

THE POETRY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

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MARGARET ATWOOD's current popularity stems in part from the fact that her poetry explores certain fashionable minority psychologies. With its cultivation of barely controlled hysteria, for instance, her verse is that of a psychic individual at sea in a materialist society. This hysteria, however, assumes specifically feminine forms and lends Atwood's work certain affinities (of which current popularity is the least important) with that of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. For like these two predecessors, Atwood confronts her own sexuality and the contemporary roles laid down by men for her to play. A minority psychology similar to that which informs her identity as a woman informs her national identity, for Atwood is a contemporary Canadian aware of belonging to a minority culture on the North American continent and in reaction recollecting and re-enacting her pioneer ancestors' encounter with the wilderness and with the native people. Appropriately, the Canadian ancestral experience — repository of the spiritual identity of a people — happens to be best commemorated in the journals and memoirs of some remarkable women, including Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie and Anna Jameson.

Charges of opportunism could easily be levelled against a poet so deeply involved with the minority psyche. But they are answerable by our exhibiting, as I hope to do here, the essential coherence of Atwood's poetic themes. Her poetry succeeds not by masterly technique or style but by a peculiar force of content, by exciting transformations of experience that appear only to the superficial reader as mere opportunities. Among the experiences of being an individual, a woman and a Canadian, Atwood intuits an underlying connection deeper than minority membership. These experiences flesh out in multiple guise the root formula of her poetry. Like a mathematical expression, that formula sustains a wealth of individual existences — of image, motif, subject and dramatic situation. Stated briefly, Atwood's poetry in the six volumes to date¹ concerns itself with the self's inhabitation of spaces and forms and the metamorphoses entailed therein. All that is thematically important derives from this: invasion, displacement, evolu-

tion and reversion, as well as those notions significant enough to warrant book titles — survival, ingestion (cf. *The Edible Woman*, a novel), and surfacing. The message of Atwood's poetry is that extinction and obsolescence are illusory, that life is a constant process of re-formation. The self is eternally divided in its attitude to the forms and spaces it inhabits, simultaneously needing, fearing, desiring and despising them.

Because the scenario of inhabitation takes place through space and time (spaces in time become forms and forms become spaces), we can see its pertinence to the contemporary Canadian's encounter not only with the landscape and its inhabitants but also with the past preserved in part by that landscape — that is, with his pioneer ancestors (whose journey itself enacted the scenario), with the native people and with his own primordiality. Also, since roles are spaces and forms, we can see its pertinence to the current re-definition of femininity. And behind the feminine and Canadian, the individual. If the self's identity as woman and as Canadian is threatened by the variety of the Canadian past and present, its identity as human being is threatened by the fact that self apparently cannot exist *outside* forms and spaces. At best, self is merely reflected off the surfaces of others' forms of self. This is the frightening phenomenology of Atwood's world superimposed, skin-like, upon the illusory solidity of its rocks, animals, artifacts and people.

ATWOOD'S SPACES are rooms, houses and even the human body, but in the beginning they are the spaces fashioned by her pioneer ancestors — the cabin and the clearing. How these spaces were created, inhabited, defended and sometimes abandoned is recorded in the journals and letters of the pioneers and early visitors themselves, which thus provide an illuminating background to the poetry. Always they concern a journey: the journal and guide are the archetypal Canadian literary forms which function in the Canadian literary imagination as does the novel in the English, something Atwood has recognized in subtitling her critical work *A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* and in "re-writing" the *journals* of Susanna Moodie. There was to begin with the ocean voyage and after, more important, the journey across the land. Ireland, Seamus Heaney has noted, has "no prairies/To slice a big sun at evening," and he adds:

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards.

New world pioneers on the other hand encountered such prairies and much else that Ireland lacks: towering mountains and awesome gorges, deserts, icefields and inland seas. The long journey from landfall to backwoods is an overland move-

ment (“surfacing,” one might call it) that even today the Canadian can re-enact, as Atwood does in “Migration: C.P.R.” which chronicles a journey from “the misty east” through “the inner lakes,” prairies, mountains and “faulted gorges” to the forest by the western ocean.

