.
Then somebody edits the movie to make it commercial
and only one bride is left in it and it's not you.

Here you are happily married, with a bungalow,
and still you are a missing person

in the same way the good witch of the North
(Mom, a long time ago, colossal)
is now missing (on file).

This portion of the poem bears repeating in the context of the previous section as well as in the discussion of this section since it illustrates a deficient representation for the purpose of a commodifiable 'big picture'. The code of obedience, reflected through a cliché of conformist behaviour (and the idea of marriage as a holiday), "happily married, with a bungalow", is immediately followed by the expressed failure of the guiding principle and the subsequent intuition of a breach. The intertextual reference to the "good witch of the North" derives its sense of enchantment from the American classic film *The Wizard of*

Oz (1939)²¹⁴ Following this fantastical vein, the poem would then suggest that, in addition to the harsh reality of the preceding verse, the “good witch”, or “Mom”, is not there to pass on the “ruby shoes” that would take her home. Thus the result is a general sensation of abandonment in a hostile environment with no possible, immediate means of escape. (This feeling would be particularly significant for post-immigrants, or the children of immigrating parents, since they would have grown up in the land of the Other while having no remaining vital ties to the land that their parents knew.)

Failure is linked to violence and to a violation of expectations, or in other words, betrayal (“Act Three”, 14-15):

...

Failure is a motorcycle gang.
Gang raped, you carelessly look at yourself
in a rearview mirror.
The metal frame around it is the world;
the rest is good-bye.

Struck numb by an obscene lack of hope, humor, faith,
your calendar looks like a sheet of ice
on which you will fall and break your neck.

The subject, or rather her reflected image, is framed by another limitative reflection of the world - that which is refracted through the “metal frame” of the

²¹⁴ The 1939 film, directed by Victor Fleming, was adapted from L. Frank Baum's 1900 children's book. The film version of the story is said to have stuck in the nation's collective mind (in *The New Yorker's* “Talk of the Town” column, issue of March 6, 1978.) with its particularly catching theme song “We're off to see the Wizard” as well as the well-known melody “Over the Rainbow”. Baum's storybook depicts an initially unhappy Dorothy who escapes to the fantastical world of Oz where she makes a series of strange and wonderful encounters, until she understands that she was better off in her own home. This original moral in the book takes on a contrastive turn in the film with the suggestion that, with the death of the Wicked Witch, Dorothy could have lived happily-ever-after in the land of Oz. See David Shipman's *The Story of Cinema*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1982. p. 464. Also *Il Morandini Dizionario dei Film 2000*. Luisa Laura and Morando Morandini. Bologna: Zanichelli. 1999. p. 741. There is also a certain intertextuality with Melfi's ‘juvenile’ fiction *Ubu, the Witch Who Would Be Rich*, (1994) with the notion of good and bad witches.

“rearview mirror” - so that the big picture is that of a distorted (due to the uneven surface of the metal frame) and restricted vision of the world which simultaneously entraps the image of the subject within a diminutive reflective plane of the girded mirror. Ultimately, the failed encounter with her Other (“You can’t find the groom”, 15) constrains the subjective vision within the space of the failed consummating of bodies - and the breach of what might have been: “you carelessly look at yourself in a rearview mirror”. This verse provides an insight into the parallel ‘baby discourse’, whereby the “metal frame” also represents the surgical instruments used in dilation and curetage (D&C) procedures for evacuating the female body of its miscarried covenant. This interpretation is validated by Melfi’s artistic corpus, and particularly *Infertility Rites*, which elaborates the protagonist’s many unsuccessful attempts at pregnancy. Moreover, the enclosing structure of “[t]he metal frame” as “the world” suggests a provocative look at the shield of Achilles that represents the world and yet does not protect him from death in Homer’s *Iliad*.²¹⁵ However, for our analysis, this interpretation of the “metal frame” also represents a dual form of oppression: by its confining and distorting/distorted frame of reference, and by its alienating function. The (repeated) failure of procreation re-enacts the compromised meaning of the subjectivity in her displacement, inasmuch as the desired conception that might intermediate between, or blend the qualities of, her two worlds, cannot be actuated. The subject thus remains captive - and controlled - within her misrepresentational frame of reference. (It should be kept in mind that the shield does not signify full protection for Achilles since he

²¹⁵ The poems of the *Iliad* refer to artistic productions, especially that of the elaborately decorated shield in *Iliad* 18. See also the theme of the fallen warrior in W.H. Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles” (Random House, 1955) Franco Ferrucci’s *Assedio e ritorno* (Bompiani 1974) presents a discussion of the organization of memory in relation to narrative structures, and the concept of siege and return, or in other words, the need to find again what had been lost, in the notion of life as a sort of siege directed towards destruction.

actually dies.) This interpretation can also be analogous to the activity of displaced writing in the context of the Canadian literary establishment, which forms another sub-textual thread of the analysis.

In literary resonance with Dante's Virgil and Beatrice, the access to the desirable state in displacement sometimes requires a guide. In *ABTA*, the guide is present in the imposing figure of "A Man" (11-12), "with a radioactive cape" who "follows you" and from whom "you cannot hide". Yet the transparency of his shortcomings is disclosed through the irony of "Leaving Home" (18):

Failure trips you (the photojournalist) one day.
You turn around and try to take a picture.

The only reason you don't break you [sic] neck
is because the groom-to-be appears on the scene.

Mr. Nice Guy stops you from sleeping with men
you don't like
stops you from eating too much junk food
stops you from misbehaving (against Mommy).

You marry Success.

One day Mr. Necessary doesn't live up to his reputation
(is reduced to a prop in a children's school play).

You, an amateur (Ms. Laughingstock) wrestle
failure by candlelight (no one's looking).

The protectionist disposition of "Mr. Nice Guy" (ironicized by its more familiar association with the cliché "no more Mr. Nice Guy") harbours a paralyzing control over the personal agency of his 'charge', ("Act Three" (14-15) - "Paralyzed: ...You are caged...") even though his shielding effects fall short of expectations (as already mentioned in terms of Achilles' shield). The resulting

sense of disillusionment informs the protagonist voice of her limited agency and of her vulnerable state of alienation. Yet a point of contention exists in this question of agency as to the degree of willful subjection of the “bride” to her Other and the degree of deference to the “groom’s” expectations of herself. The capitalized “Success” in this poem indicates the ironic vision of the Self seeking an apposite position through a total and satisfactory consummation of the relationship, but the subjective voice also discloses an ironic awareness of this “Success” as an image in which she seeks domicile. In effect, there are two interfacing voices of consciousness in this text: a superficial voice expressing a certain insecurity and subservience, while the unyielding irony dialectically cuts through the surface discourse, in part to capitalize the abstract principles of her displaced existence. In contrast to this apprehension in her disparate setting, the displaced subject finds an occasional, yet ephemeral, escape into the unconditional reception of her familiar surroundings, particularly through transient ritualistic moments such as the wedding reception (“The Tribe”, 39):

The whole tribe is at the wedding.

It loves you for no reason.

The world is a global village: safe as a nutshell.

It’s illogical:

You accept each member of the tribe into your heart
the way you always accepted obeying your mother as a
kid.

Beware (you know): all membership rights terminate at
the end of the party.

Blood relatives are as important to your life
as is a dollar to a spoiled kid.

The expressive safety of the familiar environment is perceived as something authentic precisely because it does not conform to rules of logic, but rather, it is

something that is often taken for granted (although the opposite does not concur, that is, not everything that defies logic, or that is taken for granted can be deemed authentic). Yet this moment of aperture to authenticity is countered by the reality - and not necessarily the 'authenticity' - of the displaced environment which signals a cultural discontinuity and the overstepping of boundaries into the displaced environment. Although the displaced subjectivity may have found an aperture toward authenticity in this moment, this possibility is also marked by her ironic awareness of these "membership rights" as a concession, rather than as something that is seized through will and/or desire. This awareness is also defined by a mathematical ratio equation in the observation that: "The world is a global village: safe as a nutshell". In these terms, the statement would indicate that "safe" is to the "world" as "a nutshell" is to the "global village", yet the oxymoronic term "global village" in symmetry with the microcosmic "nutshell" forms the theoretical construction that erodes the notion of "safety" in the "world"; the expressions of fear and violence throughout the poetic texts confirm this ironic articulation. In short, the irony disqualifies Post-Modernist discourses, i.e. "the global village" (*pace* McLuhan), that tend to invalidate the genuine impact of displacement on the individual. The last stanza of the poem indicates an exigency of a new beginning in the world of the Other in as much as "membership rights terminate at the end of the party..." and in such a way that the poetic expression indicates a moment of crisis, or a moment of rupture, which demands a regeneration of the subject in the world of the Other - again illustrating the rapprochement of this literature with the critical moment of rupture that was the driving force behind the Futuristic movement as well as its demands for recognition in the world of its Other.

The moment of rupture, signalled by the ritualistic passage into the Other world through the metaphorical wedding, parallels the passage of the immigrant into his/her state of *italianità*, that is, into a state of ethnicity: marginalized and minoritized. Fulvio Caccia detects this “traversée des cultures” (in the Italian Québécois context) in *Sous le signe du Phénix* with this obvious allusion to new beginnings rising from the ashes of an old identity. Caccia investigates the particular problematic that sets the italoophone Canadian against his Other(s): the Québécois and the Anglo-Canadian:

Entre les deux, le créateur italoophone cherche à se définir, à trouver sa place en partageant la culture de l'un; ou en adhérant aux valeurs de l'autre. ... Que connaît-on de cette mutation? Peu de choses en vérité. Ce qu'on sait, c'est que les échanges se font plutôt dans le sens d'une assimilation. Le baiser d'accueil du pays d'hôte est un baiser de mort. La force centrifuge de la culture dominante finit par désintégrer les liens anciens. Saturne happe ainsi ses satellites. Toute grande culture a son anneau; poussières de cultures consumées; qui l'encerclent comme un mirage. ...(9-10)

On ne peut véritablement comprendre l'ethnicité sans considérer les liens avec la terre ancestrale. En effet, le territoire est le fondement de l'ethnicité. C'est par lui et à travers lui que l'ethnicité puise sa raison d'être, son appartenance, son axe de gravité, mais également sa terrible inertie. ... (11)

La culture de l'immigré se situe aux antipodes des cultures régionales. L'immigré qui, en partant, coupe ses liens avec la terre natale et consent de ce fait à mourir culturellement, se retrouve à contre-courant de ces cultures acharnées à survivre. (11-12)

Caccia's indication of the importance of the “territoire” in the formation of identity, in addition to the allegorical “Phénix” of the title, suggests a subversion of the old in favour of a certain rebirth, all of which expresses a revised praxis of Marinetti's own symbolic rebirth - although without the outwardly directed violence of his Futuristic manifesto. (It is important to note that Marinetti was himself a displaced subject undergoing his own 'crisis of displacement'.) Hence the overstepping of cultural boundaries is linked to a conquest of personal

fears, as well as to a tangible reformulating of the self - an updated version of the crash (assisted by the vehicle) and rebirth in the primordial muck of Futurism. The last line of "The Tribe" contemplates a final break with her "blood relationships" in the consideration of the depleted use-value of this community as her 'property' and in the face of identifying discourses based on economic value.

The baby discourse emerges as another potential form of overstepping boundaries, but with its own forms of distress, and a certain necessity of obedience to the forces of Nature ("Out of Order", 63):

Period. The bride is out of order.
(Mother Nature is tidying up her affairs.)

The bride's smile will not win her anything (like it's supposed to).
E.g., her hotel room is dirty. Indifferent like a whore.

The bride is blue.
The blue bride is drunk with (machine) hormones.
Hatred.
The groom is a cocoon of decay.

The sky is an easy chair the bride sits her dreams on.
Tomorrow, she will definitely buy herself something.

"Mother Nature" is mirrored in the word "Period", signifying the sanguinary failure of the body to complete the willful desire of its subjectivity. Moreover, this apparent failure of the biological self requires a mechanical invasion so that the body itself is not so much the vehicle that can bring change, but rather, it becomes an anticipating body which is directly affected by the instruments of change by the Other. In this sense, the comparison with the Futurist movement

is more laboured, so to speak, yet a similarity can be seen between the mechanical functions of the automobile and those of the medical field for bringing significant changes to the biological body. In addition, the Futurists celebrated this state of chaos as the ideal product of their manifesto, while our protagonist views her biological incapacity for change as her own chaotic state, in the irony of the “Out of Order” body. In this case the body becomes the barrier itself which will prevent the “bride” from overcoming her liminal stage, so that the subjectivity eventually fades within her “bridal” image, never attaining the desired identity on the Other side. This particular impediment becomes charged with the various ironies of her situation, as exemplified by “Down the Church Steps: a Divorcée” (74-75):

The bride accepts roses for a bad performance.

