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“Absence, havoc”:
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Jay Macpherson’s *Welcoming Disaster*

TANIS MACDONALD

Absence, havoc — well, I missed you —
Near and dear turned far and strange,
Dayshine came disguised as midnight:
One thing altered made all change.

Fallen? stolen? trapped? entangled?
To a lower world betrayed?
Endless error held your footsteps,
On your brow a deepening shade.

Long I sought you, late I found you,
Straying on the farther shore:
You indeed? A swaying phantom
Fades, that flickered on before.
Lost, no rescue: only dreams our
Wandered, wandered loves restore.

— “Absence, Havoc” *Welcoming Disaster* (67)¹

CANADIAN POET JAY MACPHERSON’S 1974 book of poetry, *Welcoming Disaster*, was originally published as a sixty-three-page chapbook of short lyric monologues spoken by a female persona. The text is divided into five sections that describe the narrator’s reactions to the loss of her creative powers, preceded and presaged by the disappearance of a paternal magus figure. But *Welcoming Disaster* remains something of a textual enigma; it has received little critical attention since its publication, even though Macpherson’s previous book, *The Boatman*, won the Governor-General’s Award for Poetry in 1957. Lorraine Weir, in her thoughtful 1989 monograph, notes that critical discussion of Macpherson’s work is “sparse, occasionally generous, but always incomplete” (“Jay”180). David Bromwich asserts that “Macpherson’s more ambitious poems have been elegiac,” in particular

those that “lament . . . an alienated and/or repressed element of the self” (336). About *Welcoming Disaster*, W.J. Keith assures readers that the text “reveals hints (like *The Waste Land*, we might add) of a palpable if subtly personal trauma” (32), while Suniti Namjoshi calls it an exploration of “the world of nightmare” (55). Michael Hornyansky points out the text’s “ominous simplicities” and calls Macpherson’s prosody “a very curious blend of the cryptic, the elliptic, and the conversational” (337).

Suffice it to say that *Welcoming Disaster* has baffled many readers, with the result that Macpherson’s anthologized work has been drawn almost exclusively from *The Boatman*. *Welcoming Disaster* has received only a fraction of the critical attention that it deserves as a poetic sequence, as a feminist text, and as part of the Gothic tradition in Canada. Margaret Atwood, who, as Macpherson’s former student at the University of Toronto, acquired at least some of her sense of the Gothic tradition from Macpherson, asserts that *Welcoming Disaster* is “more convoluted, darker and more grotesque” than *The Boatman* (“Jay” 410). Asserting that the text resonates with “echoes of all those nineteenth-century ghosts, from Catherine Earnshaw on down” and with “vampiristic or sinister-double relationships” and “Faustian pacts with darkness,” Atwood emphasizes Macpherson’s use of the Gothic “lore of magicians, ghouls, mazes and crossroads” (410). Certainly the iconic illustrations in *Welcoming Disaster* invite a Gothic reading. “Conjuring the Dead” is accompanied by a reproduction of the woodcut from the 1620 quarto of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, showing the scientist in his learned robes raising the devil, though significantly, the *Welcoming Disaster* emblem shows only Faustus brandishing his book within his charmed circle (66). Later in the text, “The Dark Side” is adorned with a gravestone memento mori, a grinning death’s head, decorated with cherubs, bats, and an ouroboros in the background, taken from a 1776 Puritan headstone in Massachusetts (PTT 81; see also Weir, “Jay” 205). When Atwood writes that the poems in *Welcoming Disaster* “make the hair stand up on the back of your neck” (411), she does not specify whether this effect is a result of fear or admiration, but I suspect both reactions are applicable, and appropriate.

One of the hair-raising qualities of these poems is the omnipresence (or lurking “omniabsence”) of the dead. Indeed, the dead in *Welcoming Disaster* seem to proliferate at an alarming, nearly geometric rate, perhaps because the protagonist insists upon the “closed communion, pact

profound” between the dead and the living. Macpherson writes this relationship as morbidly satisfying on one level, but also acknowledges that it remains frustrating enough to leave the speaker “stupid — cumbering the ground” (“Conjuring the Dead,” *PTT* 66).² Although she has conjured them, the dead react in good elegiac fashion; they do not stay in contact with her, but neither do they have the decency to vanish. Corpses languish in cellars, in graves, in ruined castles, in lost books, in cinema seats, in coffins, and behind locked doors, haunted by the poems’ protagonist, she who craves union with the dead in general, and with one “wandering love” in particular. If we are to consider *Welcoming Disaster* a wittily melancholic blend of Gothic and elegiac traditions that work towards feminist concerns, thinking about the timing of publication is also important. Macpherson wrote this text in the years after her success with *The Boatman*, in the early 1970s as feminist theory was emerging in Europe and while younger Canadian poets like Atwood, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Susan Musgrave (to name only a few) were beginning to modernize the Gothic with feminist concerns, a project that still is very much in currency. In their 2007 collection *Postfeminist Gothic*, Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz assert that “the Gothic has always resisted a monological definition and exceeded the laws of genre and categorical thinking” (1), adding that scholars of both Gothic and feminist literature must “now demand a self-criticism with respect to their own totalizing gestures and assumptions” (7). Justin D. Edwards’s recent study *Gothic Canada* works with a wary eye on those same totalizing gestures when he proposes that Canadian Gothic literature struggles with “the grip of an ambivalent impulse that arises equally from a wish to a counter wish, from attraction to repulsion,” between the colonizing impulse and the wish to escape the force of colonization, creating “an obsessive mindset, in which Canadian writers continually return to ghostly figures who haunt” (xxi). Though Edwards’s *Gothic Canada* does not concentrate on feminist texts, I suggest that Macpherson’s *Welcoming Disaster* is another such obsessive Gothic text of subjectivity, but with an emphasis upon the female subject rather than the colonial or postcolonial subject.³