The pioneer’s “long day’s journey in the woods,” as Mrs. Traill describes it in *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), ended not with welcome but with the hostility of wilderness, wild animal and settler. In “Paths and Thingscape,” Atwood’s Mrs. Moodie complains:

I am watched like an invader
who knows hostility but
not where

All are begrudging and “unforgivingly previous” to her. Rarely in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* or in *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), or in the journals of Mrs. Jameson and Mrs. Traill is the red man anything but benign towards the white man, but behind the annoyance of the Indian asked in “First Neighbours” about the toad-like object on the stick lies the real hostility between the races.² In fact, the white man desired the removal of the red man “back from the extending limits of civilisation,” as Mrs. Jameson noted, “even like these forests, which fall before us, and vanish from the earth, leaving for a while some decaying stumps and roots over which the plough goes in time, and no vestige remains to say that here they *have been*.”³ It is upon the “malignant face” of the forest, that most formidable prior occupant of the clearing, that Atwood’s Mrs. Moodie, like all pioneers, vents her greatest wrath. “A Canadian settler *hates* a tree,” adds Mrs. Jameson, “regards it as his natural enemy, as something to be destroyed, eradicated, annihilated by all and any means” (I, p. 96). Settlement could not take place but by the penetration and destruction of the forest. The old was obliterated by the new.

But the new is at first mere negation. Disembarking at Quebec, Atwood’s Mrs. Moodie is “a word/in a foreign language,” but later in the bush her husband is not even that, but is merely “an X, a concept/defined against a blank” (“The Wereman”). The clearing represents the settler’s negative and unintelligible signature upon the wilderness, the displacement of its prior occupants. But soon it signifies a new phase in the scenario of inhabitation: the *immigrant* upon landing who became a *pioneer* upon striking for the backwoods has upon clearing become a *settler*. The pioneer has become a new person as the clearing is a new feature of the landscape. A new flora appears which the settler begins to name as though it had just been created.⁴ The landscape is culturally virgin with no associations.⁵ It is also, and in this notably different from Mrs. Jameson’s native Ireland, too new for ghosts.⁶ For forest and pioneer, settlement is obliteration and a fresh beginning.

The cabin, erected immediately after the first minimally necessary felling, is a space within a space. Like the clearing it is at first blank, a mere negation of the bush. Soon both cabin and clearing are havens (concentric areas of withdrawal) against the forces of the old that return to deny the new. In "Dream 3: Night Bear Which Frightened Cattle," the "lighted cabin" is the last refuge from the bear which invades the clearing like "an echo" of the previous inhabitants. The settler's life is a nightly siege, terrified as he is of being ambushed outside by nightfall. Indeed, cabin and clearing create for the first time in the wilderness the vital dialectic of inside and outside.⁷ "Survival" means the successful maintenance of the inside against the outside constituted by annoying settlers, "trespassing" Indians, wolves and bears, the oppressive summer and "relentless iron winter" (Jameson), the bush and the darkness. The clearing, inside relative to the bush, is outside relative to the cabin, a dialectic Atwood exploits in "Two Fires" when the clearing is mercifully inside the burning forest, but mercifully outside the burning Moodie cabin.

(each refuge fails
us; each danger
becomes a haven)

Here, as in other poems, Atwood represents the enclosed spaces of her locales by parentheses.

Even when positive, the cabin and clearing remain precarious. Mrs. Jameson sees the clearing as a man-made island resisting "a boundless sea of forest." In *The Circle Game*, in such poems as "After the Flood, We," "Descent Through the Carpet" and "Winter Sleepers," Atwood also sees the landscape paradoxically as aquatic. The image of a re-forming sea conveys the idea that the forces displaced by the cabin and the clearing are not really obliterated after all but are, by an Archimedean principle, merely re-located. Nothing is destroyed in Atwood's universe: it simply assumes another space, another form. The forces of the wilderness, *outside* the clearing, shift, when the clearings link up to create villages, towns and finally the suburbs of "The City Planners," *downwards*. The suburban homes, Atwood prophesies,

capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

The clearing reverts; the wilderness resumes. Because in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," from *The Animals in That Country*, she sees the wilderness, by being an "unstructured space," as "a deluge," Atwood likens the cabin to an ark, a motif recurring in her poetry and suggesting that the settler and his descendants at best merely float on top of the unseen forces of the wilderness.

“**I**N EXILE,” writes Atwood, “survival/is the first necessity.” The physical toll in survival is obvious, but in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* Atwood has, as it were, read between the lines of *Roughing It in the Bush* in order to re-create the assault upon the pioneer psyche. The scenarios of journey and settlement are scenarios of profound personality change. European civilized self-assurance quickly gives way, as it does in the first few poems in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, to feelings of worthlessness and self-negation when the settler is confronted by the unstructured space of the bush. In consequence, the clearing is as much psychic as physical, head-space for the embattled personality. But it is also by virtue of precisely that a prison which excludes the distant civilized world as well as giving the illusion of preserving it.⁸ When Atwood’s pioneer stands, the centre of a space unenclosed by any walls or buildings, paradoxically he cries “Let me out!” (“Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer”). Comparably, one old woman in *Roughing It in the Bush* speaks of the settler as “a bird in a cage,” a view Susanna Moodie came to share when she described the purpose of her book as “revealing the secrets of the prison-house.” Climate did not help: Anna Jameson writes of being “imprisoned by this relentless climate” and of being “completely blockaded by ice and mud.”