...

Nobody loves you either, dear, so somehow you feel
forgotten:
deadwood, deadbeat, dead duck, dead - manikin-like.

...

You're a manikin invisible to the naked eye: humanoid
and cold.

...

Nobody notices the bride's dress is soiled
like nobody notices birdshit on a highway anyway.

...

Maybe all you need to come back to (terms with) life
is love in the shape of a dildo made in Taiwan.

...

The irony in the onanistic metaphor of the last cited verse demonstrates the performative instrumentality of her Other, in as much as the bride-in-herself is personalized as a negative image of productivity. The failure to produce another life means subjective death for this host body. “You bet (underneath all that

make-up) she's only rich and alive like a dead star \ you don't know is dead because it shines in your face." (75)

Office Politics shows the new fears and difficulties of overstepping boundaries in the new hierarchies created by the new capitalistic body and the enslaving practices of this domain on the life of the worker. The boundaries in this text are determined by the obedience of the subject in submitting the self to the desire of a greater Other which is an abstracted oligarchic power, and which represents itself through its own 'lords' in the neo-feudalistic system of Capitalism: the office. The term "office politics" is highly ironic since the word "politics", taken to describe "relations or conduct in a particular area of experience, especially as seen or dealt with from a particular point of view" or "the total complex of relations between people living in society"²¹⁶ cannot really be applied in a society which has 'lost sight' of its effective leaders (the Capitalist Corporations) - or of its discursive hopes (the multicultural society). Moreover, the text indicates a stronger derivation from the definition of the policing actions of organizations that enforce a certain control and regulation over the individual. By extension, the office environment as depicted in this text appears very close to the definition of a police state through its repressive control of political, economical and social life by its arbitrary exercise of power, although it does not necessarily do so according to publicly known legal procedures - thus it demonstrates a systematic behaviour which is much closer to the definition of a secret policing force which has been internalized: an evolutionary step beyond Foucault's discourse of the panoptikon in our modern society. The potential of the individual is contingent upon a double standard,

²¹⁶ Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, under "politics" and "police" and "police state" for this section of the discussion, pp. 900-01.

one of which promotes a Christian - or more specifically, a Protestant (Weber) - work ethic to advance the dominance of the system, and another standard that serves to instill and maintain a state of fear in our everyday definitions of being.²¹⁷

As evidenced in poem number 15 (22), the subject appears in her already subjugated state, so that the supreme causes of her position are shown as being impalpable and even imperceptible. At this point the question is fixed in a subjective present: "Why am I poor? ... Yet another broken spirit \ invisibly frowning \ invisibly crying for attention, \ when what she really wants to do is blow up yachts?" The risk of the emerging consciousness is immediately deterred by the "Father" figure of the (Catholic) Church, whose function it is to further internalize the subject's apprehensions into Catholic precepts of self-censorship and self-abnegation. "Revolution is messy,... Better to shop for forgiveness \ than to plant phantom bombs \ Say nine *Hail Marys* and be sure to take all your pills". But "forgiveness" for what? For thoughts of resistance through the faculty of free will, or for even questioning the existence of unidirectional relations of power over the individual? The poem updates Marx's famous definition of religion in the reference of the first line of the following verse: "I take my Prozac \ - instant religion - \ and sail through life \ \ Yet another poor soul trying to walk on water", and exposes the subtle shift of power relations to involve the stigmatizing discourse of a medical institution²¹⁸ - that is itself stained by the rhetoric of a pharmacological economy - in the subjugation of the disquieted, self-conscious individual. This also implies the failure of Hegel's thesis on the emancipation of the 'slave' through the emergence of self-

²¹⁷ See *The Politics of Everyday Fear*. ed. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

²¹⁸ See Plato's elaboration of the *pharmakon* in *Phaedrus*.

consciousness, since the Capitalist system sees to it that this stage can never be fully achieved. Thus the widespread methodology of pre-emptive sedation fosters obedience to the system, while it also signifies a sort of death-in-life for the subject.

The neo-feudalistic quality of the system is partly visible (in poem 24, 32) in the consummate power that the queen (bee) appears to exert over her workers - "The queen opens her mouth and all living things \ collect another layer of her decisiveness". But we know that the "queen" herself is subject to higher powers and thus she is merely a representative of that power. Mobility in the corporate culture appeals to the ruthlessness of mercenary types: "The strong offer themselves up as top executives \ hatchet men (whatever) Provided there's a payoff". Feudalism is thus revisited with a neo-feudalistic system with its own order of knighthoods for rewarding mercenary spirits: "Its the Devil himself: Sir Greed" (67, 83). Both the historical feudalism and the late Capitalistic neo-feudalism are based on a dichotomous relationship of power with clear-cut boundaries between "the strong" and "the weak", in other words, between those who have access to power and those who have not. Moreover, the contract is contaminated by its anti-personnel strategies of power. "The weak offer themselves up too - except \ they expect nothing in return". The poem divides the two position of the "weak" and the "strong" by the retributive characteristics of their sacrifice, or surrender. In other words, the system enslaves (in various degrees) everyone yet it does not reward every servant with the same mobility. This means that the two factions are subject to different rules of obedience to the system and that they will anticipate dissimilar remuneration systems. Apart from bringing up the formulation of a dichotomy of

subservience, the poetic discourse unfolds the psychological struggle of self-consciousness against the soporific powers of the system which seeks to reduce the subject to obedient silence and hence to end all voices of dissent at the inceptive level.²¹⁹

The office queen barks (at me) all the time
My computer barks too; its bytes are cancer-causing

Everyone else's bites come as a shock
(especially Christians')

I train myself to turn the other cheek Ouch
Artificial kisses take hold of my day

The radio announcer says something
about the nature of intimacy/ass-licking/sucking up

The sky teaches humility to landscape artists
Too my [sic] bad my roof has a leak in it

The religious formation of the individual plays a significant role, as attested in the above poem (27, 35), inasmuch as Christian directives (derived from scriptures of dubious authorship) indicate a strategy of behaviour modification which has subtly evolved throughout the course of Biblical history. Indeed these dogmatic directives retain a wide power over the 'weaker' society and particularly for those who are delimited by a difficult situation, since the pacifist ethic requires bearing insults and injury without complaint.²²⁰ The Christian subject worships in silence and in a state of "humility" which means that the

²¹⁹ We need only look at the repressive forces which seek to crush the antagonistic movements against the negative power of the capitalistic system at the turn of the millenium, at the various meetings of the ruling mega-corporations at Genoa, Seattle, etc.

²²⁰ You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. *Matthew 5.38-41*

subject is required to retain an infantilistic form of compliance that precludes any dialectics of subversion. This strategy leaves the alienated subject with a repressed intuition of violence which is internally sublimated and/or re-directed against the self, as in poem 33 (41-42).

I want attention
I want the office queen and all those in line to the throne
to love me
but no one even says hello when I come in
So I want vengeance!

Sometimes
I want to take the computer cable at my feet
and twist it
around our office queen's neck
(I don't want my chances for promotion
to be affected, mind you)
And sometimes I want
to twist the cable around my own neck

The thing I want is my soul back
...

The dependence of the subject on this religious dogma that promises love from an unknowable entity is transferred to the sphere of the work place with the hope that a similar process will apply. But the realization of a true alienation calls up a desire for violence which ultimately results in a process of oppression against the self. The consolation of religion is shown to be inadequate since it does not progress toward a resolution to the problem, but rather it merely revolves around the core problem without access to the key. Such strategies of containment serve to arrest the individual in her displacement. The state of servility (or, the 'servile service', in the office) is where the self is rendered incapable of dissent or of practical resistance; hence servility is a violence

against the self. Moreover, it occludes external manifestations of individual “Free Will” (34, 43) (the state of slavery is a particular collective state) by sustaining a punitive self-censorship, “When I do wrong, I know it” - *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*.

The subjective voice displaces herself into this death-in-life (or, *thanatos* without *eros*) proffered by religion since she can find no other way out of her situation. Therefore she is effectively silenced in the imaginary claims of a relativized microcosm (52, 62):

She made it!
She's No One

...

No One is content to stay away
from office towers, church towers and the like

They're reserved for the living
and No One has crossed over to the other side

and found her first husband, God
Such a handsome wild flower

She speaks his language:
silence

...

In this case, the “crossing over” is a regressive process since it is not aimed at the emancipation of the subject, but rather it is intended to further “silence” the voice - within her “Prosac” world. (On the other hand, a possible cross-over into the realm of power would instill a different kind of silence: more like a code of *omertà*.) This involution is made possible by the determining factors of “poverty” and “fear” that rule this subjectivity (53, 64-65):

I'm unilingual I can only speak Fear
to government clerks and unemployment cops

Is fear a language? Of course it is

Fear shows me up as a foreigner
My country of origin: the Leaning Tower of Babel

So my words don't carry much weight around here
Cash does though

But those who speak Fear, speak Poverty
and those who speak that, speak when they're spoken to

My nose breathes for me
My lips kiss for me
and the television talks for me

My closed-circuit circle of friends shout at me
but I don't shout back
I laugh and I am misunderstood

I cough and I am quarantined
I stutter: I-I-I-I-I-ove

Love is not a word in Fear
Love is a chemical - not like acid, mind you
Acid has power, and love for those
who speak Fear has none whatsoever

How pretty you are, someone lies
I nod and turn the other cheek
Everywhere I go smiles take up position
Fire at me Shoot down my point of view

What luck: silence is a weapon too
I play with it all the time

Fear is my mother tongue
I shall always be in its debt A true servant

But - wouldn't you know it?-
the sun races down from the sky

and paints my face a brave colour

This poem explicitly cites the displacement of the Italian immigrant - in the referential "*Leaning Tower of [Pisa] Babel*" - and the linguistic question. As Italy is itself a polyglot nation (dominated by a Middle (Standard) Italian language) where one's dialect identifies that person in her region or territory of provenance, this specified form of identification can relatively identify that person's social and economic status. Yet when the individual immigrates to the host country, these differentiations are extraneously consolidated, and effectively silenced, into a singular, mediatic cultural representation: they are spoken for - "the television talks for me" - and they "speak when they're spoken to". This heterogeneous group is treated as one homogeneous subscribed collective. In addition, mediatic cultural representations based on strategies of stereotypization resume the oppressive practices, i.e. of the Church, which seek to maintain "poor" subjects in their state of "Fear" and silent obedience. Thus the lines -"Fear is my mother tongue" \ I shall always be in its debt A true servant" - disclose the complexity of the subject in displacement by identifying her in a previous displacement by the Italian economic and social system. These lines identify the problems of "Fear", of dialect ("mother tongue" is always a dialect, since (a 'Middle', or) Standard Italian is an imposed, created language - although it derives from the Florentine dialect), of economic status (of "debt"), and of servitude, all of which work with the element of "silence" in various forms of synergy to maintain the subject in a quasi perpetual state of displacement, especially if these factors were already consolidated in the subjective consciousness. (We will note that the Christian motif of "turn[ing] the other cheek" is again present in the discursive text.) Ultimately, the subject is made to experience her "fear" as an internalized ritual of reciprocation, that is,

as a form of communion from the self, with the self, and for the self, hence
without ever approaching an exchange with the external forces (54, 66):

i drink
 my fear
like a cup of urine

In a perpetual loop, the dogmatic rhetoric of “hope” accompanies
“Terror”, in a
continuous play based on illusions: “Terror is in full-bloom; so is hope” (58, 72).
And the circle begins again as the subject fully internalizes the maintenance
process of self-depreciation through an irony defined as “hypocrisy” (64, 79-80):

Hypocrisy sits on my doorstep like a bulldog
 It's there for my use,
 my bodyguard

I respond to the movement of your lips
 Your hooves
 Kick me for all I care

 I (always) turn the other cheek
 The act protects me from taking a gun and shooting you
A drug-free alternative to (self-) murder

...

 Hypocrisy is my twin,
 my daughter, my mother
She will die for you, Darling

The dogma that keeps the subject in her state of subjection (with a *third*,
ritualized gesture of “turn[ing] the other cheek”) renders her unable to perform or
react effectively to acts of violence and also keeps her in a externally passive
state, which conceals her internal chaos. In effect, “Hypocrisy” becomes the

ironic motif that defines the lifeworld of the displaced subject and of displacing practices - also visible in the leitmotiv of the “smile” -, and which risks shattering over the heads of both parties. But in the end, it appears that the framework of betrayal - “Cover me with your Judas kiss \ but cover me with acknowledgement” (90, 109-110) - might be undone through other means, such as the subjective imagination.