Using not only Gothic motifs but also a Gothic structure, *Welcoming Disaster* inquires into the gender dynamics of elegiac convention and explores the possibilities for renewed, and renewable, female subjectivity. Though the text of *Welcoming Disaster* is rendered entirely, and remark-

ably, in sapphics, ballads, and other verse forms, the narrative describes that of a traditional Gothic novel, parsed here with its attendant “misleading clues, postponements of discovery, [and] excessive digressions” by Claire Kahane:

Within an imprisoning structure, a protagonist, typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the centre of a mystery, while vague and usually sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness. . . . She penetrates the obscure recesses of a vast labyrinthine space and discovers a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this dark, secret centre of the Gothic structure, the boundaries of life and death themselves seem confused. Who died? Has there been a murder? Or merely a disappearance? (334)

This description, so accurate and yet so tongue-in-cheek, points to the standard features of a Gothic plot while suggesting that the enigmas of the tradition invite subversion, and further, that the questions that fuel the Gothic novel are potentially strong enough to crack the structure itself. Kahane is not alone in drawing attention to the fact that the “female gothic” has grown beyond the confines of Ellen Moer’s definition in *Literary Women* (1976). While a poetic sequence is not and never will be a novel — nor should it attempt to be — Macpherson’s sequence shows a surprising amount of correlation with, and witty subversion of, Kahane’s description, suggesting, as Brabon and Genz do, that Gothic literature’s best definition relies on its adaptive modality rather than its insistence upon the novel form. Applied to *Welcoming Disaster*, Kahane’s delineation of Gothic plot reveals enough commonalities to be useful, and enough divergence to be intriguing. While an individual short lyric should not need to function as a plot summary, Macpherson’s “Absence, Havoc,” reproduced in its entirety at the beginning of this article, offers a condensed version of the narrative arc of *Welcoming Disaster*, as well as identifying some of its major thematic and philosophical concerns: the speaker’s acknowledgement of loss, the havoc wreaked by abandonment, the longings and frustrations fulminating from that loss, and the confusion about the boundaries between absence and presence. But these attributes can also be read as elegiac, as well as Gothic; they are as much about grief and mourning as they are concerned with fear and confusion. The poem’s form and its appraising tone also deserve some attention: the thoughtful “well” before “I missed you,” the arch coolness of

“You indeed?” This careful poetic diction contrasts with Macpherson’s language of Gothic excess, culminating in the speaker’s desperation to “restore” her “wandered, wandered love.” Formally, “Absence, Havoc” appropriates a sonnet’s rhyme scheme and concern with lost love, but its trochaic tetrameter pushes against the conversational tone of iambic pentameter, and pits melancholic desperation against controlled prosody. This precision of form consistently frames the heat of obsession in *Welcoming Disaster*, as Macpherson produces a text that puzzles out the ways in which the contemplation of elegiac absence can quickly spin out into Gothic havoc. The illustration that accompanies “Absence, Havoc” is a reproduction of a large figure caught in the centre of a Cretan maze, reinforcing Kahane’s theory of the Gothic heroine’s search through “labyrinthine” paternal space for the maternal uncanny at its centre, the female (corporeal) secret hidden deep within the male (intellectual) structure (67). At her most audacious, Macpherson implies that absence and havoc are contiguous entities, inseparable from rituals of mourning and from a poetics of melancholia that seeks to articulate female subjectivity forged from significant loss.

Macpherson suggests the dominating influence of a male muse with her wandering magus figure, not the least because his “absence” is equated with nothing less than “havoc,” the wanton destruction of worlds. The destruction of a world, and of a female mind situated in such a world, is the Gothic subject matter of *Welcoming Disaster*. Kahane contests that the terrifying gap at the heart of Gothic enclosure, the “secret room,” is the space of the maternal, specifically the body of the absent, and uncanny, mother (336); Susan Greenfield similarly asserts that the traditional Gothic plot as written by women explores “missing mothers and their suffering daughters” (13). Atwood claims that the thwarted *nekusis* in *Welcoming Disaster* is an attempt to search for “lost mothers” (“Jay” 411). However, evidence of mothers, lost or otherwise, is scarce in *Welcoming Disaster*, particularly since the beloved father, a recalcitrant, mercurial figure, dominates the narrator’s attention with his refusal to respond to her grief. But the text’s Gothic frame supports a “secret room” at the centre of the text’s “imprisoning structure” that plays the maternal uncanny role and reveals the father’s evil abstractions to the mourning daughter.

Welcoming Disaster operates within a double frame, pursuing the paternal elegiac tradition while drawing on the maternal Gothic, yielding what Valdine Clemens calls an “antidote” for the “excessively cerebral consciousness” that is “the ache of modernism” (2), while also debating the possibilities of defining female subjectivity in mid-century Canadian poetry. The absent mother of *Welcoming Disaster* is so absent as to be nearly unimaginable; in a text in which the dead are easily imagined and even desired, the unimaginable is not that which is corporeally vanished, but that which had not yet been conceived, intellectually or physically. Just as the beloved father stands in for patriarchy in *Welcoming Disaster*, so the absent mother stands in for feminine, or even profeminist, subjectivity that remains desirable but indefinable, unpronounceable, and/or unspeakable at this time in Canadian literary history. Kahane emphasizes that the Gothic plot concerns not only the search for the mother, but also the beleaguered daughter’s way to delineate herself from the mother, while simultaneously maintaining a connection with her: “a dual unity preceding the sense of separate self” (336). Such a project is not easy, in the psyche or in the text, and may result in plot convolutions and possible gender confusion as “female characters continually attempt to escape by repudiating their womanhood” (347). The good daughter can attempt to harrow hell; she can read the right books; she can even try on the magus’s robes, but she can never be the good son. And nor should she be.

