NANCY DREW AS SHAMAN

Atwood's Surfacing

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It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid.... Apparently, there is something in these initiatory images so necessary to the psyche that if they are not supplied from without, through myth and ritual, they will have to be announced again, through dream, from within — lest our energies should remain locked in a banal, longoutmoded toy-room, at the bottom of the sea. — Joseph Campbell, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*

The speaker in "Procedures for Underground (Northwest Coast)" advises that from the spirit in the underland "you can learn / wisdom and great power, / if you can descend and return safely." The narrator of *Surfacing* follows this ritual pattern of the descent into a watery underworld and the return, as she puts it, "with secrets." The setting is a semi-submerged paradisal island, and the characters — the brother, the father, the lost baby, the narrator herself — are literally or metaphorically underwater. Conventionally, of course, the fallen world is perceived as flooded, as it is in "After the Flood, we." In *Surfacing*, the power dam has raised the lake level twenty feet and has literally drowned the island, the trees, and the Indian pictographs ("My country, sold or drowned, a reservoir"). The narrator, already underwater, dives down into even more water in a shamanistic ritual of descent and return. She is searching for what she calls "the power." "For this gift, as for all gifts, [she] must suffer."

To structure the narrator's quest for "the power," Atwood draws upon popular romance conventions as well as upon related patterns of ritual and myth. On one

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level, Surfacing is a detective story like Anna's The Mystery at Sturbridge, with the Nancy Drew narrator a parody of those intrepid "girls with jackknives and flashlights." Surfacing is also, as Atwood has pointed out in interviews, a ghost story. The activities of the narrator are exercises that heighten the chances of the ghost's revealing himself: the journey to a sacred place, isolation, waiting, and spiritual preparation. The ghosts, when they do appear, turn out to be fragments of the narrator's own psyche that she must reintegrate: her mother as a bird ("I squint up at [the jays], trying to see her, trying to see which one she is") and her father as wolf-shaman ("it gazes at me for a long time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes"). True Romance magazines, the fairy tale patterns of Quebec Folk Tales, and the grail legends are variously invoked to provide ironic parallels with the lives of the central characters. And finally the structure that subsumes all these others is the narrator's quest for a ritual that will give meaning to her life and restore her to health and power.

The opening sentence, "I can't believe I'm on this road again," announces the journey motif and the beginning of the quest. The narrator starts off in the diseased southern city and travels north to the wilderness and to health. Her condition at the beginning she describes using the following terms: "anaesthesia"; a "strangling feeling, paralysis of the throat"; "feeling no emotion"; "amnesia"; amputation ("A divorce is like an amputation"); "like being in a vase"; being "frozen"; a cancellation of the flesh ("A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a siamese twin"); and dismemberment ("we ... don't know how to love, there is something essential missing in us ... Madame at the store with one hand, atrophy of the heart"). The narrator regards herself as dismembered:

after that I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate.... The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb.

She is "cut in two," split between head and heart, logic and intuition, contemplation and action, between her father's legacy of reason and her mother's legacy of feeling.

The rhyme "severed thumb; numb" links the motifs of dismemberment and anaesthesia and seems to echo Marshall McLuhan's work on the numbing and dismembering effects of technology. McLuhan argues in Understanding Media that each of our technologies is an extension of ourselves, a self-amputation of some particular part of our own bodies. Like Narcissus, whose name means narcosis or numbness, we respond to the shock of self-amputation by a generalized numbness that prevents self-recognition.¹ In War and Peace in the Global Village, McLuhan quotes from Finnegan's Wake, "Who gave you that numb?"² and states, "We are all robots when uncritically involved with our technologies."³

involvement with technology. She aligns her narrator's personal crisis of identity with Canada's crisis, as this nation is deluged with technology and Americanization. Surfacing is, among other things, a political book by a writer who has read her George Grant ("When one contemplates the conquest of nature by technology one must remember that that conquest had to include our own bodies"),⁴ her Harold Innis ("We are indeed fighting for our lives... We can only survive by taking persistent action at strategic points against American imperialism in all its attractive guises")⁵ and her Marshall McLuhan ("Submerging natives with floods of concepts for which nothing has prepared them is the normal action of all our technologies").⁶ In Surfacing, health and "the power" are sought as much for Canada as for the narrator.