3.17 Strategies toward the Self-in-culture

The context of *ABTA* represents the liminality of the bridal situation as the ambivalent renunciation of previous notions of being as “the groom-to-be appears on the scene” (“Leaving Home”, 18). This ambivalence is compounded by a sensed need to reject the reifying nature of the ritual that confers specific roles and the donning of applicable masks. A guarded self-in-irony appears as a constant throughout this cross-over phase in such a way as to chronicle, like “(the photojournalist)”, the process at work. The tension between stasis (“Paralyzed... You are caged... “Act Three”, 14-15) and a dynamic capacity of being is illustrated by a present - as a sort of perpetual liminality which is always defined by an elusive past and punctuated with similarly elusive feelings of “hope” and “faith”, which are always directed at an anticipated future. Faith and hope relate the power of mediated auto-suggestion (“The Hypnotist” 25-26):

Hope is a woman with a gold watch chain,
swinging it right and left, left and right . . .
ordering everything to be under her control and to be
dazzled by it.

So hope is a hypnotist
with the face of a woman who spent nights cramming

for exams,
who was nearly ready to cheat on her medical exams
but said no to that sort of thing in the end,
and in the end did become a physician with a good
practice in the suburbs
but gave it all up one day (as the story goes)
to become a hypnotist
(best new trick in town).
Since then she has been discriminated against by the
rich and the poor.

But hope is a politician, a dictator, dictating hope
into people's lives on the weekend
(once organized a bingo game for the elderly and
the sick).

Hope also drove across the country to see an eclipse of
the sun
and took up mountain climbing in between.

Hope puts out her tongue to catch raindrops.
Hope confesses that she has a passion
for pistachio ice cream on a TV talk show.

Hope likes jazz on a starry night.
Hope plays the trumpet to recharge her batteries.

Hope always wants to be a millionairess and a mother
of twins
by this time next year and at the same time maintain
her reputation
and remain the one reason man cannot live by bread
alone.

For the time being, hope is a bride, a midget,
who temporarily confronts rage with a smile.

Hope is profaned into a delusory and exploitative practice "(best new trick in town)" - without forgetting the connotation of prostitution in the word "trick" - that risks a disequilibrium of the personal sense of integrity when confronted with uncontrollable external forces. This "hope" is a force in itself, sometimes quixotically impulsive and adventurous, often childlike and energetic, and

sometimes sensuous and lyrical, yet it desires a certain conventionality so that it may ultimately reflect one's purpose of being. By the very quality of its nature, hope can never be played out in the present, hence being-in-hope means being suspended within the parameters of liminality itself. Moreover, hope informs a subjectivity in such a way as to wear that subjectivity as its mask, in the same way that the ritual represents the mask of a "collective" hope: "A wedding party is a wig on a collective head." ("Wigs" 58) Thus hope in the figure of the "collective head" acts as witness to the rite of passage.

The element of hope is informed by an ensuing loss of faith in the strength or permanence of the contractual relationship. The displaced subjectivity (as displaced into the ritual moment) works within this paradoxical space to piece together a sense of being out of various perceived 'truths' and pragmatic compromises, which are not without feelings of fear and de-centredness. The (marital) union concretizes the struggle of *eros* and *thanatos* as a longing anticipation of the first against the realistic expectation of the second. In terms of the nature of "hope" discussed in the previous paragraph, *eros* or "the instinct to life" is deferred indefinitely. In addition, anxiety impedes the bride from being able to draw any guarantee for the future of the relationship as she dwells on her ideas of hope for such a guarantee while at the same time sensing this to be no more than a cruel superstition. The implication that any authentic representation of the self could only remain at a liminal stage, that is, always in a state of possible flux, with a variety of creative possibilities, and completely devoid of a definitive structure, must be considered against this condition of indefinite deferment: "Love-and-death is only a peekaboo game." ("I Remember" 87-89) This poem organizes the subjective memory around a

discursive commemoration of life-giving instincts (*eros*) through the “Grandma” figure as “my protectress”, “the lady in waiting who introduced me \ to the queen: myself”. The memory then crosses over the shadow of death (*thanatos*): “Grandma is worn out. Worn out like a nineteenth-century \ idiom. Dead. A heroine. \ Grandma, my heroine, your coffin was just a suitcase \ with nothing in it.” The sense of displacement contains its own instinct to death (*thanatos*) which is continuously played out against the will to life, when the poetic voice causes the memory, “Grandma”, to come up to the forefront once more:²²¹

Grandma, the candy store; I remember.

Grandma, the lady on the mount who fed me

...

Grandma, the peasant woman,
who couldn't read, who couldn't travel,
who couldn't do anything because she loved me,
Grandma, who didn't train me to be an adult,
who packed the toilet trainers off to work and left
me with her

(like a wall is left with another wall,
two equals holding a big house: important)

...

Grandma, the woman who gave me a lovely sense
of myself and Italian history,
Grandma, the woman who made sure this (that) bride
would not be missing on earth,
Grandma, I remember.

Hello Ms. Love-object, first and most important.

Welcome to the wedding.

²²¹ This poem interplays with a previous poem by Melfi, titled “Mirabel Airport, 11:00 A.M.” reproduced here: “That witch, that amputator, my grandmother \ is stepping down the Alitalia jumbo jet. \ My childhood suddenly explodes. Like a home-made bomb. \ Watch out, your foe has grown up in Canada! \ \ My memories are certainly out of date. \ This lady is priceless, \ as frail as an amputee's goodbye kiss, \ a piece d'art suddenly certainly necessary. \ \ Welcome, my ancestor, my mother's well-being.” In Morgan Di Giovanni, p.56. Melfi has stated that she does not like this particular poem because it is too transparent; in a comment following this author's quoting of the poem at the Congress of the CFSS (formerly, Learned Societies) in Sherbrooke, 1999.

Thus the anxiety of *thanatos* is framed and contained within the “important” “wall” of *eros*, and in the connection to an antecedent ‘self’, although the linguistic association has been eroded: the subject does not know her antecedent as *nonna*, but as “Grandma”, testifying to a certain rupture despite all else. (And the reader/critic is left to detect the poet who is standing between the audience/reader and the fictional character in the text.)

The bride’s thought processes demonstrate the artifice of social performance as a production involving many characters (paratextually, as well). The exposition of the bride’s conflict is a reflection of her isolation and the reader is compelled to draw an understanding of the character from events, many of which are purposely left out of the text. By reversing the chronological order of the text, the author forces the reader to focus on the consequential material effects of the ‘real’ events - those represented in the text plus those which can only be imagined or intuited through their symbolic manifestations. At best, this can generate a mimetic strategy by which the reader’s subjectivity may also contemplate itself as self-in-culture. The tactics of reverse chronological representation and other representational omissions show how there can be no beginning of a single (dramaturgical) phase in everyday role-playing since too much of life is played off scene.

Office Politics presents self-discovery as a paradoxical conscious awareness of a sense of pride solaced by personal history, and the self-conscious awareness of possessing culture in the de-culturalized text of Globalization (6, 12):

One day I woke up and there I was -
larger than life
Things have never been the same since

Every morning a team of office queens
looks for ways
to cut me down to size

I smile
I carry a contagious virus (Pride, Type A)
for protection

The cemetery holds a certain fascination
for the humbled(d)
Pity

In this context, the living culture would represent *eros* while globalization is experienced as an overwhelming *thanatos* against which the subject-in-culture must struggle. The battle between *eros* and *thanatos* is fought out within the subject as “servant” (39, 48):

A servant is always looking for a way out,
an escape route, a passport;
salvation:
a new master:
himself

The notion of “a passport” as “an escape route” that would bring “salvation” resonates with the derogatory appellation of *WOP* (‘without passport’, as one among various interpretations of the acronym) - see also in “The Proposition”, *OCP* 123 - handed down in the popular imaginary as a defamatory label for citizens of Italian origin²²² (“Street fights suggest the language of the people \ Loud and monosyllabic” - 36, 45). It is not by accident that the allusion to a ‘missing’ passport is added to the name of “servant” and weighed against terms

²²² Frank Paci’s novels relate this labelling behaviour in the Canadian context of the last fifty years, showing it as an active characteristic of inter-cultural relations in North America.

of “escape”, “salvation” and “new master”. Another significant resonance links the contemporary immigrant with the historical indentured workers from Italy (in our own *Gastarbeiter* system) who were denied citizenship status and were basically reduced to a status of slavery within the Canadian space. Nor should we forget, at this point, the internment issue - whatever the political affiliations - as represented, for example, in Bruno Ramirez and Paul Tana’s docu-drama *Café Italia* (1985).

This minimalist poem (concentrating an ‘essence’ of (non)being in a style echoing that of Ungaretti) deploys the force of these terms against each other in an almost futile exercise as the overkill mode of globalization, with post-modernism as its accessory, effectively sends all meanings toward their de-culturalized state. The de-humanized system of domination paradoxically seeks loyalty from its subjects through their emotive faculties, in a relationship that is peculiarly deficient in human reciprocity; the co-opting of subjective emotions is crucial for the maintenance of this system, while the antagonist subjective spirit moves into an ‘underground’ mode of resistance, as depicted in the paratextualized element of the following composition (40, 49):

The queen offers presents to her staff
 She is in need of their love
 (Yet another service to be rendered)
Thank yous flow through the air like paper missiles

 And then one day
 the queen learns her presents
 have been sold for a song*
The revelation (of not being loved?) ages her in an instant

*Its title: "Never Underestimate the Power of the Victim"

The 'death' of *eros* occurs through the incorporation of the subject into a system of non-being, represented through the technological aspects of globalization (its only tangible attribute) (48, 58):

As expected the slaughter took place at the office
The bureaucrats in charge of the clean-up operation
are efficient

The corpses of creative spirits
look more than ever ridiculous
Their deaths justified

The computers responsible
rest next to the cacti (Christmas presents)
Nothing is out of place

The office queen herself attends to the victims
Dresses them up
No one can tell which of her employees was hit

We all wear the same uniform
Have the same habits Jokes
Counterfeit smiles fly about

Survivors race against each other
Running someone down:
the top prize

My Speed & Accuracy guarantees me a place
in the sacred book of records:
the payroll.

Globalization creates a conformist atmosphere which, paradoxically, sublimates all sincerity into the realm of hypocrisy ("Counterfeit smiles"). The WASPish nature of the globalized dominant system requires this 'polite', 'smiling' falsity

as a screen for the exploitation and destruction occurring at the subjective level. In the meantime, the subject is co-opted into a competitive existence which impedes the sustenance of her relationships with the Other - instead, subjects are expected to 'run each other down' in the race toward their slave existence in the system. The choices are obvious: conform through the work system or through the welfare system, either way the self is engulfed in and by the contractual relationship (51, 61):

The woman carries a bouquet of invisible flowers
 Thrown out of work, she throws herself

 into the arms of her childhood sweetheart,
the Government itself, the sought after invisible husband

The two mate and thereafter the woman is nowhere to be seen
 A ghetto princess

 She never complains though
There would be no point

 Someone takes a picture of her family
A woman she doesn't recognize appears in her place

Either way, she is silenced (*ergo* dead), outside of an image of culture. Eventually the voice struggles to perceive her reality as something immediate, and present (rather than something in the future). The repetition of "Never you mind" - repeated nine times in (poem) 69 : which itself connotes a meta-compounding of the mystical number 3²²³ for a spell-binding, or -breaking effect (85-86) - alludes to something, i.e. "Revenge", in the imaginary future. The reiteration of the conditional phrase "I would rather..." seems to indicate a forced withdrawal into the self, so that the articulation of the desire remains a non-

²²³ The use of the number 3 as a mystical number, and of its multiples for amplification, is a recognized device of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and it is particularly evident in the warning sign quoted earlier, which is presented in the **ninth** line of the **third** canto of the *Inferno*.

emancipatory act. The relevance of this poem in terms of the self-in-culture identifies a resolute search for the self-in-culture and for identity: a struggle which has forcibly retreated into a dream of retribution - and identifying in the discursive process an undeclared state of war between subject and system. The first poem in *ABTA*, "La Demi-Vierge" (9) sustains this notion: "You're an inconspicuous hand grenade \ (with a life span of 'who knows?')\ made to order for an inconspicuous / conspicuous \ computerized war (process)."

3.18 Encounters with language: un-setting standards and limits

The poetic cynicism intercepts the English language to show how language is (re)formulated for misrepresentation. The above quotation from the poem "La Demi-Vierge" manifests a "(process)" at work which is practically internalized in the everyday existence: "(What nuclear energy predestined (too)? \ You wonder. You worry.)" The bride's ensuing sense of a loss of ideals implicates a collective (male) entity ("The Dart Game", 29):

The bride puts up a picture of a once sacred man
on her wall.
She draws circles around his head, not a nimbus, mind
you, but circles.

Target practice.

The dart game has nothing to do with religion as such.
It is a symbol for all she once thought sacred
and which she had to abandon, lose,
in the process of aging in the twentieth century.