Macpherson’s strategy in *Welcoming Disaster* is twofold. First, she adopts Gothic conventions in order to use them as textual apotropaics, ritual “deceptions intended to trick the spirit world,” like piercing the heart of a vampire with a wooden stake (Barber 46). Then, she adapts the elegiac tradition in order to articulate the impossible gap at the heart of female subjectivity. Macpherson draws on an even older tradition in order to adapt her poetic daughter persona to the role of the inquisitive Gothic heroine; she places her in the tradition of male melancholics, but gives melancholia a female twist. As Juliana Schiersari asserts in *The Gendering of Melancholia*, intellectual melancholia has from the Renaissance been viewed as a masculine privilege, a position of artistic and philosophical profundity rather than a diagnosis of a mental condition, or even a comment on personal affect. Macpherson’s characterization of the daughter persona as excessively inquisitive about the father figure’s disappearance, his alchemical abilities, his “book of laws,” and

her own melancholic powers, suggests that in the female insistent melancholic, the elegiac and Gothic traditions merge to create a new heroine, one that haunts even as she is haunted. In pursuit of the “near and dear turned far and strange,” Macpherson’s narrator proposes an intricate poetic and philosophical puzzle, beginning with a question that dominates the Gothic tradition: “Is love haunted?” (“Substitutions,” *PTT* 68). There is an implied question here, or perhaps two: who haunts love? And how? Whatever the answers, it is a more intriguing proposition to consider *Welcoming Disaster* as more than a “negotiation with the dead,” in the style that Atwood has recently discussed. These poems perform a mournful attachment to the various dead personae that occupy the poems, using a Gothic sensibility as an *aide-memoire* that eventually subverts traditional elegiac convention into an act of haunting.

The attempt to establish a daughter’s hauntology, both as a mourning practice for the lost father and as a Gothic strategy of self-definition, can be read in Macpherson’s section titles and in the narrative arc described by the poems. In section one, “Invocations,” the daughter-narrator appeals in vain to the muse of memory, as well as to the apostrophe of the magus’s lost book (like Prospero’s drowned volumes) to restore her creative powers, but to no avail. This “failure” to invoke inspiration is of course at least partially ironic, as the evidence of the poems on the page suggest. But the failure is a failure of affect; love and creativity are intertwined here, and the lack of love drives the poetic narrator to the desperate state in which she resorts to “conjuring the dead.” Section two, “The Way Down,” describes her frustrated wish to embark on a *nekusis*, a journey to the underworld.⁴ The privilege of *nekusis* is denied to the narrator by supernatural forces in which, in a macabre comic twist, the narrator must haunt ghosts for news of her lost beloved’s progress in the afterworld. Section three, “The Dark Side,” shows the narrator exploring the possibility of tricking evil by trying on the façade of death. The final two sections, “Recognitions” and “Shadows Flee,” document her elegiac revelation, the recognition of a maternal secret, and the narrator’s emergence into a world that has been altered by the force of her own desire.

Donna Heiland contests that patriarchy itself is a Gothic structure built upon the “suppression — and sometimes the outright sacrifice — of women” (11). Charting the distance between absence and havoc, between love and haunting, Macpherson inquires into some of the larger questions facing Canadian female modernists in the mid- to late-twenti-

eth century. If modernism itself constitutes a Gothic structure of masculine literary privilege, the feminist project of “writing back” allusively to master narratives of Western literature, and sometimes to its “masterly” practitioners, may have resulted in a reconstruction of Gothic secrecy in these subversive texts. Certainly one of the best kept secrets about Macpherson’s work is that it is subversive rather than worshipful. Her re-visions of the Bible in *The Boatman* allude to Blake and Shakespeare with a good deal of wit, and consider the wholesale sacrifice of women with an asperity that belies victimhood. In her version of the Philomena myth, Macpherson writes a Procne turned into a swallow who “performs as she is able” and “raises both Cain and Babel” (*PTT* 26). She offers a version of Isis that riddles her way past easy gender stereotypes: “Say, am I a he or a she? / There’s no-one shall wed me / And least of all bed me” (25). Macpherson’s addition of sixteen “rebellious daughter” poems to the 1968 reissue of *The Boatman* speaks strongly of her feminist questions about modernism’s relationship with Romance literature. “The Love-Song of Jenny Lear,” the penultimate poem in the 1968 reissue of *The Boatman*, operates as a parody of Eliot’s Prufrock in the person of King Lear, and as a rostrum against tragic hubris. Warning that she is “a hell of a girl,” Jenny Lear tells Lear not to “look so pathetic at me,” and threatens him with a “horrid long talk” and rough “romp by the seashore” as punishment. In a promise of resurrection that is both bawdy and cannibalistic, she promises Lear that she will “crunch down on your bones, / Guts marrow and stones, / Then raise you up dancing again” (*PTT* 60).

Knowing that Macpherson ended her 1968 version of *The Boatman* with such feminist audacity can give us a few clues about how to read 1974’s *Welcoming Disaster*. In this text, the magus figure is less a flesh-and-blood father than the “swaying phantom” of literary tradition: an alchemist unwilling or unable to apprentice his daughter to his transformative art. The obvious historical-biographical figure for this magus figure would be Northrop Frye, who was Macpherson’s dissertation supervisor, her colleague at Victoria College, and her acknowledged mentor for many years. Yet such an equation disrespects Macpherson’s poetics through a slavish adherence to the objective correlative. Critics who suggest that Macpherson is too indebted to Frye are missing the irony of her creation of a “Fisherman” deity who “hoicks” men into His grace and forgiveness, but summarily abandons women to oblivion,

textual absence, or interpretive obscurity (*PTT* 49). It is easy to detect Frygian influence in certain aspects of Macpherson's apocalyptic vision, but strong evidence of her independence from Frye can be found in her concern with female subjectivity, beginning with her revisions to the 1968 *Boatman and Other Poems* and extending to her exploration of a philosophically melancholic daughter figure in *Welcoming Disaster*. The doomed Biblical and Shakespearean daughters of the "other poems" dwell in considerable ambiguity, from which they can mock the old sinful order even as they mourn its passing. *Welcoming Disaster* features a good modernist daughter who grows tired of waiting patiently for approbation and decides to wreak her own havoc on absence, death, and other personal sorrows. Subjectivity is the disaster that she welcomes.