The feeling of imprisonment frequently led to lethargy and to “inaction, apathy, and, at last, despondency. . . .”⁹ That it is a short step from this to the feelings of persecution suffered by Atwood’s Mrs. Moodie is evidenced by Mrs. Jameson’s fearful resolve to “try all mechanical means to maintain the balance of my mind, and the unimpaired use of my faculties, for they will be needed” (I, p. 172). Though Atwood’s Mrs. Moodie imagines persecution, her fears are grounded in the reality of frequent deaths at the hands of fire, fever, drowning and wild animals. But paranoid delusions are the outgrowth of a schizophrenia rooted in exile itself. In “Thoughts from Underground,” Mrs. Moodie posthumously recalls the agonizing dilemma of wanting to love Canada and actually hating it:

I said I loved it
and my mind saw double.

At first it is a case of the settler physically inhabiting Canada and psychically inhabiting the homeland (a body-mind dislocation common in Atwood’s poetry), but later it is a case of the self torn between occupying the present inside the clearing and the displaced past outside the clearing. The latter wins. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, like Atwood’s other volumes, records how the settlers who dared invade the primal and aboriginal wilderness are in turn invaded and repossessed. John Howison wrote of how the settlers’ “habits of thought at length become assimilated to those of the Indians, and they conceive that they have

wandered out of their sphere, whenever they mentally or sensibly lose sight of the wilderness" (p. 165). Atwood's Susanna Moodie reverts not only to Indian but also to animal form, reflecting the role animals played in the physical and psychical world of the Canadian settlers. In "The Wereman," Mrs. Moodie is a fox, an owl and a spider, for it is as if there is one continuous spirit of the wilderness that assimilates the settler's European self and that merely incarnates itself in various forms. His wife is not even sure she herself has not been transformed:

I can't think
what he will see
when he opens the door

This wilderness spirit is indestructible, which is why Atwood's Mrs. Moodie can speak posthumously and why Atwood, as a poet and as the writer of *The Journals*, is Mrs. Moodie "re-incarnated."

Mrs. Moodie is not merely native and animal, but in the end she is the landscape itself. Ironically, she who inhabited the clearing, displacing prior occupants, is in psychic reality inhabited like the land by the animals. Only when she rounds the first hill when leaving ("Departure from the Bush") is she "unlived in." This total loss of the old self is indistinguishable from acute schizophrenia (it is as though the posthumous poems are not just Atwood's fancy but also the living Mrs. Moodie's fantasies) when at the end of the volume she becomes one with the landscape:

at the last
judgement we will all be trees¹⁰

She lies beneath Toronto, herself one of the displaced wilderness forces driven beneath the settlers' brittle surface arrogance.

THE PIONEER's physical journey was also a psychic journey during which the haughty Old World assumption that the self — humane, civilized, superior to the rest of Creation — existed splendidly independent of its chosen habitats was gradually broken down. For Atwood, the pioneer journey is in addition an extended metaphor for her own journey through the emotional landscape of everyday life. Indeed, the journey can no longer be literal because although Canadians still traverse a vast terrain, they cannot recapture the settlers' imperious feeling that they had discovered the land. That Indians had pre-empted the settlers did not diminish that feeling (the Indians were not really people and when deceased could not qualify even as ghosts), whereas in "Migration: C.P.R." Atwood's characters feel themselves everywhere pre-empted, if not by pioneer ancestors, then by the natives; prairie objects, for example, are

(like an inscribed shard, broken bowl
 dug at a desert level
 where they thought
 no man had been,
 or a burned bone)

The pioneer journey in the metaphoric sense is most graphically presented in "Journey to the Interior" from *The Circle Game*. The similarities Atwood notices at the opening of the poem are not between coastal and interior topography but between the real Canadian landscape and that psychic landscape Atwood inhabits. The coast and interior are in fact radically different (a luxury of Canada's vast landmass) and offer a variation on the distinction between outside and inside we have already noted. But there is an inversion. The wilderness outside the clearing represented danger and unfamiliarity and the clearing safety, whereas the coast in "Journey to the Interior" represents the security of everyday life and the interior the unknown where there is a "lack of reliable charts." The interior is the metaphoric wilderness, that Atwoodesque landscape of lines broken by a curious metrical whim, familiar objects ("lucent/white mushrooms and a paring knife/on the kitchen table") suddenly highlighted and menacing, odd repetitions that are evidence not so much of a poet's laziness as of a journey become a circling in an undecipherable forest.