The narrator's quest can convincingly represent the larger national quest because the narrator is the artist figure. The artist, says McLuhan, is the one who can wake us up from our somnambulism: "The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception."7 At the beginning, admittedly, the narrator is a false artist, an imitator of borrowed styles who has been dissuaded by her "fake huband" from being "a real artist" because "there have never been any important woman artists." She recognizes, however, that from the vantage point of the real Ouebec wilderness the *Quebec Folk Tales* seem inauthentic, alien, and lifeless: "The stories aren't what I expected; they're like German fairy tales"; "this isn't a country of princesses, The Fountain of Youth and The Castle of Seven Splendours don't belong here"; "there should be a loup-garou story in Quebec Folk Tales." She cannot use red for her illustrations of these borrowed legends because "they have to keep the cost down." But in the indigenous (and for Canada, it is suggested, the authentic) art of Indian pictographs, "the predominant colour is red," which is a "sacred colour." By the end, when the narrator burns her drawings of princesses and the Golden Phoenix and rejects "civilized" food, she turns to "red foods, heart colour, they are the best kind, they are sacred."

HE STRUCTURE OF THE REJECTED European folk tales is similar to that of Indian mythology, just as Christian patterns of baptism, ritual descent and spiritual rebirth are similar to the initiation rituals of Indian shamanism that the narrator eventually follows — sickness, descent to the water underworld, resurrection. But the point is that the Christian rituals and the imported European fairy tales and romance patterns no longer work for the narrator. In the course of the narrator's quest, the novel examines three different rituals: Christianity, Americanization, and Indian shamanism. As in any fairy tale, the first two attempts are failures, the third one a success.

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Chapter One ends with a reference to the "redemption" that is still to be achieved through suffering and purgation. But it will not be a Christian redemption, and the "wooden Christ, ribs sticking out" on the roadside crucifix is "the alien god, mysterious as ever." Even in the French-Canadian village, Christianity is losing its force: "the old priest must be gone. What I mean is dead." David, the most unregenerate and Americanized character in the book, sold Bibles door-todoor in the fifties to put himself through theological seminary. For the narrator and, it would seem, for modern society in general, Christianity has become a dead ritual: "no power remained in their bland oleotinted Jesus prints or in the statues of the other ones, rigid and stylized, holy triple name shrunken to swearwords." The narrator desperately needs a meaningful ritual of the sort that Christianity used to provide that would give significance to everyday life. The word that the narrator uses most consistently for this need is "the power." As a child, she was fascinated by Madame (at the store) with one hand — "a great mystery, almost as puzzling as Jesus" — and speculated that "her main source of power was that she had only one hand." She was also attracted to "Jack and the Beanstalk" and felt that if she could get some scarlet runner beans from her father's garden she "would be all-powerful," although she "had no idea what [she]would do with the power once [she] got it."

The figure that initially blocks the narrator's quest for "the power" is her father, whose god is logic and reason and who teaches his children arithmetic and geometry. The pattern involving death and resurrection is crucial in the novel, but her father has affirmed that "You died when your brain died"; "people are not onions, as he so reasonably pointed out, they stay under." Whereas her father explained everything, her mother explained nothing, "which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell." The mother's last words to the narrator do constitute a cryptic answer of sorts. The narrator has said, "I'm not going to your funeral." A funeral should function as a rite of passage to allow the living to come to terms with death. But this ritual has degenerated into an empty social form:

"I never enjoyed them," she said to me, one word at a time. "You have to wear a hat. I don't like liquor." She must have been talking about Church or cocktail parties. She lifted her hand, slowly as if through water.

The mother then makes a further statement, which goes back beyond the Christian ceremony to an earlier vegetation ritual of winter death and spring rebirth: "I didn't get the bulbs in. Is there snow outside?" Significantly, the father does get his garden in before he dies, and when the narrator pulls up an onion, "sliding the loose brown outer skin off from the bulb," the onion appears "white and eye-like."

The father's preoccupation with reason is destructive, but his love for his garden

associates him with the life force. His "ritual" exchange of vegetables with Paul is an annual celebration of fertility. The parents' original creation of this garden in the bush was a labour of love, of civilizing in the best sense — "the product of skill and of compost spaded in, black muck dredged from swamps, horse dung ferried by boat from the winter logging camps."

A structure of contrasting images opposes the life force of the garden to the destructive power of modern technology. Composting and manure and outhouses eventually produce gardens but "what used to bother [the narrator] most about the cities [was] the white zero-mouthed toilets in their clean tiled cubicles.... they roared and made things vanish." The narrator has read her father's books — *Edible Plants and Shoots, The Common Mushroom, A Field Guide to Birds,* and *Animal Tracks and Signs* — and has a precise knowledge about plants and animals: "Wintergreen, wild mint, Indian cucumber; at one time I could list every plant here that could be used or eaten"; but as for the "Americans" with their powerboats, "raygun fishing rods ... sniper eyes," "the only relation they could have to a thing ... was to destroy it."