Till-death-do-you-part is a lost faith.

...

The loss encloses her, the way a cage encloses any animal.

She is trapped in it. It won't permit her to walk out
of her loss the way she can walk out of a bathroom.

Often, she hits herself against the bars of her cage: loss.
If the bars were to be impaled into the very core of her
being
she'd end up on a hospital table. She'd receive
electric shocks
which would destroy a number of her brain cells
(that's how the system works)
after which she'd function again. A dog trainer
before and after.
Mercy killing in the reverse...

Limitations set by the senses of loss of "illusions" and of "lost faith in death-do-you-part" (30)- which contains an irony of interpretation as lost faith in permanence or, as an actual desire for the death of the union. The imagery of the "cage" and of the "trap" would seem to support the latter interpretation of irony; by a powerful sense of "guilt" deriving from a love-hate relationship instinctively being fought out *within* the boundaries of the poetic voice ("The Match", 27-28); by a sense of lovers-and-strangers bound by the compromise of "love" in "marriage" ("Familiarity Breeds Contempt", 31); by inexpressible compromises deriving from fear and "loneliness" ("Book II, Chapter I", 32-33 and "On Cue", 38). The "space" of "memory" is likewise made finite as it loses its "meaning in life" (in "Grandma's Missing", 40-41) so that the "space" of "memory" itself "is like a friend who becomes a traitor", "is like a world war...", and in the end, "memory...has to come down". "Memory" is felt as a detrimental element in the space of the Other, so that it must be segregated to a non-threatening, and hence, unknowable sense of personal history.

A contrastive, ideal 'reality' is juxtaposed to the voided history, in the form of "The Rose" (42-43), as a conspicuous symbol of Shakespeare's language,

and of the process of anglicization taking place in colonized territories (by traditional colonizing processes and by those of globalization). The following cited poem is to be read in this particular context of language:

The rose, prim and proper, a gift on the table,

...

The rose is ready to pounce on the bride.
Is ready to punch her in the face with its beauty.
It hurts; its color hurts her
because it is better than the color of her skin.

Sacred, that's it. The rose is sacred.

The rose, the focal point, the axis, the center of the
world,
the savior, the foreshadowing of the messiah, the
messiah,
the satellite fixed in space, watches, spies on the bride,
records her behavior towards her guests.
The rose is one of the eyes of God.

The rose tells its own story of creation;
a prehistoric backdrop, the heavenly rose: a stained-glass
window.

The rose is a crystal ball
(serious and profound at its worst).
The bride wants the future she sees in it.
Serenity. Its ridiculous sense of serenity. Its extravagance.
She wants it. Damn it. She insists:
the rose is my slave; pitiless.

The rose is a key to escape.

...

Turn off the light, thus thinks the bride,
let's pretend the rose is the light to see by.
In the light of the rose we are all brothers and
sisters;
a family, familial by the rose. (Incest is OK.)

.

..

The rose is a creature with a magnificent brain,
a brain whose dullness protects it against everything

(n)everlasting.

...

The seemingly powerful desire for “the rose” is juxtaposed with the cynicism of the poetic language which seeks to undermine it, for example, in an ‘insistence’, or an appeal for overthrowing the power of the English language (the “rose”), and enslaving it instead through the poetic activity while a syntactical division interrupts the articulation of desire with a double, or opposite, standard of meanings: “She wants it. Damn it.” Were this rephrased with a different use of punctuation, that is, with a comma instead of a period so as to say ‘she wants it, damn it’, then the desirableness of the object would be made evident. But the function of the period is to isolate the two phrases so as to present something that is made to be desired “She wants it.” - and then immediately refuted: “Damn it.” This is an explicit contradiction to the previous phrase, so that it not only neutralizes the preceding articulation of desire, but most importantly, it reveals its imposition in the subject’s reality. Moreover, the last quoted verse contains the conspicuous irony of the word “(n)everlasting” in reference to everything that stands outside the alleged ‘protection’ of the “rose”, thereby implying the destruction of the Other, outside object which retains only its appearance. In the context of this chapter, the term “(n)everlasting” is applied against the concept of the contract, to show the irony of its existence in spite of the perceived impossibility of its duration.

This usage of antithetical language strategies sustains the irony which can be reassembled with other, simpler articulations, such as in “Gossip” (44-46), which deals with language in its varied forms, for example in these following verses: “Silence is a textbook in any foreign tongue.”... “Words can

infect or disinfect. \ War with words: war dances.” - and in the sarcastic irony of “Let’s pour out our secrets like carbon monoxide. \ Trade is what makes North America so great, old pal!”²²⁴ Evidently, as language is rendered toxic, the cynical use of the word “Trade” reveals a viewpoint speaking from subalternity, so that the referent toxicity of language is aimed at the speaker of a language that is considered substandard to the dominating one. The last poem of *ABTA*, “Act One” (93-95) shows the replacement of language with the metaphorical meanings of the “smile” which contains and simultaneously empties out language itself. “Smiles, a bucket full of exclamation marks and commas, \ Smiles, the translation of an archaic language: English. \ ...The smile resembles a woman cleansed of all mean thoughts.” As self-cannibalizing language, the “smile” becomes a forceful tool that “cuts out hunger, anxiety, anger, hatred, greed \ (temporarily).\ ... The smile is out to make one forget the meaning of life.” The poetic language brings up intermittent images of the same i.e., the “everlasting” (*cfr.* “(n)everlasting”), this time followed by a mocking attribute so as not to lose the inherent thread of cynicism: “The smile advertises life everlasting. Ho ho ho.” The final lines of this poem produce their own catch-y images: “To smile is to give civilization its obligatory dowry. \ \ One smiles like a cat licks its tail; \ it makes for a good pet.” The allusion to the silent smile in reference to “civilization” is a self-contradictory notion since the “civilization” that we know cannot exist without language and thus being silenced signifies an impossible subjective engagement with this (singularized) “civilization”. Hence language represents a boundary line, not only in terms of its presence or absence, but also in terms of its expression, and particularly in terms of the presence or absence of linguistic accents which betray all speakers. The final

²²⁴ These verses bring to mind Todorov’s “*La conquête de l’Amérique*” and the problematical discourse of reciprocity between cultures.

image of the “good pet” licking its own tail points to a certain infinity i.e. the image of the serpent biting its own tail, and problematizes a de-civilizing process wherein the original meaning and purpose of the cultural tongue is disengaged from the reality of its owner and degraded toward de-humanized purposes or activities.

In *Office Politics*, meaning and language become signified in the digitalized environment of the corporation, and speech (the vernacular) disappears inside the “computer jungle [which] is full of signs” (1, 5), even the worker’s name is reduced to an insignificant “sign” in relation to that of its superior (34, 43):

I sign my name on office forms all the time
Nothing much happens

Too bad embezzlement is reserved for employees
with gold-embossed name plates

Instead, the surroundings of this modern “city” - the over-signifying “company”-
speak a new semiology, as told in Poem number 60 (74-65):

The city has so many walls,
 obstacle paths,
 glass ceilings,
they make the former Berlin Wall
 (or the long-standing Great Wall of China)
look like a graffiti board

 They’re everywhere around me
Walls: reminders of how things are
 for those who aren’t rich
for those who don’t belong
 to government-approved families
Appearance(s), titles, pet pedigrees count for a hell of a lot

in the Walled Capital of the World
They have to
They're a new nation's building blocks

Without money in my pocket,
without a *chapeau* on my head,
without a job,
without a knife for comfort,
without identity

I go from one wall to another
Beg for mercy
(Or is it attention I'm after?)
The walls in this city
offer nothing
(for free)

Hate literature
comes packaged in many different forms
Sometimes it's written onto an unemployment insurance check
but most of the time
the writing is on the wall
In this city
the illiterate can get the message too
Our walls speak (in tongues)

The walls of my house use standard English
"You are not welcome here," they tell me
"Rent due"
No matter how hard I try
I can't shut any of the walls up
Can you?

The term "Walled Capital of the World" exposes globalized Capitalism as a dehumanizing and alienating factor that seeks to turn human activity into signifier and non-signifier, by dividing the population into "the rich"- those who accede to the higher echelons - and 'the rest', who are "not welcome here". The resistance factor which had so far found its voice i.e., on the "graffiti board", is de-signified by the force of Capitalism which effectively silences all voices through its ubiquitous presence. Moreover, for the subject who does not

concede to an existence within the “walls” of the system, or who does not speak its signifying language, is denied “identity”. In other words, globalized Capitalism appropriates “sign” values through its encroachment over the concept of “nation” and of subjective creativity: “Appearance(s), titles, pet pedigrees count for a hell of a lot \ ...They’re a new nation’s building blocks”.²²⁵ In addition, “standard English” is the language of appropriation and of expropriation, so that the ‘rest’ is “not welcome here”. The poetic voice thus represents the concept of the multicultural nation - in other words, the ‘rest’ - as a voiceless²²⁶ anti-reality against the overwhelming reality of the “English” speaking leviathan.²²⁷ The limitations dictated by this monolithic entity draw a clean dividing line between the haves and the have-nots: those who have “titles” and “pet pedigrees”, or the rightful English extraction, vis-à-vis the ‘rest’ who are basically relegated to a generalized “WOP” status (which would appear to include even the *pure laine*) and worse, to a third-world status.

The lines “The walls in this city \ offer nothing \ (for free)” reveal a Faustian contract which becomes apparent through the irony of the ‘voice’ between the “walls” of the parenthetical space. The situation creates a Capitalistic ghetto which also generates a deterministic existence, “the writing is on the wall”, so that this cliché simultaneously ‘erases’, or displaces the “graffiti” of resistance, replacing it with new signifiers of “Hate literature” - in a semiology

²²⁵ The chosen wording of “building blocks” in the context of “the nation” bears an reasonable allusion to the Parliament buildings in Ottawa, which are divided into ‘blocks’ i.e., East Block, West Block, Central Block. In another vein, the relation of this term to the overtaking of the English language and ‘culture’ might also foreground a derogatory term of “blockhead” - *tête carrée* - used to refer to Anglophones by other, suppressed cultures, and particularly by the French Canadian culture.

²²⁶ Again we should mention Marco Micone’s play *Les gens du silence* translated by the author as *Voiceless People*.

²²⁷ Two critical works can be consulted in relevance with this discussion: Fredy Perlman’s *Against His-story Against Leviathan* (1983) and Zygmunt Bauman’s *Society Under Siege* (2002)

shared by the poor and the “illiterate”. Moreover, acceptance and admission into the dominant culture is presented as a sort of atonement for the ‘outsider’ - including immigrants and refugees - who is otherwise made to internalize a sense of perpetual indebtedness toward the colossus i.e., through the collection of the “unemployment insurance check” or any other form of support for basic subsistence. In other words, while the language of corporate culture is centralized within the English language, the language of poverty is capable of overcoming linguistic barriers while it is simultaneously made to experience its exclusion to the fullest. The term “standard English” corresponds to the problematics of “standard Italian”, that is, as a language that is imposed over the vernacular speech, hence un-accented and un-dialectical, and represented as the following sign:

language
speech

3.19 Mechanics of relationships, mechanisms of dialogue

Significantly, *ABTA* is presented in the form of a monologue, thus absent of the dialogue which is a fundamental aspect of the dramatic genre (although the modern, and particularly the post-modern drama, admit the monologue genre). The reader has no other option but to follow the ‘action’ of the representation through the personal impressions of the protagonist voice. Within this viewpoint, the relational space between the bride’s subjectivity and her Other is the focus area for development of the relationship in the drama. Certain problematics will arise from the fact that there is no definite rationality possible in a realistic “I and Thou” relationship (Buber), because every aspect of

its reality can be disputed by its opposite and any attempt to rationalize the human relationship will only end in a distorted and distant view of the situation. The text is a work made up of words that indicate thoughts and impressions, and not dialogue per se, or at least, no direct dialogue with the Other: there is no real exchange of speech, and there are no stage directions. Yet the thought-process of the protagonist voice can be considered as a realistic development of an internalized dialectical crisis. The first clue into the deficient dialectical space is present in the first poem "La Demi-Vierge" (9-10) with the lines:

You're an inconspicuous hand grenade
(with a life span of 'who knows?')
made to order for an inconspicuous \ conspicuous
computerized war (process)."

These lines, which have already been discussed under previous topics, perhaps gain a fuller impact in the question of dialectical potential, especially for the element of "war" which was brought to the foreground in the earlier analysis. This poem also establishes the "trust" factor, or lack thereof, in reference to "the groom" in the lines: "you don't trust his mechanical know-how \ will change (exchange) you destiny." In the discussion of dialectical potential within the relationship, these two factors of "war (process)" and lack of "trust" signal a critical sub-text of cynical irony that continuously instructs the reading of the text. Indeed, the poems emphasize the asymmetry of the relationship through such self-reflexive terms as: "a missing person" ("On File", 13); "Paralyzed", "caged", "lost in the barrens", "Gang raped", "Struck numb" ("Act Three", 14-15), and the list goes on. Some of these terms obviously correlate with the discourse of the female body in terms of the "difficult(ies)" of "pregnancy", yet Melfi's poetry cannot be evaluated on such simple, superficial

levels.

