POWER POLITICS IN BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

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> Is it possible for men and women to stop mythologizing, manipulating, and attacking one another?
>
> MARGARET ATWOOD, 1971

IF THE "argument" of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* is "Cruel Chastity," the argument of Atwood's *Power Politics* is cruel sexuality. The cover design[1] pictures a knight in armour from whose extended arm and gauntletted hand depends, like a game trophy, the body of a woman, torso swathed in mummylike bandages, head down, hair trailing on the ground at the knight's feet. This inversion of the traditional posture of *homo erectus* — a deliberate echoing of The Hanged Man of the Tarot pack — is repeated in the novel *Surfacing* with David's sadistic upending of his wife, " 'twatface' " Anna. In *Power Politics*, as in Atwood's two novels, the unrequited love of courtly myth gives way to its equally frustrating modern form, a hedonistic, yet somehow mechanical union. The woman in *Power Politics* feels that her being is lacerated and her capacity for vision destroyed by subjection to a sadomasochistic sexual love:

> you fit into me
> like a hook into an eye
> a fish hook
> a open eye

Atwood's ironic inversion of courtly love connects her art with the revelations of MacLuhan, Millett, Roszak, and Chesler about the social mythology of Western culture. Romantic obsession with lover or husband is presumed to provide the woman with her most satisfying form of existence. "To a man, love and life are things apart. To a woman, love is life itself," preaches The Sensuous Woman, echoing Byron.[2] The compulsively exact male/female polarity of "doing" and "being" implied by Atwood's sardonic conversion of garment fastener into

deadly weapon expresses the conviction of the female prisoner of the machismo love structure that romantic love, in its modern version, is a devastating mode of existence. "Have to face it I'm/finally an addict," the "hooked" woman in *Power Politics* concludes. In "an air stale with aphorisms", a unique relationship that is sustaining yet liberating and joyous does not develop and, through a painful succession of claustrophobic encounters, Atwood suggests that maybe her female persona is looking for something that just doesn't exist.

Recent studies of the situation of women in our patriarchal society have established that the essential female traits are considered to be passivity, masochism, and narcissism.[3] Atwood's "fish hook . . . open eye" image perfectly condenses this cultural definition of "normal" female personality and emotional capacity and hurls it at the complacent romantic sensibility. Hence the poet Robert Read writes of "Atwood as acupuncture"; her manipulations anaesthetize his persona so that she may gulp his heart down her "icy throat" (*The Canadian Forum*, Dec., 1972, 9). But Atwood is also aware of the basic victor/victim patterning she explores in *Survival* (1972), her thematic guide[4] to Canadian literature, as a vicious circle. The woman in *Power Politics* can proclaim with an ironic self-awareness that verges on compassion: "Night seeps into us/through the accidents we have/inflicted on each other/Next time we commit/love, we ought to/choose in advance what to kill."

To Atwood, the love-aggression complex is an historical-personal fact. The cover of *Power Politics* expresses the predicament of women in the sexist society:

> My love for you is the love
> of one statue for another: tensed
>
> and static. General, you enlist
> my body in your heroic
> struggle to become real:
> though you promise bronze rescues
>
> you hold me by the left ankle
> so that my head brushes the ground,
> my eyes are blinded . . .
>
> There are hordes of me now, alike
> and paralyzed . . .

The theme of *Power Politics* is role-engulfment: "You refuse to own/yourself, you permit/others to do it for you . . ." The self is lost to the social role of romantic lover, warrior, wife, superman: fulfilment means incarnation within the

archetype: "... through your own split head/you rise up glowing;/the ceiling opens/a voice sings Love Is A Many/Splendoured Thing/ you hang suspended above the city/in blue tights and a red cape,/your eyes flashing in unison". Self-emergence is as difficult as pacifism in a world of war: "If you deny these uniforms/and choose to repossess/yourself, your future/will be less dignified, more painful, death will be sooner ..." Beyond the mask of social role lies the paradox of Western culture: a postulated uniqueness of self that may not exist, or perhaps cannot be known, if it does exist:

> You drift down the street
> in the rain, your face
> dissolving, changing shape, the colours
> running together
>
> My walls absorb
> you, breathe you forth
> again, you resume
> yourself, I do not recognize you
>
> You rest on the bed
> watching me watching
> you, we will never know
> each other any better
> than we do now.