"Americanization" is the second ritual the novel explores. Its power is "the power to kill." The narrator associates Americanization with the power lines that run into underground concrete bunkers filled with rockets and with the power company that sixty years ago raised the lake level and might do so again: "Twenty feet up. . . . The garden would go but the cabin would survive; the hill would become an eroding sand island surrounded by dead trees." Americans do not necessarily live south of the forty-ninth parallel, of course. The Americans in the novel who kill the heron are from Sarnia and Toronto. Americans are those who believe they can solve the problems of existence by engineering and technology and have consequently offended against the deepest sources of life itself: they have "turned against the gods." The abortion is the narrator's personal experience with technology as applied to sex, and she associates it with other scientific ways to interrupt the natural cycle of life: the pill, artificial womb, stirrups, forceps.

So to what has Americanization brought the narrator? It has brought her to "an evil grail" — the complete destruction of all human life, as represented for her by the abortion:

It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it.

Here Atwood is alluding to the familiar pattern of the grail legends: a questing knight, in order to restore his own sick society, goes on a journey; after preliminary trials he comes at last to a chapel perilous where he confronts death; if he proves himself worthy, he is granted a vision of the Holy Grail which symbolizes power, energy, fertility, and electric community with others; his life-enhancing return to society culminates in marriage and universal renewal. The narrator herself is just such a questing figure, and her journey, at first physical but soon psychological, brings her at last to an underwater version of the chapel perilous.

Her dive into the watery world below the surface is the key event in the book. She is descending into her subconscious, into her own past, and into the unredeemed world. The horror that she confronts there is death:

It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs... a dead thing, it was dead... the lake was horrible, it was filled with death.

She has seen her dead father. But it is also her dead baby and her own spiritual death that at last she can recognize: "I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version." Ritual death is the necessary preliminary to rebirth and the reintegration of the severed pieces of herself. Earlier Anna has asked, "Do you have a twin? . . . because some of your lines are double." And now the narrator, preparing to dive, says, "My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow." In the dive she recovers her lost twin, her shadow. Now she can re-unite heart and head, feeling and rationality. The vision that she sees is at once her father, her lost baby, her own past, and the Indian past — the rock paintings which represent the past of this country, submerged by American technology but still down there waiting to be rediscovered.

Surfacing turns out to resemble the detective stories that Anna so avidly reads. A body is missing and believed dead. The detective-narrator sets off to sift the clues: "Whatever I find inside [the cabin] will be a clue." The map of the district tacked to the wall and the stack of papers are a "treasure map" with accompanying legend. "I finally spotted the key," she says. At first she thinks her father is "Crazy, loony. Bushed" — "total derangement." But when she reads the article "Rock Paintings of the Central Shield," she is like Hercule Poirot, green eyes aglow, pouncing on a clue and rearranging the evidence into a new pattern: "The secret had come clear. . . . My eyes came open, I began to arrange." The reordering of the evidence involves, as so often in detective fiction, a re-identification of the corpse: "It was no longer his death but my own that concerned me ... alive up to a year, a day, then frozen." She is sure now; but as early as the beginning of Part Two she has begun to suspect that the murderer in the case is American technology with its power to fragment, separate body from head, and turn people into "robots or puppets":

I'm not sure when I began to suspect the truth, about myself and about them, what I was and what they were turning into... it was there in me, the evidence, only needing to be deciphered.... I hold inside it [time compressed like a fist] the clues and solutions and the power for what I must do now.

The compressed time that she must examine for clues and solutions is her own

past. Earlier she has said about Anna's hand-reading, "I just wanted to know how long I was going to live, she could skip the rest." She learns that she must remember the past in order to predict the future. This is the paradox of her father's epigram: "The future is in the North, that was a political slogan once; when my father heard it he said there was nothing in the North but the past...." The narrator goes north to her childhood home to accept the legacy of the past as a gift from each of her parents:

I had a talisman, my father had left me the guides, the man-animals and the maze of numbers.

It would be right for my mother to have left something for me also, a legacy. His was complicated, tangled, but hers would be simple as a hand, it would be final. I was not completed yet; there had to be a gift from each of them.

Her father's gift gives her the power to see:

The power flowed into my eyes, I could see into him, he [David] was an imposter, a pastiche . . .

... More than ever I needed to find it, the thing she had hidden; the power from my father's intercession wasn't enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain. Not only how to see but how to act.