In any dialogue, at least two interlocutors must be present, yet the protagonist voice presents herself and her Other through their conspicuous absences: "You can't find the groom" ("Act Three", 15); "The groom is off exploring... dead to all concerned" ("Mercy Killing", 16). "Failure" is expressed as a normative element in the relationship, along with a thematic trilogy of "love", "hate" and "guilt" ("The Match", 27-28) that spill into the conflictual space of encounter. The textual discourse establishes a procreational motive that can only be achieved through a successful 'dialectical' encounter, yet the poetic text betrays this impossibility. This poem also expresses a concern about the grounds upon which the couple may meet, as in the lines: "The instinct to think in the future tense \ makes the bride and groom careful when they fight." This would indicate a rather fragile aspect of the relationship which demands a certain rational approach to their problem, but the reiteration of affective disturbances also present an impediment to open dialectics; the sense of "guilt" is particularly obstructive since it focalizes attention on a single point. Moreover, the aesthetics of marital love are set against a "hate" that is repressed since it does not fit into a concept of what is "fitting" or "logical": "Love fits like a jewel but hate fits like a saw \ which means hate isn't fitting, or logical." (28). On the other hand, expressions conveying the bride's need to "rationalize" things ("The Ugly Guest 1", 54) are offset by the formal composition of the text which, as mentioned above, presents a somewhat illogical, and thus more realistic, sequence of the thinking process.

But the discussion of a dialectical process cannot ignore the ironic quality

of the recurrent image of “the smile” which culminates into a quasi obsessive repetition of the word - 56 times - in the last poem of the text, “Act One” (93-96) reproduced here in its entirety (with my emphasis) :

The smile is a **cathedral**,
renovated to fit the twentieth century.
The smile is an acrobat,
ready to please the twentieth century: **awkward sneer**.
The smile is a **giant octopus** in an aquarium,
indifferent to the smiles of school children.
The smile is a Japanese **formal** garden.
The smile is a **fortress**.
The smile is a toddler in the arms of an old person.
The smile is a **galaxy of brides**.
The smile is a world fair
seen through the eyes of a **prisoner** on parole.
The smile is a **symbol** for all that is **right** with the world.
The smile is the best of all possible **habitats**
earned by hard work.

The smile, a **pastoral setting**.
The smile, the Milky Way on a dull photograph.
The smile, an oxygen tank.
The smile, the beauty and the beast after falling in love.
The smile, a lottery ticket.
The smile, the **prize** and the **standard** of living.
The smile, a fistful of sunlight and a fistful of hope,
hocus-pocus.

Smiles, the cornerstone of **civilization**.
Smiles, the lace tablecloth, **expensive**, on an old table.
Smiles, archangels dancing on the head of a safety pin:
the earth.
Smiles, envelopes enveloping good things.
Smiles, cargo boats.
Smiles, a bucket full of exclamation marks and commas.
Smiles, the translation of an **archaic language: English**.
Smiles, a picture book, a diary of **better dreams**.

Smiles, the **bride** and the cathedral; the **groom**
and the office building.
Guests smile. Radio news, TV news, newspapers smile
and **say nothing at all**. Thank heaven.

The sky smiles, helped by a kite.
The sun smiles without any help.
The wind's smile is contagious like a drummer boy's.
The rapids rapidly smiled on a **coureur de [sic] bois** and his
canoe some time ago.
The heat smiles and the **potato harvest**
takes a while to smile back
but it smiles back **in due time**.

The smile resembles a woman **cleansed** of all **mean
thoughts**.

The smile resembles the shape of vaginas and penises:
vertical and horizontal at the same time: shapes without
boundaries.

South East North West all smiling at the same time.

The smile resembles a duet.

The smile resembles a man wild and hungry
to hurt no one.

The smile cuts out hunger, anxiety, anger, hatred, greed
(**temporarily**).

The smile cuts down one's ridiculous **perception**
of a ridiculous world.

The smile hunts down death wishes and dumps them
off the Arctic coast: ice food.

The smile is out to rediscover the meaning of life.

The smile is out to make one **forget** the **meaning of life**.

The smile is nutritious.

The smile advertises **life everlasting**. **Ho ho ho**.

The smile insists on an honest bride and groom
who need not smile in bad times.

An honest smile is a blessing, the second **shower**
of the day

(before **words** come and change everything
for better or for worse).

An honest smile makes atomic waste
look like the mess in one's bedroom closet.

To smile is not simply a **challenge**, but an instinct.

To smile is to **decorate** one's life
with the **search for happiness**.

To smile is to give civilization its **obligatory dowry**.

One smiles like a cat licks its tail;

it makes for a **good pet**.

An ironic charge is emitted from particular words or phrases throughout this poem to challenge the general sense of satisfaction conveyed by the idea of the “smile”. The emphasized terms point out a critical betrayal of language in juxtaposition with the masking properties of the “smile”. The first stanza establishes the “smile” as a symbolic and aesthetic space of containment for the fantasized appearances of being itemized in the second stanza. The third stanza shows semantic variations for charging the “smile” with a vital function. However, the first line of the fourth stanza locates the “bride” and the “groom” in their separate “habitats”: while she situates her being within the “cathedral”, he is linked with the “office building”. In other words, the representational sphere of the male spouse is the pragmatic and official, or ruling, bureaucracy while the female spouse is represented within a controlled metaphysical space - hence, without physical presence. This same stanza also reveals that “smiles” “say nothing at all”; the ironical addendum “Thank heaven” betrays the fraudulent quality of the “smile” in its function of concealment - significantly for a society that seeks to preserve its peace keeping image. References to the “coureur de[s] bois” and the suspended “potato harvest” tell of (French) settlers and (Irish) immigrants whose times came...and went: in other words, it appears that the building of the nation was considered to be complete by the beginning decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, the Canadian imaginary needs to be constantly reminded of its own immigrant roots in regards to its often negative attitude toward the continuing influx of immigrants. The “smile” is a mask at a masquerade: it masks (or protects) the self within its own disguised surroundings. In this sense, the “smile” is domesticated into a habitual, and hence meaningless, gesture. Ultimately, all that remains is the “smile” as the

mask which marks the beginning and the end of the self, and the obliteration of all other expressions of the self. In this constrained space, an authentic dialogue cannot occur.

Office Politics unmask the mask by foregrounding the hierarchical systems at work in the globalized society, so that dis-communication between the levels of hierarchy brings out a class-consciousness through techniques of reiteration of juxtapositional terms and images between the machine and human feelings: images of death, in varied metaphorical concepts and against expressions of rescue and life; of the “rich” against the worker (“poverty”); and of language and signs against silence and dreaming. As human life is technologized, the potential of communication is appropriated by the machine. Poem number 8 (14-15) illustrates these points:

My bosses speak one **language**,
and I **another**

I turn around and there is another
vice-president of **(in)human** resources,
another **magistrate**,
another **rich** person
fanning himself with his stocks and bonds

Hate has its own **grammar and syntax**

I **dream** about guns,
making a **statement**,
erasing **words**,
bad **thoughts**
I dream about **dreaming** in a **new language**: joy

No one listens when I speak
Someone calls it the **language of complaint**
Better to **say nothing**
The assembly line feeds on **silence**,

**complicity,
Obedience**

What luck
I work in **telecommunications**
We turn **words** into electronic impulses
(Dis)information is offered at cut-rate prices

My fellow **wordsmiths** open their mouths
and someone makes a profit
The background **noises** drum out what they say
They make love with their machines
and leave me **out**

My husband though is always ready
to demand a kiss
My children do the same
Love is a **service industry**
No words need be **exchanged**
My lips are **sealed**

Smiles do not say much either
Smiles are a lazy man's answer to **fraud**
Body language: con-artistry
So there
the **underdog** doesn't have a **language** to call her own

If only God could come and **speak through me**
I would be protected
No more **war** of words,
language **police**, language **borders**
No more **self-betrays**
Coffin ships

I **dream** about **breaking into** the global village;
cutting its wires with my fangs
I dream about **poetic justice**
I **imagine** myself waking up one morning and **speaking**
in binary **code**
I dream I am you
The leader of the pack

"Ms **Rosetta Stone**
will you hurry and come in here please
Give us a **clue** to what is going on

Bring out another company **manual** this time tomorrow!
Give us **meaning** The last **word** or else
You're **history**"

While the poem "Act One" from *ABTA* related the "smile" in metaphorical expressions of a final, pseudo contentment, this poem (again with my emphasis) is loud and clear in regards to the problems of communication. The poetry unveils a conspiracy at work, spilling outside of the discursive workplace per se, and taking over both private and public spheres of subjectivity. The poem exposes its analogous nemesis as a pre-established cultural sect that seeks to maintain its 'majority' status in the literary and/or information industry by demanding the unrealistic -in terms of the changing demographical landscape - , and undisturbed continuation of the same. Segregational practices in this field are frequently rendered obvious i.e., in Canadian newspaper articles and other critical commentary in the literary field,²²⁸ yet these seem to be ignored. The encroachment of a globalizing language implies a crisis situation and the effectual muting of Other voices through a flattening process of Canadian idiomatic, and dialectic, representation. As this question is seldom addressed in the public sphere, it remains buried or disguised in analogical representations of power relationships. Displaced artists who work with and in language lack certain advantages of getting their work known if only because they are primarily subjected to the Capitalistic demands of the publishing industry. Immanuel Wallerstein, in *Historical Capitalism and Capitalist Civilization*, points out the Capitalist construction of ethnicity as a tool

²²⁸ References to articles in the National Post (most often by financial writer Diane Francis), and published interviews with Margaret Atwood, have already been mentioned in this dissertation to demonstrate the continuing practice of, it must be said, racism against the voices and the presence of immigrants. Moreover, there is a serious problem of misrepresentation in the publishing industry which, except for very few publishing houses in Canada (such as Guernica and a minimal number of French publishers), mainly represents a WASP writing population in one major language of publication: English - with its publishing industry based in Toronto.

for more profit, or in Melfi's words, "Hate has its own grammar and syntax".

Moreover, the displaced artist who writes in the English language (or even in French, in Québec) may already feel the compromise of misrepresentation of the self - since the language of the Other cannot completely represent the cultural reality of its own Other - as well as a risk of misinterpretation by its readership. This process results in a collapse of the hermeneutic circle, and worse, it can perpetuate distorted representations. In addition, the writer who relates a reality which transcends the boundaries of a putatively established linguistic Canadianness - be it French in Québec, or English in the rest of Canada - risks falling through the cracks by virtue of this hermeneutic deficiency. "No one listens when I speak \ Someone calls it the language of complaint". Anxiety, frustration and even anger regarding the status quo is not uncommon in the writing of culturally displaced critical artists as their works effectively become 'displaced' into hermeneutic oblivion.

The industry demands "complicity" and "Obedience" (the capitalized word is adequate in this analysis as it correlates to the previous discussions of obedience) for 'success' - as the ensuing "(Dis)information" rewrites the system of exchange for the 'masses'. The displaced literature that maintains a sense of cultural integrity ("No more self-betrayals") also risks becoming an onanistic experience, a displaced and/or alienated erotic to be consumed among the so-called cultural community which is itself being eroded by the interpretive "binary code" of the "global village". The "silence" that paradoxically defines the "underdog" writer is epitomized by the "Coffin ships" that contain the "language" of the self as Other. The lines "I dream I am you \ The leader of the pack \ \ "Ms

Rosetta Stone...” make a pointed “statement” about Margaret Atwood’s dictatorial supremacy in the direction of what is generally acknowledged as the (‘rat pack’ of the) Canadian canon. (A look at anthologies of Canadian writing which are regularly *officialized* by Atwood prevalently and obviously *authenticate* a tight circle of essentially WASP writers, with a token representation of very few, recognized ‘immigrant’ writers such as Ondaatje.) With this background information in mind, the last lines of this poem are charged with a forewarning: “Give us meaning The last word or else \ You’re history”. The implication of these words brings up a dual problem: one being the right to the maintenance of cultural integrity (in the ‘canon’ as well as in the writer), and the other homonymously suggesting the demise of authenticity in the representation of Canadian writing: ‘your history’ ? <=> “You’re history”.