Atwood's poetry is a journey into this interior landscape between insight and hysteria. Her poetic voice, slightly paranoid — it is difficult to know whether the "we" of so many of her poems actually signifies another person, or whether the poet is using a schizophrenic version of the royal "we" — suits her theme of the metamorphosing and divided self. Like the historical Susanna Moodie, she is a civilized city dweller confronted by what is primitive and irrational in the land around her. And like her, too, she is conscious of being inadequately equipped for the journey. "Provisions" is the contemporary and psychic equivalent of "Looking in a Mirror" from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* in which Mrs. Moodie's china plate and shawl from India become casualties of the forest. "Provisions" has us confronting the wilderness

in thin
 raincoats and rubber boots
 on the disastrous ice, the wind rising,

with the environmental and intellectual paraphernalia of the irrelevant city, and is placed appropriately at the beginning of *The Animals in That Country* as though to warn us of the dangers ahead. But the journey is completed, for many of Atwood's poems concern the psychic hazards of "settlement"; that is, of making sense of our lives and the world around us, and of creating fulfilling relationships.

In "The Planters," Mrs. Moodie's husband is seen moving "between the jagged edge/of the forest and the jagged river." Edges — transitional slivers of doubt between hazard and security, the known and the unknown — were naturally important to settlers. Atwood is preoccupied by edges ("There is no center," she proclaims in "A Place: Fragments"), and in "Evening Trainstation Before Departure" asserts:

I live
on all the edges there are.

And there are many: mountain road-sides (in "Highest Altitude"), ends of forests, deserts and glaciers ("Habitation"), beaches ("Notes from Various Pasts"), a roof's edge and the edge of a mirror (both "Head Against White"). Even Atwood's poetic lines, broken off at conjunctions, prepositions and other weak joints, have jagged edges. All of these are metaphors for mind and emotion pressing against the outer limits of those forms they are forced to inhabit, and simultaneously hugging those boundaries in exquisite fear of the chaos beyond them. The choice is between safe imprisonment and dreadful freedom.

Images and situations of entrapment abound. The city is a prison in "The End of the World: Weekend, Near Toronto" from which the drivers are "intent on getting out." Rooms are recurring and menacing enclosures in Atwood's poetry: in "Frame," she occupies a room whose window she fashioned herself (and showing everyday but typically distorted Atwood images) and from which "I dream/always of getting outside." These spaces become forms containing the self which in turn expands to fill and threaten them. In corollary, the body is a space to be worn, explored or even abandoned. In "Fortification" it is "a metal spacesuit"; in "First Prayer," the speaker thinks of her body as a chrysalis-cast or a flayed skin. This notion is taken even farther in "Astral Traveller" when the speaker leaves her body but finds it difficult, no doubt because of her ambivalence, to return.

It is skin, that membraneous edge between inside and outside, by which Atwood is especially fascinated, though it sometimes takes the forms of outlines, margins or surfaces. The fighting bull in "Bull Song" thinks it a mistake "to have shut myself/in this cask skin," and in "Corpse Song" the decomposed body, addressing the living, exclaims: "I resent your skin, I resent/your lungs, your glib assumptions." There is a sexual aspect of Atwood's dermatophobia (or is it dermatophilia?); it is as though a diffuse, vaginal sexual urge resents the forms nature has decreed for sexual expression and gratification. In "More and More" the speaker wishes to assimilate the world and, apparently, sexually absorb her partner, "if possible through the skin," but unfortunately instead of leaves she has "eyes/and teeth and other non-green/things which rule out osmosis."

In the light of this, it is small wonder that Atwood is drawn to all the orifices

leading from the inside to the outside — highways, doorways, eye-sockets, gills and mouths. Of these, the mouth is the most important. The pioneer's concern with provisioning is transformed by Atwood into a sexual preoccupation. Her belief is that eating is a brute fact opposed to love which, the speaker in "Is/Not" reminds her lover, is not a case of merely filling cavities. It is difficult not to see Atwood's ambivalence towards mouths and eating as a metaphor for her ambivalence towards the phagic receptivity of the female form, with its vaginal mouth, and the male's active delivery of the seminal "food." Not surprisingly, the killers of the hen in "Song of the Hen's Head" who desire its edible treasures are "scavengers/intent on rape."