Macpherson fashions a literary father from the Romance figure of the alchemist which she identifies as a "hypnotist" or "abominable showman (Frye's term)," who bamboozles people with "the glittering world of illusion" while pursuing the dark arts in the "surrounding darkness" of secrecy (*Spirit* 194). Within these bounds, the alchemist figure of *Welcoming Disaster* appears as the anagogic man of *The Boatman* turned demonic through his possession of absolute power — some combination of God, Noah, and Blake's Nobodaddy, with a touch of Northrop Frye. Macpherson indicts the rhetoric of modernism as the alchemist father's "world of illusion," the decaying paternal *logos*. In desiring the key to his secret art, the daughter desires the father's knowledge, and as Macpherson points out, the hot pursuit of "knowledge as treasure is usually ironic, and apt to bring destruction instead of fulfillment" (*Spirit* 184). The seeds of such destruction are sown prior to the text's beginning, for as Rosemary Sullivan notes, *Welcoming Disaster* begins "with the poet metaphorically orphaned" (498), struggling in vain to define herself with the magic formula of her father's symbology.

The paternal figure featured in Macpherson's poems seems to be no less than a Kristevan "imaginary father," a rereading of Freud's "father in individual prehistory," or in simpler terms, a father whom the daughter struggles to represent as "love" rather than "law" (Oliver 69). Kristeva proposes this "loving, giving and gratifying" father (*Black* 92) in direct opposition to Lacan's more commanding law-giving father. While Macpherson's explorations of the father figure leave no doubt about the father's traditional power, the abandoned daughter is nonetheless greedy for his attention to the point where she haunts him after his

death. Significantly, she does not fear him as an authority, but rather desires his sense of order and creation, his certainty and confidence with symbology. In kind, the Kristevan “imaginary father” has his own sense of alchemy; Kristeva describes him as the male figure who establishes “the link between pleasure and symbolic dignity . . . as he leads his child from primary to secondary identification” (*Black* 92-93). So necessary is the imaginary father as a figure of psychic gratification in *Welcoming Disaster* that Macpherson configures his “absence” as first “havoc,” and then “winter” (85), invoking first chaos and then isolation as manifestations of grief.

The father-daughter kinship explored in these texts cannot be separated from Macpherson’s practice of the “parody, pastiche and allusion” that David Bromwich sees in her work (334). The “paternal” in *Welcoming Disaster* does not refer to the autobiographical, biological father, but rather to the symbolic father, who for all his ephemerality, strikes a formidable figure of a “tranced master.”⁵ The magus figure is the anagogic man with the key to the mysteries of religion and the secret of transcendence. But as Linda Bayer-Berenbaum points out, transcendence in the Gothic tradition is almost universally related to evil; not only a defiance of Christian law, it also defies the laws of nature, and flouts humankind’s “inescapable connection to the world around us,” the “immanence” that makes us human and allows for the possibility of the sublime (21). Such immanence is certainly not exclusively paternal by definition, but in *Welcoming Disaster*, masculine power is so rigorously anagogic that it begs its opposite. The alchemist does not transmute himself so much as he entrances himself to a self-serving evil that grows rich on “treasures coined from pain, from anger, / Spoiled love” (“Masters and Servants” *PTT* 75).

The duties and vicissitudes of a daughter’s paternal mourning have their own Gothic cast. Atwood has commented on the “eerie” and “ruthless” tone of *Welcoming Disaster*, and her recommendation of Macpherson’s “rigorous and sometimes bloody-minded self-analysis” (“Jay” 411) connotes a certain protofeminist glee in Macpherson’s poetic hijacking of the Gothic tradition to reconfigure it as a feminist apotropaic, a way to ward off the “evils” wrought by a rigid male tradition and its modernist succession. This is the practice of Adrienne Rich’s feminist “re-vision” with a side journey of exploration, “entering an old text from a new critical direction, . . . not to pass on a tradition but to break its

hold over us” (Rich 35). In *The Spirit of Solitude*, Macpherson locates a series of daughter figures in Romance literature that “are all in their various ways betrayed by impulses that reach out for the conditions of an unfallen world” (146). Or, as Macpherson puts it in *Welcoming Disaster*, such daughters are “still waiting for the spark from Heaven” (PTT 64), or from their Heavenly “fathers.” The narrator who welcomes disaster is, perhaps, from our twenty-first-century perspective, provisionally or ambiguously feminist. However, the emergence of a defiantly melancholic female figure in the poetry of Canadian modernism suggests not only that melancholia may be adopted as a feminist literary strategy, but also that such a strategy may be less pathological in affect than it is intellectual in structure.

Macpherson’s demanding daughter persona eventually comes to understand her paternal magus as a sinister figure, and her *anagnorisis*, or elegiac “recognition” in the text’s fourth section, is that her subjectivity must be defined beyond the father’s influence. Lorraine Weir claims that the “public parallax” of Macpherson’s poems operates as “a technique of revelation” that contrasts with her “camouflage or deflection,” and that this play of public and private desires subverts women’s literary colonization by “patriarchal culture” (“Toward” 62). While Weir’s identification of the text’s “elliptical, circumscribed [and] self-reflexive” structure is significant (61), neither she nor Atwood comments on Macpherson’s use of elegiac convention; nor do they identify the father figure as an elegiac “lost beloved” in *Welcoming Disaster*. But a close look at the text reveals that Macpherson is still contemplating the traps of literary daughterhood that she left us with in *The Boatman*. In *Welcoming Disaster*’s first poems, she establishes the persona of a mourning daughter, abandoned by the word, struggling to deal with the loss of the paternal *logos*. In “Poets & Muses,” she writes of the need to “reverse the story,” to be “Muse-redeemed, return and live,” and immediately invokes a Biblical patriarch, Solomon, only to render his wisdom impotent compared with the power of the Muse (PTT 62). In “Lost Books & Dead Letters,” the narrator laments the loss of ancient books of knowledge, but notes with chagrin that the “book of laws” is very much in evidence and in use. Chillingly, she claims that the book of laws is older than God Himself, and that the book foretells both her birth and her incipient sorrow. Her only hope is to write her way out of

the book of laws and into “the book of life” held by the Muse: “Let me not be put to silence, / From thy page blot me not out” (*PTT* 62).