The references to the “language police, language borders” refer to the two-sided guarding operation by both official languages of Canada. These are analyzed in the realistic context of a writer of Italian origins, writing in English in an officially French province. In these terms, Melfi demonstrates the problematics of writing as a third element between two Other literatures (*cfr.* Hugh McLennan’s *Two Solitudes*) - a situation that can compound the condition of displacement as well as jeopardize the Canadian literary potential (48, 58):

As expected the slaughter took place at the office
 The bureaucrats in charge of the clean-up operation
 are efficient

The corpses of creative spirits
 look more than ever ridiculous
 Their deaths justified

The computers responsible

rest next to the cacti (Christmas presents)
Nothing is out of place

The office queen herself attends to the victims
Dresses them up
No one can tell which of her employees was hit

We all wear the same uniform
Have the same habits Jokes
Counterfeit smiles fly about

Survivors race against each other
Running someone down:
the top prize

My Speed & Accuracy guarantees me a place
in the sacred book of records:
the payroll

Keeping in mind that “Survival” is the title of a principal Canadian anthological work edited by Atwood, the rest of this poem displays more clearly the requirements of a writer who must demonstrate the necessary skills (i.e. “Speed & Accuracy” symbolizes a *standard* of performance) to ‘make it’ into the “sacred book” - the canon - that would secure success and a potential future for the writer while simultaneously allowing a voice to Canadian diversity through cultural and critical expressions, and at the same time dismantling a cultural notion of “Survivors” *against* an Other as the term clearly implies: survival is always an antagonistic activity whether it illustrates a struggle against elements of nature or against a human ‘enemy’.

Melfi uses frameworks of non-identity for a critique of in(corporate)d culture and the displacement of self-identity through globalizing practices which seek to empty out identity and language. Moreover, this voiding practice at the end of the twentieth century reflects a precarious situation which is developing

and gaining strength in Canadian universities that are reducing their 'foreign' language and literature programmes, as well as comparative literary studies programmes - a discipline which fundamentally promotes critical thought - , so that a common ground for cultural dialectics is pulled away from under our feet. This paranoid-like administrative methodology could be compared to "guerrilla" warfare for their practices of sporadic and individual strikes so as to impede a general resistance movement against the dominating cultural minority. In this interpretive context, the irony of poem number 69 (85-86) gains a new clarity:

Never you mind
 guerrillas are picnicking:
eating cheese, drinking wine right this moment
 Never you mind
food is not on their mind
 Revenge is
 Never you mind
Allow me to attend to my garden chores
 and gain the attention
 of what may become prize winners
 Never you mind
roses obey their internal mechanisms,
 their genetic dispositions:
 beauty at all costs
They sign their autographs on any human iris
 They don't discriminate
 Never you mind
there is more to the guerrillas than meets the eye
 They're church-goers, fathers, mothers, plant lovers -
forced to do the only honorable thing:
 execute orders - justice for all
 Never you mind
 I would rather read manuals
on how to uproot old roots
 than read revolutionary tracts
 I would rather watch my roses speak up
than watch the evening news
 Guerrillas don't have much to say
They're tongue-tied (Bombs speak for them)
 Never you mind

Roses die with dignity, you and I don't
It's easier to find God in a garden than on a battlefield
Never you mind
only the rich can afford to garden (or forgive)
If I were to give mine away
would it ensure world peace?
Never you mind

Hence the corporate culture of Globalization is the extension of the colonializing 'empire' in the sense that colonialism and post-colonialism have effectively prepared the grounds for the appropriation of subjectivity through a delusory conferral of existential 'choices' and free agency: "Nightmares take the trouble to trouble me, \ surprising me, reassuring me that compared \ \ to getting punched in the eye \ punching a time clock is a dream come true" (70, 87).

"Have a nice day someone orders"
(85, 102)

Dialectical potential is severely reduced when language becomes a reflex action rather than communication and real understanding. The integrity of the self is seriously compromised as restricted options are considered (86, 103-104):

Business lunch
I browse through the menu
Find a drink with my name on it

My boss' fangs have been professionally
painted and polished
"Do you want it?" she asks

The waiter nods in approval
A reflex action
It doesn't say much

"Do you want it?" my boss repeats
Smiling: no door will be closed to you

No more glass ceilings; language barriers'

"There will be a pay increase,
of course," she adds,
taking a sip of her bloody Mary

"I want it,"
I assure the woman,
watching myself change color

My new clothes, my new skin -
my badge of courage - will serve me well
No more fat farms

"I could use a promotion," I tell her,
my head bent; a lady-in-waiting
ready to eat of her true self

The waiter is taken by surprise
His training said nothing
about colored underlings' chameleon abilities

to match their surroundings
when (well-) treated
to lunch

On the menu: dessert: angel cake: edible hierarchies
Invisibility can't be so bad
Why look at God

The expressed urge to belong, or to "match one's surroundings", in this poem directly correlates with the poem "Camouflage" in the *OCP* (127) reproduced here:

The Statue of Liberty
beckons Maria to follow her lead
and have her face re-done,

but her native-born plastic surgeon
insists it is highly un-ethical
for immigrants to **match their natural surroundings**
(that trick is reserved for the frogs).
[my emphasis]

In the time between these two publications, that is, between 1986 (*OCP*) and 1999 (*OP*), it appears that the “immigrant” has been co-opted into the dominating discourse of globalized Capitalism through a rhetoric of Success based on a notion of ‘making the team’. The betrayal of the self, be it through the adoption of an Other language or of an Other form of behaviour, speaks of the far-reaching and totalizing effects, that is on the private and public self, of assimilation required by the strategies of a new order. Strategies of conformity and uniformity translate into the impossibility of a dialectics of resistance, in addition to reformulating, or rather eradicating, any possible sense of collective memory. However, the apperception of the absurdity of this situation, “inside the insane asylum” (87, 105) remains in the critical consciousness (90, 109-110, my emphasis):

Silence covers the city

Clerks, crybabies, old cronies go about
unheard, unsung, unattended to

Classified ads howl for attention: love me to-(K)night

Charity is disseminated through junk mail
Choices: mercy or weapons

Anything to exist
Cash registers register the significance of some
Guns, for others

Possibilities for enchantment are limited
Prayer is a lost art

Self-expression is difficult too
when you’re afraid death is showing up on
the hem of your thoughts and God is lurking elsewhere

Does **survival** have a quiet thrill to it and why?

Temporary flashes of enlightenment sweeten the atmosphere
So do trees, instant companions
Under their protection the insensitive are dismissed

Park benches are full of sweethearts
with good tidings in their mouths Do not disturb

Come charm me, transient citizen of this cosmos,
my partner in alienation, blood relative
Good to be here with you
where the blackberry bushes thrive on being depleted

Harvest me too
Pick me out and cover me with your words

Cover me with your **Judas kiss**
but cover me with acknowledgement

The sin of non-existence blossoms in my grandfather's
grave
Take no note of it and do not rebuke me for bringing it up

I need the sky
I need to see it cradle the sun
And sometimes I too need to be cradled

Listen a queen (mother?) is laughing
somewhere right this moment
So can, so should, so will I

The fear of "non-existence" in the displaced environment motivates the
subjectivity to declare her cultural self at the same time that she recognizes her
slippage into the lifeworld of the Other. The fact that the protagonist voice
recognizes and verbalizes - and thus attempts to document - this process
situates her in the antagonistic field of a critical avant-garde.

Flowers play by the rules
but victims of high expectations
know better than to wait to be cut down

They uproot themselves
Huddle together and complain
about celestial (im)probabilities

Needing, wanting, pleading
Obedient/disobedient
Looting/bootlicking

Whatever it takes
to walk out of the office
and blossom elsewhere
(91, 111)

So that this poem recovers a determined irony of resistance while
simultaneously lamenting the extent of the breach and the consequential
passing of the cultural community into non-critical and non-dialectical
discourses of loss.

CONCLUSION

Ironies Unbound

The above analyses have determined that the literary text exercises the capacity to move across territorial positions of power through the instrument of irony. Melfi's narratives are played out on territories that are never clearly defined because the irony consistently leads the critical gaze toward the deficient liberal rationalism of actual divisive strategies of containment and exclusion. The device of irony allows the artistic voice to assume the authority of the detective to step over the various boundaries in order to investigate all possible 'sides of the story', and to ultimately report the process that has led to the alleged violation of an (unspoken) agreement. Similarly, the ironic thread of the narratives easily displaces itself onto the dominant territory, and it confronts this territory with a transgressive dialogism which extends the mobility of subversion between the dominant voices and the voices of subalternity. In this sense, subversion becomes an extension of the consciousness of the disallowed subject who senses the oppression of bureaucratic structures that are motivated towards a paradoxical discourse of globalized Multiculturalism - since this globalizing strategy, in its capacity to disregard boundaries, inhabits a mode of ubiquity. Hence, the multiplied voice of irony assumes this ubiquitous mode in the artistic text to defamiliarize accepted meanings of language in a multicultural context and to foreground the discrepancies at the level of subjectivity.

As the subject moves through the various sign systems of particular

social and cultural lifeworlds, she becomes displaced into and for the production of signs in that new territory. This means that the subject virtually undergoes her transformation into a manageable or domesticated sign, i.e. through stereotypization, so that a status quo is maintained in the dominant hegemony. The artistic text in turn displaces these tactical generic sign representations in order to look at the relations between the signifiers and the signifieds, thus extracting the modes of power relations that define the socio-political space of the so-called multicultural state - in the broader sense of the term 'state', signifying 'stasis' as well as 'power'. The poetic act does not simply represent a form of society: rather, the representation of being in that society is made visible through the multiple discursivity of the ironic voice. The strategic resistance does not so much rest in the simple refusal of meaning or of the words since their value as heuristic tools is fundamental for identifying the mechanisms of the system. Nor are these words and meanings merely absorbed by the displaced subjectivity. Rather, the critical consciousness reproduces these words and meanings in the displaced environment of the textual irony so that the problematics of being (and becoming) are emphasized in the multiplied spaces of social, cultural and political logic. Irony itself is the mirror that would refract, or intersect the putative rationalisms of the system to show the artificiality and the controlling desires of an invisible, yet overpowering entity over the transcultural subject. This ironic operation addresses different requirements in simultaneously different ways: first, it uses irony through the displaced consciousness to bounce back to the reader the complexities of one's own language so that language itself gains a more transparent quality for the inured user. On another level, the irony serves to instruct the reader about her location in the Canadian public socio-political sphere and/or in her private life.

Moreover the multi-level irony, in its capacity to look at itself, also instructs the user of language in the various ways to contemplate the self, her immediate lifeworld, and the extraneous forces of the world system(s). In this sense, irony is not only a heuristic tool, but it can also become an adequate signifier for the over-determined *simulacra* (Baudrillard) of the multicultural subject.

Irony is thus the counterenvironment that is created within the space of displacement. It also represents an adequate navigational guide across the alien(ated) space, first by giving back to that space its characteristic of Other, and then by engaging this space through its own language to make it perceptible to the critical mind. The device of irony also serves to investigate the environments created by words and meanings and to understand the power mechanisms that these environments disseminate over the meaning(s) and autonomy of the self, and particularly to understand how these powers work to deflect the general human awareness through their distorting strategies. The ironic technique avails itself of a Bayesian thought process or analysis³⁴¹, insofar as the artistic consciousness in displacement seeks to conciliate the knowledges perceived from its own particular experience with the intellection of its actual lifeworld, yet without ever letting go of the circumstantial processes that determine the displacement(s). The displaced voice retains a triple framework of experience and thus it speaks from a triple ironic stance that speaks of, and answers from, this complex state of being. The drama of subjective stability is thus played out across this field of analysis which becomes further engaged by the processes of physical (geographical), cultural

³⁴¹ Bayesian analysis is principally a mathematical framework for pooling historical experience with the actual information. Among its various applications in the realm of physics, this method also serves to indicate the asymmetrical relations between physical entities. The methodology of the Bayesian thought process is now being applied in the social sciences and particularly in the field of cultural studies.

and ideological displacement.

The complex network of images used by Melfi presents a subjective world confronted by external worlds that are sometimes imperceptible, so that appropriate tactics need to be engaged or created in order to locate the subjectivity and assess her situation. The engagement of subversive faculties contained in irony reveal subjective forms of trajectory that vary from a possible dynamic relationship, and to various degrees, with the new environment (*The O Canada Poems, A Queen Is Holding a Mummified Cat*) to the perceived petrification in the ineffectual gridlock, i.e. the “standstill” of subjective being in the reality of her socio-political space (*A Bride in Three Acts, Office Politics*). In the first analysis (*AQHMC* and *OCP*), the poet uses a strategy of clichés and stereotypes to represent the self against the power of the over-produced images of her Other. The subject presents the self through the ironic mode of stereotypes, and passing through this mode she can then potentially emerge through the process of creation, a process which has been compared with Marinetti’s Futurist Movement throughout the body of this dissertation. In these terms, the irony of the self engaged by the self is an empowering tool, as opposed to the destructive irony of the self engaged by the Other. The ironic device parallels the subjective trajectory by guiding the critical analysis through the strategies of myth-production for their effectual destruction in the displaced consciousness. The aim of reaching an adequate recognition of the self-in-culture is thus established at the beginning of the analysis, and the means toward this purpose are illustrated through the multiple uses of irony discharged by the poetic voice.