Like Susanna Moodie, then, Atwood both desires and fears escape from the imprisonment of form. Tantalizing images of unstructured space attend her poetry. In "Migration: C.P.R." the travellers after jettisoning on their way west their "eastern suitcases" emerge with faces scraped blank; however, the rider is attached:

(but needing new
houses, new
dishes, new
husks)

The pioneers were compelled to provide themselves with these new husks, but the husks these contemporary travellers assume are new only in the sense of being novel; actually they are secondhand: primordial, aboriginal, ancestral. Yet if on this level we can no longer find unstructured space, we can still dream of doing so, still entertain the Canadian fantasy of trail-blazing, as Atwood does when she resurrects Captain Cook and has him ill at ease in a fully-mapped world and at length re-entering "a new land cleaned of geographies" ("The Reincarnation of Captain Cook").

On other levels, the uncharted is a genuine threat and seduction. In commending the unstructured space of the wilderness to her lover in "Attitudes Towards the Mainland," the speaker tries to convince him of its solidity. But he will not believe in its solidity; for him it is a place in which one can drown. Both are right, but the solidity of the speaker's wilderness is not the solidity of depth but the solidity of brittle surface off which the self is merely reflected. Atwood's poetry is filled with reflective surfaces — mirrors, eyes, glass, photographs. They suggest how we merely "surface" — float, skate or cast reflections — through life, rarely penetrating behind or below. In "Tricks with Mirrors," for example, the loved one is forever trapped behind the narcissistic reflection of the lover. Fancifully, the subjects in "This Is a Photograph of Me" and "Girl and Horse, 1928" are similarly trapped behind the photograph which is in each case a mere surface

representation of an instant. They are part of a solid world only in the sense of being dead and no longer selves. The solidity of unstructured space, which is fatally incompatible with self, is usually represented in Atwood's poetry, befitting the Canadian landscape, as green. Susanna Moodie is "crept in/upon by green" in "Departure from the Bush"; water is a "green violence" in "River"; a "green vision" invades the progressively insane pioneer; (the Boston strangler is the subject of "The Green Man"); and those charting the land in "The Surveyors" find themselves "changed/by the gradual pressures of endless/green on the eyes." We cannot inhabit this green unstructured space even if we discover it; the most we can do, and the most Atwood and other pioneers do, is to wrest a living-space *from* the wilderness. Otherwise we become an indistinguishable part of the landscape, retreat to the animal and primitive recesses of our being. What this means emotionally and sexually is that we cannot gratify our desires fully, truly inhabit the other person, this side of *becoming* that person. Atwood in "A Pursuit" follows the other

Through the wilderness of the flesh
across the mind's ice,

wanting the other to be a place she can inhabit. Success would be a kind of death. Self and the spaces and forms it occupies are synonymous.

I
N THE MATTER of confronting his primordial and aboriginal past, the contemporary Canadian can be more truly a pioneer than the early settlers. The latter, pre-Darwinian, would not have acknowledged their own animal origins, neither did they acknowledge that the native people were their ancestors in Canada. Atwood on the other hand realizes that mutual inhabitation of the land binds native and settler as surely as racial genetics. These acknowledgements entail their own kind of journey. Archetypally, it is a Heaneyesque journey "inwards and downwards" rather than outwards and across as was the pioneer journey, a journey "underland," as Atwood describes it in "Procedures for Underground," rather than overland. For evidence of the predecessors lies beneath us and, in one more sense of the word, the poet "surfaces" with this evidence after her subterranean exploration. It is also a journey *back* instead of forward ("We must move back," writes Atwood in "A Place: Fragments," "there are too many foregrounds"), in recognition of the fact that metamorphosis is not just spatial — that inhabitation of successive forms and spaces we have already noted — but temporal, that is to say, evolutionary. But because these metamorphoses can be replayed — by vestigiality, by re-enactment, by dream,

by the racial memory that is imagination — we can be one with the past. The traumatic feeling of being cut off from the past is assuaged by this but above all by the life-forms and culture-forms that have been long since vacated by their temporal substance but can be inhabited once more by a protean poetic imagination.