The book of laws, with its doubled echo of the Lacanian “law of language” and “law of the father” is Macpherson’s sign for desire and violence, a Romance symbol rendered Gothic by its power and its prescience. Donna Heiland notes that “transgressive acts at the heart of Gothic fiction generally focus on corruption in, or resistance to, patriarchal structures” (5), and Fred Botting identifies father-daughter kinship as a dynamic of Gothic excess that evokes incestuous overtones even as it refutes them: “Familial and sexual relations, power and suppression, turn on the roles and figures of father and daughter” (20). In *Welcoming Disaster*, the daughter-narrator’s haunting of the paternal figure asserts a female melancholia that holds the key to an emerging female subjectivity in mid-century Canadian modernism. In the nineteenth century, female writers combined the Gothic tradition with the elegiac with spectacular results, hinging their narratives on the desperate resolve of the mourner to regain the lost beloved at any cost: *Wuthering Heights*, *Frankenstein*, *Goblin Market*. Elegiac convention predicates the desire of the living mourner to risk her humanity for a last sight of the beloved, the mourner’s assertion of unending grief, the obdurate refusal of consolation; these conventions find fertile ground in the Gothic tradition of portraying cultural anxiety as corporeal and eschatological excess.

Without a doubt, love *is* haunted in this text, principally by the alchemist-father’s “book of laws” (62); the narrator worships these laws as immutable, and she cannot anticipate how profoundly the father’s law will betray her. When the father departs to his unknown destination, the power of his law deflates. The daughter’s invocations fail; the “old spells” of his mythology are unworkable, “hollow” (73). She tries to manipulate the myths into performing for her, as familiars to his transformational magic. In frustration, she determines that it is better to haunt than be haunted, and in “Lady Haunts Ghosts,” she takes on mourning as a job of work. Because her “phantoms” are “too weak” to haunt her, she must “take the whip and urge them” into her world (*PTT* 72). Once in their presence, the lady of the poem ravishes the ghosts for sustenance: “Back in the light I rummage them, ransack them, / Breathe them and suck them, wolfish, famished, rake for / News of my lost ones, gone where gods of darkness / Keep, unforgiving.” This is “bloody-minded” work

indeed. The narrator calls herself, variously, a “ghoul” (71), a “goblin” and a “familiar” (75), and a “lost soul” who is run by “greed, pride and envy” (76). She labours at “conjuring the dead,” but finds even the living are trapped in “magic circles” and “dead-engrossed, they make no sign” (66). The lost magus figure for whom she mourns is at once an “enchanter” (75) and a “man of stone, of ivory, of glass” who will not (or cannot) yield to the narrator’s “conjuring,” but instead remains “tranced” by his lost power (75). The interplay of these two figures produces what the poet calls “complicities” (77). The narrator indicts the poems as inadequate to the task: “painful, cautious offerings” (78) featuring the daughter as a “cherished bosom-serpent” (76), recalling the gleeful viciousness of Jenny Lear from *The Boatman* and King Lear’s injunction that “sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / to have a thankless child” (*Lear* 1.4.295-96). Macpherson carries this tone of vicious neediness into section three, “The Dark Side,” in which the daughter enters a “castle with the mystic name” and descends a “stairway to the underground / Where the lost ones shall be found” (82). There she sits a lonely mourner’s vigil resolving to “nevermore behold the day,” the better to “keep a lasting watch above / My undying monster love.” Even as Macpherson invokes horror-movie phantoms throughout this “Karloff Poem,” “monster love” seems to describe the tenor of the daughter’s affections as much as the body she seeks.

Comfort and hope for the future, such as Macpherson allows them, come not from a mother figure, but from the unlikely figure of a stuffed bear, specifically named as a substitute for the absent magus: “Filling in for / Him not there” (“Substitutions,” *PTT* 68). Macpherson mocks the tendency for psychoanalytic theory to infantilize female desire and female protest, and her creation of a daughter-narrator — complete with teddy bear as a father “substitute” — is a parody of elegiac substitution and its attendant psychoanalytic reading. Again, Macpherson’s appropriation operates as subversion. In designating the bear as both “doll” and “god,” the narrator refuses to be reduced to an embodiment of the Electra complex, or a recalcitrant child. Michael Hornyansky notes that the bear’s inclusion in the text is “a big risk,” but as a symbol, it is “psychologically right and has been poetically anchored in myth” (337). Macpherson pulls off this audacious conceit — a combination Atwood claims, quite rightly, that “only Macpherson could get away with” (410)⁶ — principally because she uses the stuffed bear to mock the psychoana-

lytical perception of women as id-ruled children. The narrator may be written as a child, but she is not a child in the psychoanalytical sense; she is, rather, Macpherson's wry comment on the sociocultural infantilization of women's desire and its manifestations in grief. In writing the grief of the girl-narrator, Macpherson welcomes the "disaster" of a belief system that takes adult female subjects and their grief seriously.