Irony avails itself of illusory practices of recognition when it is deployed as a co-optive strategy by reductive dominant discourses. For example, the traditional limiting definition of *irony* as a trope, or a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words (*cfr.* Samuel Johnson) amounts to reducing the meanings of *irony* into a rhetorical lie. The other extreme, as suggested in New Criticism's sense that no discourse can be un-ironical (Brooks 209-10), rhetorically flattens any political sense of *irony*. On the other hand, the critical history of irony has also allowed such insights as the presence of paradox and the need for a critical attitude of ambivalence (Schlegel), although even these notions can be framed in modernistic essentialism. More recent critical voices, i.e. Hayden White and Northrop Frye, view the concept of irony as "a mode of thought which is radically self-critical". (White 37) Thus the complexity of recognition demands a critical activity to bring out the significant factors of identification through the voice in conjunction with the textual composition. This strategy is described through the analysis of *AQHMC* and *OCP* and other analyzed aspects of irony in the poetic voice.

The ironic potential of the poetic voice has been shown throughout as working with the subjective consciousness and toward the resolution of identity-formation strategies. To recapitulate, and to work towards a conclusion, several issues pertaining to irony are brought up. An initial irony of being is pointed out in the beginning of the poetic analysis with the affirmation of the subject's engagement with nature following a displacement from her recognized experience of culture. Yet the immediate sensation is that of a pervading mortality, while grace (*cfr.* "While Maria gracefully falls \ into the arms of another man (a John?)..." *OCP*, 121) is implored in the form of "Eternity" (*AQHMC*, 11-

12). Melfi's elaborate handling of irony offsets concepts such as that of *Dasein*, which posits the subject as 'being thrown' into, a (presumably, recognizable) specific historical time/space; the irony of displacement turns this notion on its head by showing a subject who has been cast outside of (her recognized) historical time/space as a consequence of factors in her own historical time/space. Melfi's irony illustrates the notion of *Canadasein* - a term coined by Avital Ronell (321) which posits "being there" as being always 'somewhere else'. The Christian resonance (another significant ironic thread in Melfi's narratives) with the casting out, or Fall from Paradise, presents its own irony for the fact that emigration is generated by an act of expulsion from one's historical identifier (not yet recognized as such, until it will be displaced into nostalgia) by the forces of a recognized common social order. In other words, that which is supposed to guarantee existence - e.g. Nature, the economy and the State -, is turned against the subject. This brings up an important question of trust, if we consider the process of emigration as a systematic process of eviction from a specific historical, radical relationship with the world. Moreover and in a similar way with the Fall from Paradise, the immigration process foregrounds a question of duration - in terms of spatial and historical ruptures - by making visible the discontinuities in the human experience. Thus the alleged expulsion illustrates a parallel forced re-elaboration of the relationships between the subject and the frameworks that inform and/or identify her being. In this sense, irony becomes an instrumental factor in the investigation of identity through her relationships with her lifeworld.

The critical irony seeks to displace strategies of globalized exploitation by a tactical displacing of pre-determined concepts of culture, against the

precarious voiding practices of Capitalistic globalization. The phenomenology of displacement thus engages a paradoxical irony involving an ontological re-interpretation that seeks to 'materialize' itself in the artistic act, in a continuous reciprocity, with irony as the connective tissue among the perceived lifeworld, the ontological condition and the critical text. This critical capacity foregrounds the irony of a double perspective that is capable of seeing certain processes, and of looking through them, so as to cut through the aesthetics of institutionalized thought and bring in the critical vision that exposes the nature and practices of the multiculturalist "mosaic", that is, as a mythical sphere engaged in the exploitation of historical realities (*cfr.* "Look", *AQHMC* 15).

The subjective irony in the text showed that displacement also recognizes an organization of the self based on historical (diachronic) and (synchronic) factors. The additional irony of our visual dependence to define the self and the other is illustrated formally and compositionally, for example by the model of the failed synecdoche in comparison with conceptualized notions of alterity, or in the visual irony of composition, for example in the simultaneous indication of possibility and impossibility, which is picked up again in the suggestion of the subjunctive "if" clauses of the poetic voice. Moreover, the handling of the bracketing technique exponentially heightens the irony of visual and audible images. The consequences of displacement on notions of alterity bring out the ironic questioning of repressive practices of mutual exclusion, and polarizes the irony of the love relationship (does it give or does it only take?) - showing as well the difficulty of gauging the lines of difference between two oppositional entities. A self-reflexive irony extends to the question of presence through absence. Indeed, the condition of displacement engenders this double

form of existence wherein the subject is always simultaneously present and absent: one is 'here' because she is not 'there'. One consonant sensation is that of ironic entrapment - as illustrated with the spousal relationship in *ABTA* - occasioning the perceivable irony of an polysemantic language i.e. the "Darling", a polysemous term which forms the dialogical basis of Melfi's novel *A Dialogue with Masks* (1985).

The use of bracketed irony brings in a new, subversive dimension to the main discursivity, with the added use of cliché terms for ironic weight and a dynamic show of Socratic irony. Melfi's irony has also shown the multi-levels of interpretation working dialectically, particularly with her technique of *enjambement*, which also shows irony as inhabiting the space of liminality. Thus recognized practices of irony of direct opposites are continuously subverted so that some feminine (since the subaltern is feminized) strategies of recognition are also interjected, for example, through the supplanting of the patriarchist knowledge ownership. The female voice illustrates a tacitly defensive strategizing through a deft use of irony which sometimes emerges as a sort of "surprise" and promptly shows the ironic aspect of surprise as a potential weapon. Irony is usually directed 'against' someone or something else. (Even in its ludic form, irony can remain subversive.) Irony is not usually directed at the self, unless a critical dialectical consciousness is at work: a necessary process especially if the subjectivity has experienced the irony of failure through the betrayal of false friends. The sense of betrayal is translated into the (subconscious) awareness of a pervasive lack of guarantees, which is also illustrated throughout the thematic 'baby discourse' as a desired self-initiated development project towards the creation of the new self. This desire

would entail the ironic letting go of the self for the creation of the new self through the stronger Other - a form of chaos which would also denote an irony of being.

The texts have established the relationships among the various framing ironies deployed in the form and content of the poems, in interrelational ironic connections between poems and/or their titles to show how irony is only understood with and through its Other(s). It has also been established how a masking irony, vis-à-vis a revealing irony, serves to disguise fearful states of consciousness. The ironic turns in the poetic composition show sequences of divisive imaging of the Canadian space, geographically, culturally or ideologically, and linguistically. These images are countered with semiological forms of irony for dismantling the highly-sensed patriarchal dominance by bringing in a matriarchal presence to occupy the defective "spot" (*AQHMC* 37). An interlinguistic form of irony is complementary to the condition of inter-cultural displacement which generates a hypersensitive perception of language in the critical consciousness. This in turn produces a carnivalesque (à la Bakhtin) ironicizing of language, from subtle orthographical ironies to the more obvious exposition of subjective self-contradictions. The notion of a carnivalesque spirit serves to ironicize the spectacle of nationalistic culture by framing it in the suggestion of its apotheosis. As a liberating strategy, the text simultaneously reveals the false irony of the carnivalesque by redressing the vision toward the realities of power relations so that an existential irony of self-subjection to the Other is also exposed. We are reminded that the carnivalesque is an act of concession from the authorities and hence it serves to fool the subjective desire of control over one's body or existence. The irony of the text consistently

transcends the literal sense, partly by depicting the fairy tale analogy as the irony of the same (self or environment) in the different (self or environment) ; in other words, the spectacular quality of the carnivalesque is brought to bear on the ironic gaze through the Other and back to the self - hence, through the Other as mirror of his own falseness.

The praxis of ironic exposure in the *OCP* presents its intentionally distortive idea of success in the guise of the text as an 'ironic guide to success'. The ironic use of markers of visibility and invisibility forms a sub-text to this collection. However the ironic tone of acquiescence and of imperative gratefulness injects the sardonic irony of existing in, and for, a linguistically Other self. The means of coping with this existentialist problem avail themselves of the ludic use of ambiguity in language for characteristically ironic purposes, of the ludic exposing of an underbelly in the focal Canadian space (in Toronto) juxtaposed with the recognition in memory of a residual identifier from the 'underbelly' of Rome (the she-wolf who sustained Romulus and Remus). Thus an ironic content is named within each acquired status of existence. The technique of indenture (*OCP* 117) projects the irony from the visual to the linguistic field, and then to the historical imaginary demonstrating life in a disabled displacement as an ironic illusion of death (with the aid of oppressive religious doctrines that promise immortality only in death).

Indentured Italian workers had no civil rights in Canada, hence their *worth* - to borrow Charles Taylor's terms - as subjects could not have been recognized. A continuation of this relativized existence is present in the ironically deceiving denotation of Capitalism as a liberating force for the

individual in the (Canadian) “multinational” society. In such a case, the irony deploys its multiple dimensions of meaning as a tactic for dis-naming through the negation of the legitimacy of power. The Capitalistic process is undermined at the expense of its relative irony of access to economic legitimacy and equality- an irony that is reproduced in each concentric junction of cultural power. This undermining operation employs various methods, including the ironic reversal of the fairy tale outcome, the ironic presence through the declaration of absence, and the irony of the burlesque.

The performative irony (form) blends with the irony in the performance (content) to further ironize the contrast between differing realities. To this end, the strategy and range of irony extends from subtle self-references to biting satire as an outlet from subjective alienation and towards a self-initiated recognition through reconfiguration. In these terms, irony acts as a specular provocation developing through a sequence of ironic twists (somewhat like a DNA structure) throughout the poetic texts. The ironic gaze bounces back images undermined by the irony of the word, so as to invoke that which has been historically made invisible, e.g. the indigenous cultures. Yet irony as a rhetorical device occasionally faces obstacles i.e. problems of suspension of disbelief, or the tensive irony between desire and repulsion, or again the irony of non-realization of representation, signifying an irony of failed communication and of a resulting vacuous dialogue. A framing irony would ideally represent a framed meaning of presence so that representation ultimately lies within the irony itself. The question of a utopic character to irony is not ignored but rather, it becomes visible in the demonstrated ironic loop of ideas such as “The Catch” (as a ‘Catch-22’) (*OCP* 124). The applicability of varied intertextual connections

through time and space - that is, partaking of a Western system of knowledges -, in combination with other rhetorical devices , i.e. ironic *enjambements* or splits within the bracketed space, serves to perceive the Other through his own and other texts, and to expose the ironic absurdities of existence on a grander philosophical scale, in part to undermine the persistent irony of failed expectations, and in part to show the potential (mis)appropriation of irony as bait proffered to the displaced subjectivity. Ironic defusion can also take place through varied strategies, such as poetic techniques of ascending irony in preparation for an ultimate expression, or through deliberate ironic splits which manifest the disjuncture and re-organization of meanings. Hence, irony displaces the acquisition and/or internalization of the 'second' voice, that of English hegemonic power. It also serves to displace censorship, and particularly self-censorship, through the use of ironic bracketing which is connotative of the subject and her content from her recognized historical context. Irony thus points out the paradoxes in the means of recognition and direction. The remaining dual figure of irony of the Canadian space (as "an alien with two heads" *OCP* 128) is ultimately projected between the false dialectics of the hypocritical and insubstantial "smile" and its simultaneous impotence.

As for the second analysis (*ABTA* and *OP*) the question of irony is shown to be displaced into, and passing through, the feminized body and the question of free will through the socio-political winks of the text. The question of performativity manages the question of irony so that irony itself is presented in its function as a channel of 'authenticity' in regards to the self as Other, and against the threat of miscontextualization. In these texts, relationships (bride-

groom, worker-boss) themselves are the analytical points that address the possibility of negotiation in displacement. To this effect, the space of free will is posited between the ironic self-consciousness and the lifeworld. The irony is shown to overflow its bracketing walls in order to problematize the main discourses and to challenge knowledges by pitting itself between speculation and accepted knowledges, and by willfully producing and inserting other knowledges into the critical discourse.