Because the Canadian landscape is so various and primitive, and not cultivated to a European degree, it facilitates man's awareness of the primordial. Vast and depthless lakes seem to commemorate the aquatic origin of life. Atwood exposes the nerve of our fascination with and fear of making the descent. For it is a kind of drowning, daydreams and nightmares of which haunt her poetry. "Descent through the Carpet" begins with a real sea outside a window, but it is a mere surface that reflects the mountains and sailboats. Paradoxically it is inside, through a carpet depicting plants, that the poet begins her descent, drifting down to a darkness populated by "the voracious eater" and "the voracious eaten." When her daydream is shattered, she ascends, breaking the skin of the water; her own skin "holds/remnants of ancestors/fossil bones and fangs." Here and elsewhere, "surfacing," in yet another sense of the word, refers to this decisive evolutionary breakthrough: the appearance of the terrestrial air-breathers.

Human embryonic gills testify to our aquatic origins. In "For Archeologists," Atwood asserts that our terrestrial progenitors too — in this case early cave-painters — "survive" in us not as vestige but as an imprinted and as yet undecoded part of our structure. Less dubitably, the blue jay's reptilian ancestor survives in the bird's "lizard eye." The entire panorama of our evolution is attempted in "A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum" in which the museum becomes a labyrinth down which the poet is forced to view the increasingly ancient relics and remnants of our ancestors. Past Greek and Roman marble, past Chinese bronze and Amerindian wood, the poet reaches — as though at the labyrinth's centre — mastodons, fossil shells and finally "thundering/tusks dwindling to pin-/points in the stellar/fluorescent-lighted/wastes of geology."

If fossils are casts, hollow forms which life has vacated, so too are the skins of animals preserved in museums. In "Elegy for the Giant Tortoises," Atwood imagines the huge reptiles, outdated in their ill-fitting and useless armour, ascending the steps of a museum towards "the square glass altars"

where the brittle gods are kept,
the relics of what we have destroyed,
our holy and obsolete symbols.

Gods in animal forms are represented by the Indian masks Atwood sees in the Royal Ontario Museum. These too are casts, of a cultural rather than animal kind. Even when no longer worn they remain for the poet potent and menacing, as do totem-poles no longer in use.

Why then is my mind
 crowded with hollow totems?
 Why do I see in darkness
 the cast skins, poised
 faces without motion?

she asks in "The Totems." The totem-animals once inhabited her but one night crept out through her eyes, leaving their totems behind. This explanation identifies the poet with Susanna Moodie (cf. "Departure from the Bush") but also with the native people whose totems are the preserved records of the people's having been inhabited by the animal spirits. But in fact the animal gods "with metal feathers and hooked/oracular beaks and human bodies" still exist but merely, in the titular line of another poem, "avoid revealing themselves." There are still ways of reaching them. In "Fishing for Eel Totems," Atwood turns her preoccupation with eating to magical effect, catching a tongue-shaped eel, eating it, thereby ingesting knowledge of the earlier language: "After that I could see/ for a time in the green country." The oral origins of myth are suggested too in "A Messenger."

It is clear that Atwood has been profoundly influenced by Indian mythology, especially from British Columbia where she lived for a time. Many of the poems in *You Are Happy*, and certain poems elsewhere (for example, "The Totems"), resemble Indian tales of origination. Moreover, Atwood's animal imagery is not naturalistic but heraldic and emblematic, and this heraldic stylism she shares with totem-carvers. Consider, for instance, the animals in "Buffalo in Compound: Alberta" which walk in profile "one by one, their/firelit outlines fixed as carvings" and enter "the shade of the gold-edged trees." Even more telling are the metamorphoses which operate within Atwood's sexual and pioneer contexts but which are also the transformations that inspire totemism and involve, as they do in Atwood, men, animals and the landscape. "A carver," wrote Viola E. Garfield, "may include a figure representing the dwelling place of a story character, a camp site or place of refuge, or any phenomenon he desires. He always depicts it as animate. Features of the landscape are usually illustrated as land animals, while those of the sea are given the anatomical characteristics of ocean dwelling creatures. Sometimes they are carved with human, rather than animal, attributes."¹¹ The relationship between man and animal is paramount. "In the beginning people and animals were not distinct and separate, but animals were people, and many retain the ability to think and act as people in the present world . . . Down through the generations men have been known who assumed animal form. . . ." ¹² Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism animate *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and indeed much of Atwood's poetry, and are aspects of the primordial unity to which her characters and personae revert. The section of poems in *You Are Happy* entitled "Songs of the Transformed" seems especially

indebted to Indian cosmology, concerning as they do human spirits in animal shapes. It is no coincidence that “Owl Song,” in which the owl is the heart of a murdered woman, bears a resemblance to the Tlingit and Haida tale of the unkind woman turned to an owl and depicted on totem poles (Garfield, pp. 26-27). We could even argue that the stylistic metamorphoses with which we are familiar in poetry — metaphor, simile and personification — are in Atwood’s poetry derived as much from a totemic awareness as from poetic convention.