Her mother's gift is also a pictograph, not an Indian pictograph but a childhood drawing she had done of herself as a baby in her mother's womb:

That was what the picture had meant then but their first meaning was lost now like the meanings of the rock paintings. They were my guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs, I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power.

Now that she had these two legacies, time, which was compressed like a fist, opens, and she can read past, present, and future in her palm:

I unclose my fist, releasing, it becomes a hand again, palm a network of trails, lifeline, past and future, the break in it closing together as I purse my fingers. When the heartline and the headline are one, Anna told us, you are either a criminal, an idiot or a saint. How to act.

The "funny break" that Anna has noted in the narrator's lifeline is healed. Heartline and headline, intuition and logic, action and contemplation are now one. And now she sees not death but life and she celebrates vital energy flowing through all nature: "But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive."

HE GRATITUDE THE NARRATOR NOW FEELS is not for the Americans, whose ritual of death leads to an evil grail. Nor is it for Christianity which gave her "so little in return": "no power remained in their bland oleotinted Jesus prints. . . ." Her gratitude is all for the Indian gods who, "unacknowledged

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or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed, and freely." She now discovers that her father has gone before her on this same quest, looking for deeper sources of power. The sites he has marked on the map are "sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth":

There was no painting at White Birch Lake and none here, because his later drawings weren't copied from things on the rocks. He had discovered new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I had seen, true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic.

The father had begun perhaps by making a scientific inquiry into the rock paintings but by the end he has become a shaman himself, seeing and recording new visions. The shaman typically withdraws to a sacred abode of the *manitous* such as a rocky cliff and, by fasting and drumming, induces a trance during which he can speak with the spirits, journey to the upper or lower worlds, and see visions. These visions he later paints upon the rock. Atwood includes within the novel itself the essential information that the reader needs to know about shamanism and pictographs. The three paragraphs, ostensibly quoted from Dr. Robin M. Grove's article on rock paintings, condense material from Selwyn Dewdney's Indian Rock Paintings of the Great Lakes.⁸

Shamanism is the source for many details of the novel. The central incident of diving and surfacing is an initiation ritual in which the shaman discovers his vocation. In *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Mircea Eliade discusses the sickness-initiation:

More or less pathological sicknesses, dreams, and ecstasies are ... so many means of reaching the condition of shaman.... that is, they transform the profane, pre-"choice" individual into a technician of the sacred....

[A]ll the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman's vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection....

The content of these first ecstatic experiences ... almost always includes one or more of the following themes: dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the internal organs and viscera; ascent to the sky and dialogue with the gods or spirits; descent to the underworld and conversations with spirits and the souls of dead shamans; various revelations, both religious and shamanic (secrets of the profession).⁹

As well as dismemberment ("I was emptied, amputated") and the underwater journey, Atwood uses the shamanic identification of man with animals, the multilayered shamanic universe, the shamanic boat, and the learning of the secret animal language. Throughout, the narrator is associated with water creatures — fish, heron, and frog. During her dive, she is "like a frog," the amphibious animal that earlier has symbolized unity of body and head. The dive itself is a journey to the underworld that is made possible because the shamanic universe has three levels sky, earth, and underworld — connected by a central axis. According to Eliade, "The pre-eminently shamanic technique is the passage from one cosmic region to another — from earth to the sky or from earth to the underworld. The shaman knows the mystery of the break-through in plane."¹⁰ The narrator describes what this breakthrough must have been like for her father:

When it happened the first time he must have been terrified, it would be like stepping through a usual door and finding yourself in a different galaxy, purple trees and red moons and a green sun.

Compare the first stanza of "Procedures for Underground":

The country beneath the earth has a green sun and the rivers flow backwards.

Atwood typically perceives things in levels. In her poetry, she is interested in underground and above ground and in the boundaries between these levels of water, ground, and air. The multilayered shamanic universe is therefore already congenial to Atwood before she adopts it in *Surfacing*.