Displacement shows the ironies of misrepresentations in language so that, ultimately, irony is demonstrated as a possible world where writer and reader can potentially recognize each other, and in this way, it shows the discrepancies between desire(s) and the phenomenological lifeworld. Irony as rhetorical device shows its familiarity with a broad (Western) philosophical and literary foundation, yet the poetic text presents itself as an ironic contingency of the dominant mode. Resistance assumes a traditional mode with its reinterpretation of messages according to specific codes of identity or significance. But the text also demonstrates how projections of messages into the spectacular realm risk falling into uncritical practices of consumption of images and meanings - hence the importance of irony as a hermeneutic and a heuristic tool.

Foucault's notions³⁴² of the subject and discourse are potentially engaged by the displaced subjectivity who is in a privileged position in relation to the productions of meaning. Although *OP* demonstrates that power can operate without the 'subject' - since it reduces the conscious subject to the

³⁴² See "The subject and power" in Dreyfus, H. and P. Rabinow eds. *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton: Harvester, 1982.

drone level -, it also serves to question the sources of imposed existential meanings on the disappearing individual. Hence the poiesis is a praxis for an investigation of discourses in the production of knowledges. Thus the reader is alerted from the beginning of each, individual collection to a praxis of inquisition into the discourses of representation through a characteristic rhetorical irony also found in literary connective techniques of alliterations, i.e. Fear <=> French, and through a particular framework of assonance which continuously engages a multiple semantics of control and subjection as shown in the following (dis)connections:

promise <=> Prozac

science <=> silence

servile <=> survival

Yet a forcefully recurrent assonance shows the networking of significant words which can be understood in the following schema:

rage <=> rape

cage <=> cape

cave

Language itself ubiquitously inhabits the 'machine' while it simultaneously provides the vehicle for the extension of the self through language itself and its multiplied meanings. The critical writing thus represents an hopeful encounter leading to a negotiative process towards a possible exchange of knowledge(s) in the engagement of the critical medium, and as a possible means of pre-empting the exploitation of the poetic voice.

For the displaced subjectivity, survival means a certain dependence of the displaced text or body on the critical irony of its own being. The female subject in particular is shown to find her identification with the body, over and above her identification with a status of individual. The allegorical discourse relating to the publishing industry intersects repeatedly in this discussion to show its own interrelation with the problem of a search for identity in an establishment which is itself struggling with its own sense of displacement (desire: 'Are we still British?' or anxiety: 'How close are we to an identification with the American culture?'). The ludic voice is combined with the added resentful irony that also considers a formative aspect of Italian Canadian writing which has in practice espoused the English literary identity through the canonical channels of its Canadian university formation. Yet assimilation can be achieved without the metaphorical death, that is, through the irony of an appearance of assimilation, wherein the technique of ironic bracketing serves as a buffering system through various camouflaging strategies.

An issue of dominant representational paradigms represents a moment of crisis for subordinated cultures that are vulnerable to these conceptual structures of power, whether through the colonialist or globalizing discourse, or into the Post-Modernist strategy of 'fragmented reality' for reducing its scope to a manageable scale. The lifeworld of *OP* demonstrates the hidden agenda of discursive notions of individualism which conceal the trap of a standardized existence, while the surface discourse promotes the acceptance of the new paradigms in a seemingly consensual form. In this sense, the critical voice of *OP* points to the propaganda of 'signs' as cloaked signifiers for the

'rules of the game' (Kuhn 1962). The text criticizes the over-production of signs in the sense-giving sphere of the individual's life as a form of indoctrination into the new paradigm. Hence the critical voice of the artworks continues her humanistic discourse in the hermeneutic relationship with the production of images and texts and the rejection of a hypocritical discourse for the production of an 'ideal' definition of Canadianness. Each text constitutes a specific discursive object within a historically situated practice, and in relation to particular relations of power. In a Foucauldian sense, we might say that each of these texts represents a *savoir*. Moreover, the texts reveal definitions and classifications organized by the frameworks of the Other, so that the critical text anticipates these analytical constructs through its own strategy of visibility, that is, by displaying the power asymmetry through the corrective action of the speaking voice to bring out the discursive evidence of the Other through the ironic language of the poetic text. The recurrent invocation of a fantastic realm in the texts ironically connotes the relationship between power and fantasy, wherein the ideological fictions of power exercise a practice of 'circularity' between reality and representation in order to 'empirically' assert their claims to power.

OP brings up a sequence of meanings that are interrelated through a framework recalling Burrough's language as a 'virus' - of hypocrisy ("cover me with your words \ Cover me with your Judas kiss" - 110). Perhaps in view of this, the activity of critical writing is considered in terms of (Plato's, by way of Derrida) *pharmakon*, establishing it as a poison for some, and a remedy for Others. Yet against this potential, the text shows a peculiar irony through a slippage of the potential of the *pharmakon* into the de-humanizing praxis of the

pharmaceutical industry, indicated in the poetic enunciations of 'Prozac' as the ultimate stabilizer against dissent. But the critical text rides the viral potential of language by using the English language against itself through the rhetoric of irony, through the clash of poetic images and the approximation of meanings through the rhythmic and sonorous patterns of the language in relation to its subliminal Other. The differences in the parameters of existence are introduced in *AQHMC* as being contingent on its limiting factors while *OCP* presents a sub-text of allegiance to the English Other. The references to Shakespeare, as the unequivocal English identifier, indicate a specific historical framework if we consider a certain parallel with the historical context under which Shakespeare was working. In other words, the Tudor period was concerned with a crisis of the royal succession and Shakespeare's plays reproduced these anxieties in his history plays (Kermode 2004). It is also significant that Shakespeare wrote under the influential authority of the Elizabethan Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy (1559). In view of this, Melfi's works show a sensitivity to a reproduced historical anxiety in the actual context of the Canadian Anglo-Saxon hegemony, by revealing the strategies of domination in the efforts to change the 'alien' Other into a satisfactory copy of the putative 'Canadian'. Melfi's tactics thus represent a play of language between two polarized wills of being (*eros*) and non-being (*thanatos*). The poetic irony brings the English language into play as a means of intercepting the language in its misrepresentational operations, while showing it as a process of entrapment which compromises the subjectivity and her linguistic and historical significations. In this way, the irony demonstrates the referent toxicity of language when it is dis-engaged from reality, and when it falls into the 'hypocritical' mode - where the 'hypo-critical' also denotes something below the

standards of criticism and which rests inside the imposition of 'standardized' language, that is, un-accented, and undialectical. Hence the depiction of Multiculturalism as something into which the public has uncritically bought finds its critical 'other' in the materialist discourse of the 'multinational' as it is depicted in *OP*. Ultimately, the promise of self-realization for the immigrant must first break through the breach of promise, yet it does not do this without experiencing intense feelings of betrayal.

Like the critical literature of displacement, this analysis refutes the constriction of language into theoretical paradigms. Instead the analysis follows the Socratic techniques of an intellectual investigation through a critical dialogue with the text as a means of exposing its discrepancies. In contrast to this, the Hegelian concept shows a process of change in which a concept or its realization passes over into and is preserved and fulfilled by its opposite: this, in other words, is the process of imperialism which appropriates the Other and permanently silences her. This is evidently the enemy that Melfi's texts engage, through her complex irony, which seeks to demonstrate a dynamic condition proceeding through strategies of identifications (versus static identities). In this way, the poetic image assumes a dialectical relationship with the beholder of the text through the various interpretations allowed by the image.

Multiculturalism is the discourse by which 'Canadian' culture seeks to manage its plurality or diversity politically, sociologically, ideologically and imaginatively. It is also a fetishistic strategy of having it both ways: as a strategy for both representing and not-representing the object (of desire) - in short, it provides the (*Canadasein*) dialectical process with an alibi, an *altrove*,

an elsewhere. Taken as a given, it serves to aestheticize the stereotype into a (non-critical) work of 'art' to effectively neutralize the possibility of our definition of dialectics - while it reinforces the Hegelian model. The critical dialectical text thus foregrounds the agency potential of the reader/spectator by asserting his capacity to modify his own subject-position. The text depends on a rich semiotic competence in order to indicate the existing and the potential interpretative frameworks in the reading of intercultural texts, based on efficiency of knowledges and perspectival approaches. This kind of reading, which partakes of Bourdieu's 'cultural capital', also depends on an understanding of the socio-political context and of the cultural meanings by which the texts are produced, and which produce a dynamic relationship extending to a broad communicative context. In other words, as shown throughout this analysis, the texts work against the neutralization of the subject which still appears to depend on a binary judgment of good versus evil - while the artwork shows this actual binary division to be constructed along economic standards. At the same time, the texts seek to prevent the absorption of the real into the hyperreal of the discursive model. The critical discourse thus works on several planes at once between the social and the political, in order to prevent the implosion of the socio-cultural subject into the distortion of mass representation, so that the possibility of meanings and of dialectical intervention between two points may be maintained.

In terms of a history of Canadian Literature, another irony is disclosed when we consider that this generation of Italian Canadian writers has emerged right alongside, yet on the margins, of the circle of the English Canadian writers led by Frye and Atwood, who were seeking a strong identity

for themselves as Canadian writers through the validation of their works as exclusively Canadian Literature. Critics recognized an upsurge in cultural nationalism in the 1960's and 70's³⁴³ in the CanLit circle as well as in the Canadian socio-cultural spheres. As Imre Szeman says:

The desire to reject everything foreign, to isolate and destroy the bacteria that have invaded the national host in order to leave it pure and free of disease, was the motivating idea behind... cultural and economic nationalism in the 1960's, just as it was in Canada during the same period.

Moreover, an essay titled "CanLit(e): Fit for Export?" by Danielle Fuller and Susan Billingham³⁴⁴ is rather enlightening concerning the image of the Canadian literature that was being distributed in the international sphere, in this comment concerning 'representative' works of Canadian literature that were sent to British libraries from External Affairs in Ottawa:

In other words, several years after the 1967 Immigration Act (supposedly legislated for 'colour-blind' admissions, five years after Trudeau's 1971 declaration that "a vigorous policy of multiculturalism" should be pursued by the federal government ...in the midst of the decade that coined the now infamous term "Canadian mosaic", the Canada in this box was nevertheless narrated and canonized through its imperial past." (115)

The emergence of a Canadian Literature and its criticism was fed by its struggle for existence and for its identity, in short, it was an "exercise in patriotism" as W.J. Keith³⁴⁵ calls it. In other words, this was a moment of crisis for English literature which was concerned with maintaining its status as the Canadian Literature - let alone as a dominant one, which would have entailed

³⁴³ Cfr. essays by Robert Lecker, W.J. Keith, Andrew Pyper, Danielle Fuller and Susan Billingham, Jennifer Andrews, David McGimpsey, Sandra Djwa, Imre Szeman, Richard Cavell, Tracy Ware, Herb Wylie, et al. in *Essays in Canadian Writing*.

³⁴⁴ In *Essays...*, 114-127.

³⁴⁵ See "Blight in the Bush Garden: Twenty Years of "CanLit" ", in *Essays...*, 71-78.

recognizing literatures by 'immigrant' writers as 'Canadian'. The idea of CanLit was dictated to by Atwood's and Frye's nationalistic streak which basically meant a branching out from British literary traditions.

Significantly, two years after the emergence of Di Cicco's (1978) Italian Canadian anthology *Roman Candles* - which paralleled the emergence of Other local voices -, Frye attempted to defuse the whole question of a Canadian literature by his "embrace of the instantaneous present and the international style as a joint solution to the problem of Canadian culture." (Szeman, in *Essays*, 191) Frye's comments were: "A world like ours produces a single international style of which all existing literatures are regional developments." (qtd in Cavell, 262) Frye's leap into the Post-Modernistic discourse was a means of avoiding the local politics as it relates to the class system of Canadian literature. A look towards the global in the field of literary 'competition' means the impossibility of 'minority' voices of being heard on any level: whether national or international. Frye's comments, which maintain a strong hold in the English curriculum, actually reveal a new crisis which is fed by a nationalistic spirit, but this is a different nationalism which is tempered and fueled by globalization, because of a nationalistic sense of pride and desire of CanLit (and criticism) for global recognition. Indeed, Andrew Pyper³⁴⁶ calls this current crisis and anxiety of CanLit "the persistence of this institutional paranoia" (88). Atwood's *Survival*, which was described by Keith as "infuriatingly uneven and often seriously misleading" concerning its presentation of Canadian Literature, is described by Atwood herself as "a cross between a personal statement... and a political manifesto". (1972, 13)

³⁴⁶ See "High Anxiety in the Bush Garden: Some Common Prejudices in Mainstream Canadian Criticism", in *Essays...* 88-95.

Even today, three decades after what Frye, Atwood and others of the same ilk, envisioned as the normative 'manifesto', literature with an 'ethnic flavour' (depending on the author's last name) is still considered temporally transient and commercially exotic. Against this background, Mary Melfi's poetics stands out not only for its aesthetic and artistic *raison d'être*, but also because of its underlining ironic principle which rationally and eloquently undermines the politics of Canadian Literature.

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