The antithesis of the mask is the "face corroded by truth,/crippled, persistent," asking "like the wind, again and again and wordlessly,/for the one forbidden thing:/love without mirrors and not for/my reasons but your own." Poised on the brink of a metaphysical negation of individuality, the disillusioned female lover is possessed by a harsh nostalgia. At the same time there is a continuation of a previous movement in Atwood's poetry towards accepting the visitation of archetypal presences as a substitute for authentic interknowledge of the selves, as in "your jewelled reptilian/eye in darkness next to/mine" or "you descend on me like age/you descend on me like earth." But the implicit quest is always for some alternative to the sadistic penetration and destruction of the "fish hook-open eye" relationship, for some "reality" behind the engulfing political role, and for some communion with that "reality". *Power Politics* confronts us with an entropic modern world in which a formerly solar masculinity now operates as a suction pump to exhaust and destroy the environment:[5]

You are the sun
in reverse, all energy
flows into you and is
abolished; you refuse
houses, you smell of
catastrophe, I see you
blind and one-handed, flashing
in the dark, trees breaking
under your feet, you demand,
you demand

I lie mutilated beside
you; beneath us there are
sirens, fires, the people run
squealing, the city
is crushed and gutted,
the ends of your fingers bleed
from 1000 murders

The imagery in Atwood's novels also expresses mechanization and destruction, but there the woman's helpless suffering or retaliation changes into an urgent desire for liberation.[6] In *The Edible Woman*, where social intercourse proceeds by means of "finely adjusted veneers," and the dominant aesthetic is conformity to the consumer ideal ("I love you especially in that red dress") images express role-engulfment as an omnipresent fate shared by everyone from the protagonist, Marian, a reluctant market researcher, to the "office virgins". To Marian, her fiancé's very clothes "smugly [assert] so much silent authority," she fears they would be warm, if touched. Dickens' caricatures and Bergson's essay on mechanization as a principle of comedy seem to underlie Atwood's satirical description of character and behaviour. Despite the humour, sex role mechanization is associated with death, until Marian finally sees Peter as a "dark homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon". A conditioned product of his consumer society, Peter is preoccupied with establishing, perpetuating, and worshipping himself within the glossy confines of the urban male image: a *Playboy* bachelorhood followed in due time by a *House and Garden* marriage. The "lethal weapon" with which he tracks and attempts to capture Marian is, of course, a camera; escaping from its focussing eye, Marian runs away from aggressive consumption and towards selfhood, rejecting the role of "soapwife" in a never-ending soap opera.

Deciding to remain an individual involved in a variety of human relationships,

Marian defeats the shaping power of the sexist consumer society. Making a surrogate self out of cake and then eating it in a comic parody of ritual cannibalism, she both destroys a false image and reabsorbs her culturally split-off female self. This form of magic, a self-assertive process of encoding and eliminating what she is *not*, looks forward to the ritual destruction of false images of the self at the end of *Surfacing*; it is a comic anticipation of the magic more seriously practiced by the schizoid personality to restore its connection with the world.

Marian's fiancé refuses to eat her cake body; unable to liberate himself from consumerhood by comic communion, he rejects even the possibility of self-knowledge. Peter's social world is luxurious, totally artificial, self-consciously sensual; the mirrored spaces of his apartment lobby epitomize the glittering surfaces of urban reality: the world of technological hedonism founded on industrial technology. The "high electric vibration of this glittering space", is the concept of the ego as consumer — the grossly inflated ego extending itself in voluptuous narcissism through its glittering "made-up" surfaces: images of chrome and glass, arranged interiors, iced cakes, elaborate hairdos, face-makeup, sequinned dresses, ritualized, mechanized social behaviour. It is in reaction to this world of surfaces that Marian slowly becomes unable to eat anything at all. Psychoanalytically, the ego of the cultural personality is shown as being in a state of fixation at the level of oral aggression, an infantile state of consciousness in which "the good" is the consumable or edible, including other people. Marian's consumption of the "edible woman" is a transformation ritual to get her outside of this one-dimensional social nexus, in which the potential self is condemned to collective narcissism as an alternative to genuine interaction with others.