Kelly Oliver suggests that by claiming a loving father, the female theorist (and, I would add, the female poet) can lay claim to being the "imaginary son, the rightful heir" (67). But in *Welcoming Disaster*, the mourning daughter discovers that she cannot lay claim to the knowledge dispensed by the father-chemist figure, principally the mythology that serves him. In fact, her lack of access to his mythological systems shapes both her mourning practice and her Gothic search for the mother. Macpherson's depiction of the father figure as an "enchanter" and "magister" who is the source of all knowledge aligns with the Kristevan imaginary father as "a metaphorical function that gives way to the metonymic paternal function" (Oliver 66). But the Gothic sensibility should balk here; there is something too similar about Kristeva's "imaginary father" and Lacan's paternal lawgiver — Father as arbitrator of law and the symbolic order — even though Kristeva insists that her idea of the father is both "stern" and "playful" (*Tales* 46) in contrast to Lacan's completely authoritative Father. Something of this tension plays itself out in Macpherson's "Some Ghosts and Some Ghouls," as the daughters "admired how ignorance became" the fathers, how the fathers were with "coldness adorned," while the daughters are "guilty most of suffering" (*PTT* 71). Tellingly the fathers are the cold ghosts, and the daughters the suffering ghouls, who learn by example to become "Greedy, devourers" (71).

Despite Kristeva's objection that a "crisis in paternity" is characterized by "the lack of love" rather than "the lack of law" (Oliver 69), the difficulty in representing the imaginary father makes him a shadowy figure, rather than a loving one who dwells at the limits of paternal representation. It is the father's imaginary love that makes the narrating daughter so dogged in her pursuit; his position as a Gothic object of desire, both flesh and ghost, perceivable and not available, captures his epistemological appeal. The chemist father is elusive: always invoked, always mourned, and rarely glimpsed until the text's end. The daughter-narrator of *Welcoming Disaster* assumes the cloak of the melancholic

daughter with an abandoning father, and she consciously “nurtures horror” — in the Kristevan sense of gesturing to chaos to restore order — as an undeniably Gothic bid to bring him back to life, and to defy the corporeal laws of nature with her desire. Weir points out that the text of *Welcoming Disaster* teases out the parallels between eschatology and epistemology (“Jay” 195), and with them, the difference between the pathological nurturing of horror and a welcoming of disaster. Alice Jardine claims, in *Gynesis*, that “the crisis of legitimation in the West is necessarily a crisis in the status of knowledge — traditionally, the ability to decide what is true and just — functions that have remained inseparable up to the present” (65). *Welcoming Disaster* deals with such a crisis of legitimation as an allegory for personal loss. Within the struggle to differentiate love from reason, Macpherson contemplates the possibilities of writing beyond the influence of the father, a dream of *écriture féminine*. The disaster that is welcomed is nothing less than a bid for a female subjectivity that does not rely upon paternalized permission. Like many modernist writers, Macpherson alludes to the “great books” of Western literature in order to debate the efficacy of male-centred knowledge systems, and to suggest the need for a fully realized female literary subjectivity. Certainly her elegiac tone mourns the obedient daughter as much as it mourns the mythological father.

The speaker of *Welcoming Disaster* begins by longing after the lost and abandoning father figure, but soon her loss grows to encompass her systems of thought and ways of expression, until she is mourning the loss of a world and a particular language. The play between the elegiac object and the elegiac subject, or between the elegized and elegist, is part of the disaster that the elegist welcomes not as a consolation, but as a part of establishing subjectivity. Such a project is fraught with potential structural and epistemological pitfalls. Jardine cautions: “the ‘woman-in-effect’ can only be thought beginning with how the monologic structures we have inherited are constantly reimposed and rearranged, and (particularly) with how women both mime and reject those structures and even become their most adamant support systems” (48). Macpherson acts out this “mime and rejection” with her use of Gothic symbology to challenge elegiac convention, and to mourn for the daughter figure while miming an elegy for the father. The struggle for subjectivity in *Welcoming Disaster* develops into elegiac concern that is also fundamentally metaphysical; can a person exist outside reference,

outside the master discourse, even if (or especially if) she loves and serves the master discourse? How can a female poet, as Macpherson characterizes her narrator, grieve for the “fatherly” myth and discourse that abandons her? As an example of a Kristevan “subject-in-process,” the daughter-narrator of *Welcoming Disaster* argues for subjectivity at the same time as she mourns the lost world of myth from which she enacts her exile, even as she probes the myths for answers about how to grieve. Judith Butler warns that such insistent and ambivalent mourning acts as “a transgression that gives kinship its prohibitive and normative dimension but that also exposes its vulnerability” (*Antigone’s* 10). *Welcoming Disaster* proposes a mourner who attempts to haunt the dead through a descent into the underworld — and finds that the journey and consolation of that myth fails her, leaving her “conjuring” both the dead and the living (*PTT* 66). Even though Jardine claims that the retrograde dangers of nostalgia are considerable when discourses conduct a “melancholic search for a recognizable solution” (68), the danger of nostalgia is even greater when discourses remain trapped in oppressive rhetoric.

The failure of the mythological journey to the underworld is played out repeatedly in this text, as the daughter fruitlessly searches castle dungeons, basements, and root cellars for ghosts to love or interrogate. But she cannot find an entry to the underworld and, finally, she abandons her project of haunting the dead, only to find the father at last in a place she never thought to look. In “The Well” — a poem Atwood includes as an epigraph to her final chapter of *Negotiating with the Dead* — Macpherson shows the daughter drawing near the empty space at the heart of the Gothic structure: the maternal absence, a hole in the ground, an *omphalos*. But she searches for the father deep in “the well of truth, of images, of words,” and at first she sees only her own “pupil head” backed by a sky of stars (83). But the maternal space of the well gives her, at last, an answer about the whereabouts of her haunting, haunted father; the water reflects the sky. When she turns to look up at the image reflected in the water, she sees the image of Orion, “the winter-king.” The reversal is perfect, and a solution to her anxiety. In searching for the lost father on “the way down,” she finds him above in the firmament. Frye designated winter as the mythos of irony and satire, and far from representing a Christian apotheosis, this discovery of the “winter-king” reveals the magus father as a “fiend” who lives according to a reversed law of physics and morality: “his up is down: his height is

set / In Hell, and yet he shines” (84). The irony of this reversal shocks; the father is not languishing in the afterworld but is instead a demon pinned to the sky for the purposes of cosmic shaming. This image of the magus is not a romantic intellectual rebel or a sardonic hero, but rather a revelatory image of evil and a shock to the mourning daughter figure, whose bloody-mindedness has goaded her to reap the whirlwind.