A related motif is the boat which carries the gods, the spirits, or the shaman himself on journeys to these other worlds. The narrator has noticed among her father's stack of drawings a half-moon with four knobbed sticks coming out of it: "it became a boat with people, the knobs were their heads." Later when she is underwater, she sees her canoe above her floating "split between water and air, mediator and liferaft." Here, the canoe is both a mediator between cosmic levels and an enclosed space of protection. It is related to the ark image of the "floating house" and the narrator's recollection of, as a child, being with her parents in the canoe: "what stayed in my head was only the mist whiteness, the hush of moving water and the rocking motion, total safety." The contrast, of course, is with the inurderous powerboat. When, on the third dive, the narrator again sees the canoe, it has become a solar boat. Its vital energy contrasts with the death that she finds in the lake: "The green canoe was far above me, sunlight radiating around it, a beacon, safety." In Sacred Art of the Algonkians: A Study of the Peterborough Petroglyphs, Joan and Romas Vastokas discuss in some detail the significance of the boat:

The soul-boat becomes also a vehicle of the sun. In Scandinavian rock art ... the solar-boat ... came "to symbolize everything that arose from the triumphant return of spring: the renewal of vegetation and the revival of fertility in all its forms."¹¹

Accordingly the narrator has penetrated to the deepest sources of power and is now ready to share the sun's energy and renewal. "Feeling was beginning to seep back into me," she says. The renewal is completed with the conception of the new child which she feels surfacing within her, forgiving her, redeeming the lost child.

The narrator completes her shamanic initiation by learning the new secret language. Our damaged language of technological death ("If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them ... a language is everything you do") — this language, she says, "divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole." Technological America with its machinery and its hydroelectric towers and its skyscrapers is a vast Tower of Babel which will collapse in a confusion of tongues. The narrator realizes that she must "immerse [herself] in the other language." Eliade, in his chapter on "Obtaining Shamanic Powers," discusses this secret language:

In the course of his initiation the future shaman has to learn the secret language that he will use during his seances to communicate with the spirits and animal spirits....

Very often this secret language is actually the "animal language" or originates in animal cries....

Animal cries proclaim the presence of the spirits, also proclaimed by animal-like behaviour....

All over the world learning the language of animals, especially of birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature and hence to being able to prophesy....

Imitating animal voices, using this secret language during the seance, is yet another sign that the shaman can move freely through the three cosmic zones: underworld, earth, sky....

But this is not all. In numerous traditions friendship with animals and understanding their language represent paradisal syndromes.... Friendship with animals, knowledge of their language, transformation into an animal are so many signs that the shaman has re-established the "paradisal" situation lost at the dawn of time.¹²

In the last chapters the narrator achieves her animal form. A loon "accepts [her] as part of the land." She leaves her "false body" in the lake. Logic, geometry, borders of all kinds are forbidden. Finally she is ready for the mystical experience for which all her previous initiatory trials have prepared her. She sees herself in skeleton form: "I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh." Eliade comments that to "reduce oneself to the skeleton condition is equivalent to re-entering the womb of this primordial life, that is, to a complete renewal, a mystical rebirth." Similarly the narrator has penetrated to the very sources of power and life and is fused with the energy of nature. She is now one with the sacred place of the gods:

the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark....

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place.

During her ecstatic trance, the narrator can abolish the present fallen human condition and recover the original paradise in which man and animals and nature are at one.

The only stage left in the quest is the return to society. Joseph Campbell out-

lines the pattern of the heroic quest as "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return." He notes, "The return and reintegration with society, which is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and which, from the standpoint of the community, is the justification of the long retreat, the hero may find the most difficult of all."¹⁴ The narrator's anticipated return to society is structurally necessary to complete the two quests of the book — the narrator's personal quest and Canada's quest. The narrator will return to the city to confront "the pervasive menace, the Americans. They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied." Uncritical involvement with our technologies will turn us into zombies and robots. But with the help of the power, the narrator has brought the "evil grail" of technological America to the surface of her consciousness where she can take steps to cope with it. Withdrawal, flight, and invisibility are no longer possible. Therefore her return to the city will not be a return to the old situation and to the old patterns of victimization. She will remember "the power" and live now in the fallen world, her energies released through ritual from what Joseph Campbell calls "a banal longoutmoded toy-room, at the bottom of the sea."

NOTES

- ¹ "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis," Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (Toronto: Signet, 1964), pp. 51-56.
- ² War and Peace in the Global Village (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 97.
- ³ Ibid., p. 18.
- ⁴ Technology and Empire, quoted in Atwood's Survival (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 48.
- ⁵ "The Strategy of Culture" in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 91.
- ⁶ Understanding Media, p. 31.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 33.
- ⁸ Selwyn Dewdney and Kenneth E. Kidd, *Indian Rock Paintings of the Great Lakes*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967).
- ⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, trans. by Willard Trask (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), pp. 33-34.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 259.
- ¹¹ Joan and Romas Vastokas, Sacred Art of the Algonkians (Peterborough: Mansard Press, 1973), p. 126.
- ¹² Shamanism, pp. 96-99.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 63.
- ¹⁴ Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949; rpt. New York: Meridian, 1970), pp. 35-36.