In *Power Politics*, sexual love is imaged several times as a shattering of the ego that seems to be epitomized in the collision between mirrors of "They travel by air:" "your/body with head/attached and my head with/body attached coincide briefly/. . . we hurtle towards each other/at the speed of sound, everything roars/we collide sightlessly and/fall, the pieces of us/mixed as disaster/and hit the pavement of this room/in a blur of silver fragments." In the semantic universe of technological man, what ought to be separate modes of existence somehow mirror each other through the shaping effect of myth. Hence velocity and violence enter into personal relationships. The woman cries to her lover, "I lie mutilated beside/you . . . How can I stop you?/Why did I create you?" Men and women are political prisoners of the sexist society, trapped as victors/victims in their own reflections of the world and of each other. Only in orgasm ("a kick

in the head ... sharp jewels/hit and my/hair splinters") or in fantasied death do the mirrors shatter.[7]

A persistent strain in Atwood's imagery, appearing in the poetry as well as in *Surfacing*, is the head as disconnected from, or floating above, the body.

> But face it, we have been
> improved, our heads float
> several inches above our necks
> moored to us by
> rubber tubes and filled with
> clever bubbles, ... *(Power Politics.)*

Often the imagery describes the body as a mechanism remotely controlled by the head; sometimes the neck is sealed over; always the intellectual part of the psyche is felt to be a fragment, dissociated from the whole. The "head" of Atwood schizoid persona is the "Head" described in Michael McClure's "Revolt" (reprinted in Roszak's *Sources*,) the Head that "quickly ... fills with preconception and becomes locked in a vision of the outer world and itself.... The Head [that] finally may act by self-image of itself, by a set and unchanging vision that ignores the demands of its Body."[8] We think of Anna in *Surfacing*, locked into her *Playboy* centrefold stereotype, her soul trapped in a gold compact, her capacity for love locked into a sadomasochistic pattern. The narrator describes her:

> Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's head. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paper doll wardrobe, she copulates under strobe lights with the man's torso while his brain watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room, her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment ...

Anna conforms; therefore, she is. The narrator inhabits her own cartesian hell. Locked into a sex role herself by the conspiracy of her friends, pursued by "geometrical sex" as "an abstract principle", her past "marriage" and "baby" a fantasy rationalization or restructuring of the personal history she cannot live with, she is clearly intended to be a representative schizoid personality: "I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time.... At some

point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase . . ."

During the course of her search for her father, a biologist living in isolation near the Quebec-Ontario border who has mysteriously disappeared, she becomes painfully aware of "what circuits are closing" in her friends' heads and in her own. Responsible for the group's survival in the wilderness setting, she finds the mandatory sexual "liberation" of her lover and friends depressing and alienating. For her, it depersonalizes them into cartoon figures or rock drawings, linear caricatures of humanity. "Shadowing" her along the trail to where she is pragmatically contemplating, not the "names," but the "forms" and "uses" of the various plants and fungii, Anna's husband David imposes his one-dimensional, linear, or "phallic" thrust on nature:

> [The Death's Angel] sprang up from the earth, pure joy, pure death, burning, white like snow.
>
> . . . "Hi, watcha doin'?" he said . . .
>
> . . . it was like trying to listen to two separate conversations, each interrupting the other. "A mushroom," I said. That wouldn't be enough, he would want a specific term . . . "Amanita."
>
> "Neat," he said, but he wasn't interested. I willed him to go away but he didn't; after a while he put his hand on my knee. . . . His smile was like a benevolent uncle's; under his forehead there was a plan. . . .
>
> "How about it?" he said. "You wanted me to follow you." . . . He reached his arm around me, invading . . . I twisted away and stood up . . . "You're interfering." I wiped at my arm where he had touched it.
>
> He didn't understand what I meant, he smiled even harder. "Don't get uptight," he said, "I won't tell Joe. It'll be great, it's good for you, keeps you healthy." Then he went "Yuk, yuk," like Goofy.

Through the perceptions of her narrator, Atwood records again the pathology of a sexual relationship in which the male asserts his masculinity by inflicting physical or psychological pain:

> . . . then [Anna's] voice began . . . a desperate beggar's whine, *please, please* . . . She was praying to herself, it was as if David wasn't there at all. *Jesus jesus oh yes please jesus.* Then something different, not a word but pure pain, clear as water, an animal's at the moment the trap closes.
>
> It's like death, I thought . . .

> "He's got his little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them, so I'm never sure. He's crazy, there's something missing in

him, you know what I mean? He like to make me cry because he can't do it himself . . . "

Echoing Laing's description of the depersonalized alienated personality — "Bodies halfdead: genitals dissociated from genitals" — the narrator conceives a mental ideogram for David's kind of love: "it would be enough for him if our genitals could be detached like two kitchen appliances and copulate in mid-air, that would complete his equation." Her sudden vision of David as "an imposter, a pastiche", relates him to the "creeping Americanism"[9] that she feels is moving up into Canada, destroying the landscape, the animals, and the people. "He didn't even know what language to use, he's forgotten his own, he had to copy. Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches . . . He was infested, garbled . . . it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true." At her worst moment of alienation, she sees those around her as evolving, "half-way to machine, the left-over flesh atrophied and diseased".