AS MUCH AS the journey overland, the journey underland is a journey inwards, an exploration of the self and its relationships. Atwood has discovered on this journey that one price of evolution has been our loss of an ancient language of signal and skin. The words we use are really vestiges of more potent words that now, as the poet tells us in “Notes from Various Pasts,”

lie washed ashore
on the margins, mangled
by the journey upwards to the bluegrey
surface, the transition

The act of love is one way back to that submarine reality. In “Pre-Amphibian” the lovers are released from the lucid solidity of day into an aquatic primordial night where their ancestors, in a suggestively sexual image, are “warm fish moving.” When the act is completed, the lovers are “stranded, astounded/in a drying world” with the air “ungainly” in their new lungs. In such a poem as this, Atwood betrays a horror of fixed form, which is associated with daylight, solidity, dry land, coldness, mind and racial orphanhood. The lover in “Eventual Proteus” has, as the relationship developed, re-enacted the evolutionary scenario — he has been rock, fish, mammal and bird — but now that he has reached the condition of man (that is, the relationship has peaked) and evolutionary forms have given way to dull social spaces (“vacant spaces/of peeling rooms/and rented minutes”), love is no longer possible. The lover cannot resume the legends of his disguises: his emotional shape is brittle and final.

Yet the alternative to fixed forms and spaces is the emptiness they enclose, and of hollowness and vacuity Atwood has a morbid dread. Equally feared is the water from which ancestral forms must be dredged. Her pervasive fear of drowning seems to be a fear of the poetic imagination, and her relative indifference to poetic form I read as a studied and negative concern with it, a determination not to succumb to its hollow and dermal illusions of solidity. Fear of drowning and the recurring images of surfacing seem in addition to indicate a thinly-veiled queasiness about birth: the phylogenetic ocean might equally be the

amniotic fluid and her references to skin references to the amnion. But it is hard, too, not to read fear of drowning, after Virginia Woolf, as a disguised repudiation of a sexuality that leads to merely banal coupling. Better, it would seem, to return directly, at least in imagination, to the presexual unity of being to which coupling seems a clumsy attempt to revert. Either way, the price paid is the unique integrity of the self, and this Atwood is loath to surrender. Drowning images the loss of self; “going under,” which is a necessary operation to recover the past, is also the process of succumbing to anonymizing forces hostile to the self; “surfacing” is to come through with both a knowledge of the past and an intact self.

Not that old forms are acceptable simply because they represent a kind of dry land. Feelings of being marooned, beached and stranded pervade Atwood’s poetry; wreckage and relics of relationships are strewn on her shores. Often these feelings derive from Atwood’s sense of being a woman in a man’s world. It is as if women have suddenly surfaced, been cast precipitately among the air-breathers and are uncertain what roles to inhabit. The poems in *Power Politics* and the “Circe/Mud Poems” sequence in *You Are Happy* are re-examinations of women’s inherited roles, the former psychological and the latter mythological.

The Circe episode in *The Odyssey* is, like other myths Atwood has borrowed (of Proteus, the phoenix, Frankenstein and Amerindian totemism), a myth of metamorphosis, pressed by Atwood into curious service of her two overriding themes. First of all, Circe is contemporary woman addressing contemporary man. When Circe disclaims all responsibility for her actions in *The Odyssey* (itself a male fantasy), she is contemporary woman renouncing the roles men have created for her. It was not she who turned the men into swine, she asserts, but their own masculine nature no longer at one with the female sea on whose rim they have been spilled. She did not desire Ulysses, either his presence (“One day you simply appeared in your stupid boat”) or his putative charms. Indeed, she is tired of masculine mythic heroes, of male heraldry and hollow heroics:

Men with the heads of eagles
no longer interest me

She searches instead for those who have escaped mythologies (as she wants to escape *The Odyssey*) and if they desire a metamorphosis, “they would rather be trees.”