However, being bloody-minded means possessing inordinate powers of perseverance, the kind of perseverance Frye notes is needed to pass through “a dead center,” like the hole in the ice where Dante and Virgil climb down Satan’s body in order to climb up Mount Purgatory; passing through the ironic reversal of perspectives wakes the protagonist to understanding (Frye 239). As the daughter turns to see the image of the father in the sky, she embarks on what Judith Butler calls a “melancholic turn” towards subjectivity. By abandoning her dependence on traditional tropes of consolation, the mourner turns back to contemplate the enormity of her loss and so faces the “loss of autonomy that is mandated by linguistic and social life” (*Psychic* 195-96). The “melancholic turn” allows mourning by asserting subjectivity, an “ego [that] is other than itself; what melancholia shows is that only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all” (196). The mourning daughter’s demand is answered at last; she turns to identify her lost beloved, and in doing so, recognizes the fruitlessness of her search, and is granted the means to recognize her own subjectivity.

Rocked by the revelation of her own subjectivity, she is ready now for the irony that is played out in “They Return.” As the elegist has “long desired,” the dead return, but all is not well: “they are changed” (*PTT* 85). The dead are not the loving beings of her memory, but rather appear “Armoured each in private shade, / Sullen, helmed against the light.” “Absence, winter,” instead of being “shed like scales” as the narrator anticipates in the first verse, invokes the very name of the dead, and they are unregenerate in laying blame for their uncomfortable return to the living: “Their resentment fills our arms, / Sifting from their ribs like night.” Because this scenario recalls the excesses of Poe, the ending of the poem offers a sobering shock or horror. Understanding, at last, that these returned dead have had their “human places” not only devoured by death and entropy, but also “sold to darkness by our fear,” the narrator has room to admit her complicity in the final two lines of the poem: “They, returning, bring us back / Absence, winter, what we gave.” The

absence that began the elegiac sequence has now been returned to the narrator, in a matched pair with winter's irony. The dead cannot return not only because of a spiritual injunction placed upon them to remain in the world of the dead, but also because they can never be equal to the elaborate encomiums upon which the living insist.

In the fourth section, "Recognitions," the narrator returns to the teddy bear as a substitute for the discredited father-hero. In "Discovery," the daughter credits the bear with destroying the father in a heroic subplot: "was it you then . . . / Laid a powder plot, and blew the / Man of glass to smithereens?" (86). But the Gothic heroine has now reached the centre of the labyrinth, and we discover the other death that has remained a secret until this point in the text. Though the bear seems poised to become the Gothic hero, Macpherson addresses the rest of the poem to "a feeble-minded child" who is desperate for revenge. The child in question is at once the girl-child who owns the bear and another separate child, a miscarried or aborted baby whom the speaker calls "poor changeling, never born, / . . . the first of me to die" (87). The accompanying emblem, showing a serene adult figure in a coffin with a child's body in the crook of her arm, completes the picture of the miscarried child, as do the final six lines of "Discovery":

Lie there, fertilize my garden:
 See what earth will make of you.

 Though, I never meant to lose you,
 Little thorn of poison tree:
 Nights I lay me down beside you,
 When I wake, am still with thee. (86)

So the "secret room" of the text shows both a vengeful child and a loving mother; the girl-child has both connected with her mother and separated enough to become a mother herself, although the pain of the loss of the baby is acute in these poems. "What Falada Said" proposes the mother and the lost child as "a constellation / Turning: maimed child, barbed mother — torn, rent open / Womb, bladed baby" (91). In a gesture of protection, the hero-bear makes the journey that the daughter cannot; as her "surrogate" (87) in the land of the dead, he becomes a symbol of pastoral renewal, buried beneath "the world-tree" where the daughter discovers herself "reposing in his shade" and can see the way "punished giants, monsters dim — / All the heaven turns on him" (*PTT* 89). Is Tadwit himself a "punished giant" or a "monster dim"? The narrator's

willing sacrifice of the bear, after all her pains to assert his substitutive value, gives the reader pause. Does she simply make a martyred hero of Tadwit, or is he a convenient repository for her anger?⁷ By becoming the still point in the earth around which the stars turn, in contrast to the Orion-father who is impotently pinned to the sky, the bear fulfills his symbolic destiny as the daughter's substitutive "messenger" to the dark side — particularly the "dark side" of her own rage (88).

Macpherson's daughter figure draws energy from an inquiry into her own state of abandonment. The inquiry itself is "ghoulish" in its intensity; the persona is determined to endure the rigours of mourning by haunting the lost beloved. The ghoulish-mourner fears the loss of words; she begs to be included in the orthodoxy of knowledge as the Father has defined it; and ultimately, she learns to live with both absence and havoc.

The mourning daughter continues to crave the unveiling of a revelatory consciousness of a mid-century protofeminism, but instead reaches an uncomfortable comprehension that the myths she loves do not, and cannot, represent her effectively. Does this make Macpherson the kind of poet Frye calls "a poltergeist in the city of God" (*Anatomy* 128), the kind of poet who haunts religion for answers rather than for inspiration? That remains to be discussed. In the end, the daughter's quest brings her to the "conjecture" she imagines at the end of the text's fifth section, "Shadows Flee." In "Playing," Macpherson poses an intriguing series of questions. She wonders about life for the daughter beyond the tenets of the father's rule, querying about the lack of success at what she calls "Square One" and speculating about the operation and rules of "Square Two," which she believes "never got marked on this / Board." The narrator is clear that "life on Square One" was an exercise in paradox and frustration: its "surface not solid, though / Hard as a stone" (*PTT* 94). In spite of her industry, she gets nowhere: "I venture runs, but I'm / Always bounced back." She considers what might be involved in the move to the next "square" in the game:

Hardly a player,
Nothing to win,
Clocking how long I might
Take to clue in.