The cultural link between depersonalized sex and modern technology is suggested by George Steiner in *In Bluebeard's Castle: Notes Towards a Redefinition of Culture.*[10] Steiner comments on the significance of the "maniacal monotony" of de Sade:

> . . . that automatism, that crazed repetitiveness, . . . directs us to a novel and particular image, or rather silhouette, of the human person. It is in Sade . . . that we find the first methodical industrialization of the human body . . . Each part of the body is seen only as a part and replaceable by "spares". In . . . Sadian sexual assaults, we have a brilliantly exact *figura* of the division of labour on the factory floor.

Throughout *Surfacing,* as in Sadian fantasy, sex is linked with mechanization, coercion, and death:

> . . . I didn't want him in me, sacrilege, he was one of the killers . . . he hadn't seen, he didn't know about himself, his own capacity for death.
>
> "Don't," I said, he was lowering himself down on me, "I don't want you to."
>
> "What's wrong with you?" he said, angry; then he was pinning me, hands manacles, teeth against my lips, censoring me, he was shoving against me, his body insistent as one side of an argument.

Anna's compulsive need to conform to male expectations makes it impossible for her, despite a degree of self-knowledge, to view other women as friends ("she resented me because I hadn't given in [to David], it commented on her," and fills her with unconscious self-loathing. As Anna's relationships with others seem

to fall almost totally within a general sadomasochistic tendency, and as her love for David seems to be a kind of death, so detective stories are her "theology".

To repulse David's attack, the narrator is able to use magically her awareness of his golem quality:

> His wrist watch glittered, glass and silver: perhaps it was his dial, the key that wound him, the switch. There must be a phrase, a vocabulary that would work, "I'm sorry." I said, "but you don't turn me on."
>
> "You," he said, searching for words, not controlled any more, "tight-ass bitch."

Obviously, David is projecting. In David, and to a lesser extent in Joe, Atwood creates a parody of the mighty hunter:

> [They] appeared . . . one at either end of a thinnish log. They were proud, they'd caught something. The log was notched in many places as though they'd attacked it . . . David wanted some footage . . . for *Random Samples* . . . In the end they stuck the axe in the log, after several tries, and took turns shooting each other standing beside it, arms folded and one foot on it as if it was a lion or a rhinoceros.

Their film, a development from the camera imagery of *The Edible Woman*, is an aimless stockpiling of randomly chosen images — a linear, mechanical imitation of natural flux that is the equivalent in art of their other male activities. Just as ineffectual hacking at the log is rationalized as male strength, so a total lack of vision becomes creative spontaneity when David decides that the film "might be even better if it was out of focus or over-exposed, it would introduce the element of chance, it would be organic." In both novels, Atwood satirizes a general tendency to rationalize — or transcendentalize — conformity to unsatisfactory behaviour patterns.

In connection with their posturing for the film, the narrator senses again the vicious yet pathetic narcissism of David and of her lover, Joe: "He didn't love me, it was an idea of himself he loved and he wanted someone to join him, anyone would do . . ." Fear and hatred of the repressed "female" element of personality erupts in David's conversation:

> "None of that Women's Lib," David said, his eyes lidding, "or you'll be out in the street. I won't have one in the house, they're preaching random castration, they get off on that, they're roving the streets in savage bands armed with garden shears."

To Atwood's intuitively psychoanalytical consciousness of human nature, engulfment in the sexual role, as she satirically exposes it in *Surfacing*, means that the

ego of the cultural personality tends to become fixated at the stage of anal-sadism, condemned to the hellish circle of self-definition through violence, in which each man kills the thing he loves, in one way or another.

The end of Chapter 18 brings the sexual politics of *Surfacing* to a ritual climax of judgment and rejection by the peer group:

> "She hates men," David said lightly. "Either that or she wants to be one. Right?"
>
> A ring of eyes, tribunal; in a minute they would join hands and dance around me, and after the rope and the pyre, cure for heresy . . .
>
> "Aren't you going to answer," Anna, said, taunting.
>
> "No," I said.
>
> Anna said, "God she really is inhuman," and they both laughed a little, sorrowfully.