This echo of Susanna Moodie (“at the last/judgement we will all be trees”) connects these Circe poems with Atwood’s pioneer theme. Homer’s sea, in the two italicized poems framing the Circe sequence, is transformed into a forest: his epic has become a Canadian odyssey. Circe is the voice and spirit of the wilderness — now female — resenting the penetrations of the male pioneers. As though addressing a pioneer, Circe asks petulantly of Ulysses: “Don’t you get tired of

saying Onward?" Yet Atwood is not being anti-pioneer. Circe at length comes to accept Ulysses, and is even apprehensive about his departure which is inevitable because "you leave in the story and the story is ruthless." Beginning in rebellion against her role in the epic, she at last defers to its narrative ineluctability. Likewise, the woman must accept the man, and the bush the pioneer.

Forms, spaces and roles are inescapable. Besides, "form," as Gaston Bachelard tells us, "is the habitat of life." And also, we might add, of identity. In reflecting this, Atwood's poetry is emphatically prepositional, even though the poet identifies prepositions, because they "pre-position" substance, with the enemy. The inescapable must constantly be resisted. In her first volume of poems, Atwood repudiates all prepositions except one: "with." The closing lines of "A Place: Fragments" express the enigma and dilemma of Margaret Atwood's highly personal relationship to the confusion that is womanhood and Canada:

not above or behind
or within it, but one
with it: an

identity:
something too huge and simple
for us to see.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Circle Game* (Toronto: Anansi, 1967; first published by Contact Press, 1966), *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto: Oxford, 1968), *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford, 1970), *Procedures for Underground* (Toronto: Oxford, 1970), *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), and *You Are Happy* (Toronto: Oxford, 1974).
- ² "First Neighbours" is a good example of how Atwood adapts incidents from Mrs. Moodie's book: it was not Mrs. Moodie who asked the Indian about the deer liver, but a young friend, and the Indian laughed when replying. *Roughing It in the Bush* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923), p. 483.
- ³ *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, II (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), pp. 249-50.
- ⁴ "It is a remarkable fact . . . that when one growth of timber is cleared from the land, another of quite a different species springs up spontaneously in its place," observes Mrs. Jameson, I, p. 95; see also Mrs. Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 78. Of her habit of naming whichever plant was new to her, Mrs. Traill allowed: "I suppose our scientific botanists in Britain would consider me very impertinent in bestowing names on the flowers and plants I meet with in these wild woods," p. 61. We might call this an Adamic motif in pioneer literature. Compare Mrs. Moodie: "Every object was new to us. We felt as if we were the first discoverers of every beautiful flower and stately tree that attracted our attention, and we gave names to fantastic rocks and fairy isles, and raised imaginary houses and bridges on every picturesque spot which we floated past during our aquatic excursions," p. 263. If the pioneer's self-comparison with Adam was not conscious, comparison with Robinson Crusoe was: see Traill,

- p. 53, Moodie, p. 342, and *Early Days in Upper Canada: The Letters of John Langton* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), p. 113.
- ⁵ "In Canada the traveller can enjoy little of the interest derived from association, either historical or poetical," Jameson, II, p. 104.
- ⁶ Mrs. Moodie records a conversation she had on this topic with a friend, and adds: "The unpeopled wastes of Canada must present the same aspect to the new settler that the world did to our first parents after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden; all the sin which could defile the spot, or haunt it with the association of departed evil, is concentrated in their own persons," Moodie, p. 251.
- ⁷ This phrase I borrow from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
- ⁸ "The sympathies which once bound the settlers to the world, and made them feel a common interest with the rest of mankind, are in the course of time broken and annihilated, and they listen to details of recent battles, murders, earthquakes, and conflagrations, with as much *nonchalance* as if the events had happened in a planet that had long since ceased to exist." John Howison, *Sketches of Upper Canada* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1821), p. 164.
- ⁹ Moodie, p. 448. Both Howison, p. 164, and Jameson, I, p. 171 speak of lethargy as a hazard of settler life.
- ¹⁰ This notion of Mrs. Moodie's is not very different from the notions of the paranoid schizophrenic Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.
- ¹¹ *Meet the Totem* (Sitka: Sitka Printing Company, 1951), pp. 43-44. For a further account of Northwest totems, see Viola E. Garfield and Linn A. Forrest, *The Wolf and the Raven* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1948).
- ¹² Garfield, p. 7. The important role of animal and bird skins in Indian tales of transformation (see Garfield and Forrest) might illuminate Atwood's pre-occupation with skin.

from OUT THERE: EMILY CARR

Tom Marshall

silent fire green apocalypse
still and full fire gathering
around the fierce

old woman of the forest at
her easel her dis-ease her
ecstasy:

leaf and bough interlocked in
carved nebulae cloud-trees
leaf-

galaxies that surge out of
void space leaving off
on air