Now we've exhausted the
 Charms of Square One,
 Maybe you know a
 Game that's some fun? (*PTT* 94)

Despite her progress, the daughter's despair goes unabated, and she must fall back upon the struggle for her own subjectivity as a consoling performance, a "game" that might be "some fun." Her mourning ushers in the meta-performance of the text, the poet's turn from the rhetoric of daughterhood to the approach of subjectivity, "Square Two." In the text's final poem, "Notes and Acknowledgements," Macpherson thanks her mentor, in perfect rhyme: "Best of readers, Northrop Frye, / Cast a sure arranging eye" (*PTT* 96). The temptation to cast an ironic eye over this couplet is considerable, but it helps to situate *Welcoming Disaster* as a revelatory or apocalyptic text in the Frygian sense. Although Lorraine Weir notes that the text operates as "an elaborate strategy of camouflage which strives paradoxically for both concealment and revelation" ("Toward" 61), *Welcoming Disaster* strives toward the possibility of a feminist future in very careful terms. Macpherson operates within Jardine's "profound paradox" of a woman writer who searches for a reconfigured subjectivity: "she proceeds from a *belief* in a world from which — even the philosophers admit — *Truth* has disappeared" (31). Jardine warns that the tension of such paradox may result in "at least three possible scenarios: a renewed silence, a form of religion (from mysticism to political orthodoxy), or a continued attention — historical, ideological, and affective — to the place from which we speak" (31-32). *Welcoming Disaster* charts the narrating persona's struggle with all three of these circumstances: the ghoul-mourner fears the loss of words; she begs to be included in the orthodoxy of knowledge; and ultimately, she learns to live with the absence of a "father" to guide her to firm epistemological ground.

Sylvia Söderlind, in "Ghost-National Arguments," suggests that within Canada, mourning is less of a national impulse than a regional one, of special concern to "lost nations-within-the-nation: Quebec, Acadia, Newfoundland, and the First Nations, all of whom rattle their chains on occasion" (676). Can we hear women writers as a nation-within-the-nation in *Welcoming Disaster*? The narrator's displacement from the psychic space of her poetic tradition makes her an outsider in her own text: "blot me not out" indeed (62). Macpherson's method of

harnessing both Gothic and feminine “powers of horror” to inscribe paternal mourning underscores her narrator’s dedication to defining herself both with the mother and as distinct from the mother. The difference between nurturing horror and welcoming disaster is a fine distinction, but the distinction is vital to the carnivalesque project of defining female subjectivity. Each desire contains the seeds of disaster: the beloved paternal is monstrous; the barely imagined maternal is painful; and the knowledge gained by the thwarted journey is not transcendent, but rather, resoundingly corporeal. The daughterly subject of *Welcoming Disaster* has been set in motion by her recognition that it is not the stuffed bear, but rather the spirit of havoc that becomes her most reliable “guide to dark places — finder of lost direction — / Tearspring-diviner, and where the wordhoard lay” (“The End” 95). The wordhoard is the treasure to which the daughter at last lays claim, even as the text ends. The text is not the wordhoard, but a simulacrum that wreaks havoc.

NOTES

¹ From *Poems Twice Told* by Jay Macpherson. Copyright © Oxford University Press Canada 1982. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

² The texts of *The Boatman and Other Poems* and *Welcoming Disaster* have been collected in a single volume, *Poems Twice Told*, published by Oxford University Press in 1981. *The Boatman* was originally published in 1957, and then reissued with sixteen additional poems in 1968, with the title *The Boatman and Other Poems*. Macpherson published *Welcoming Disaster* privately under the imprint Saannes Publications in 1974, and copies of that original text are rare. All references to the poems from *The Boatman and Other Poems* and *Welcoming Disaster* will refer to their appearance and pagination in *Poems Twice Told*, hereafter abbreviated as *PTT*.

³ Another poetry text of the era that deserves critical discussion through the protofeminist Canadian Gothic is Anne Hébert’s *Le Tombeau des Rois*, first published in French in 1953; Peter Miller’s English translation (*The Tomb of Kings*) was published in 1967. Links between Hébert’s text and Macpherson’s are intriguing. Hébert’s narrator searches for a “man of salt,” explores the confines of “a closed room,” and is as haunted and haunting as Macpherson’s narrator, declaring: “The dead weary me / the living kill me” (Hébert 49).

⁴ In her article, “Toward a Feminist Hermeneutics: Jay Macpherson’s *Welcoming Disaster*,” Lorraine Weir proposes that Macpherson models this narrative of *nekusis* on the Sumerian myth of Inanna. See “First and Last Things,” *PTT* 70.

⁵ The limits of autobiographical criticism are apparent here. While Macpherson dedicated *The Spirit of Solitude* to her father James Macpherson, her circumspect nature prohibits me from making any argument that he is the only, or the intended, father figure in *Welcoming Disaster*. Delineating the cultural/symbolic Father from the individuated father is never easy; Macpherson’s creation of a mythic “alchemist” father suggests strongly

that F/fathers may be found both within the boundaries of the family and, significantly, beyond them.

⁶The surprising effectiveness of Macpherson's Tadwit the bear (and David Blostein's drawn emblem of child and bear) is matched in oddness by the cover image of Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*. Two girls dressed in Victorian undertaker's garb pose like carnival barkers on boxes painted with depictions of Christ with a crown of thorns and a death's head. Their theatrical air of expectation is strangely appropriate to ghoulish negotiations.

⁷For the idea that the narrator's love for the bear hides a well of anger, I thank Stefan Sereda, who argued eloquently for this possibility in my graduate seminar on the Canadian elegy during the winter of 2007.

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