Rejecting her assigned sex role, Atwood's protagonist becomes the modern equivalent of the heretic or witch — the mentally ill or "inhuman" person, the deviant by means of whose existence "normal" values are asserted and maintained. At this point, the expulsion/escape of the unfeminine wilderness guide begins. Skulking animal-like beyond the clearing until her friends have abandoned her (as she wishes), she approaches and returns from the verge of total madness.

Alone in the house her father built, she reflects: "Logic is a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror." Starting to groom herself, she feels a "surge of fear", knows the brush is "forbidden", knows why:

> I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face: . . . reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's towards the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken.

She then destroys all the "artifacts" of her past life: among other symbols, her childhood drawings, "the rabbits and their archaic eggs"; the "confining photographs" of her family heritage; her own false art, the "bungled princesses, the Golden Phoenix awkward and dead as a mummified parrot". Her ritual destruction of all falsely defining images of her self and others, her temporary rejection of all linear structures (house, fence, even garden), her reversion to primitive survival by eating roots and mushrooms, leads her to an hallucinatory identification with the matrix of nature, in which the artificial structures of language and culture dissolve for a moment, and she becomes a microcosm of the biosphere:

> The forest leaps upward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it, columns of

sunlight frozen; the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment.

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word.

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground.

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.

As ATWOOD NOTES in the Introduction to *Survival*, Northrop Frye suggests that in Canada "Who am I?" at least partly equals "Where is here?" Here, in *Surfacing*, is the liberated naked consciousness, its doors of perception symbolically cleansed; the "place" is the Canadian wilderness, which becomes the new body or rediscovered original body of the psychosomatic human. The radiant plurality of the organismic realm into which the narrator descends is epitomized in the image of the frog: "A frog is there, leopard frog with green spots and gold-rimmed eyes, ancestor. It includes me, it shines, nothing moves but its throat breathing." The fairy-tale theme of metamorphosis is present: the narrator transforms herself from a schizoid personality into a basic human creature by going down into forest, swamp, and water, into a primitive Edenic reality where frogs, no longer revolting or worthless, become fellow creatures of the biosphere — breathing, shining kinfolk of the human. The basic metaphor of descent and surfacing is itself a transformation of Atwood's inherited romantic image of death by drowning. The last part of the novel is thus a paradigm of descent into and ascent from the fluid ego boundary state of schizophrenia.[11] But it is a carefully controlled, artistically simulated descent, of therapeutic purpose and value within the psychoanalytic dimension of the novel. The ego core (or inner self) of the narrator always retains its integrity, except for a fleeting moment during the peak experience of hallucinatory oneness with nature where Atwood seems to be synthesizing a primitive state of mind analogous to Lévy-Brühl's "participation mystique". Like Laing, Atwood seems to believe that schizophrenia is a form of psychic anarchy: a usually involuntary attempt by the self to free itself from a repressive social reality structure. John Ayre quite rightly terms her a "psychic iconoclast",[12]

In *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman*, it is as if Atwood had inferred from the glittering surfaces of our social images the Freudian theory of personality as narcissistic, accomplishing self-definition through various forms of aggression,

ranging from overt coercion to the subtle forms of unconscious "induction" revealed by Laing. At the end of *Surfacing*, when the wilderness guide returns to the cabin where she had at the beginning of her descent into madness turned the mirror to the wall, symbolically rejecting the feminine image represented by Anna's gold compact, she turns the mirror around again and regards herself as she has become:

> ... in [the mirror] there's a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch eyes staring blue as ice from the deep sockets; the lips move by themselves. This was the stereotype, straws in the hair, talking nonsense or not talking at all. To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood: their definition of sanity.
>
> That is the real danger now, the hospital or the zoo, where we are put, species and individual, when we can no longer cope. They would never believe it's only a natural woman, state of nature, they think of that as a tanned body on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves; not this, face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bathmat stuck with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centrefold.

Beneath this ironic transformation of Narcissus' mirror lies Szasz's concept of the "mentally ill" person as political prisoner of the social reality structure of his society, as enforced by institutional psychiatry, Laing's "mind police". A fusion of many literary forms, Menippean satire, diary, wilderness venture, even the Canadian animal story, *Surfacing* is the classic human animal story: the wilderness guide as social deviant becomes a scapegoat, driven out of the technological society for her sexist peers so that they may define themselves by their rejection of her.

By the end of the psychological quest, it is clear why, as Atwood stated earlier in *The Circle Game*, "Talking is difficult" and why in *Surfacing* "language is everything you do". The difficulty in human relations, metaphored in *Surfacing* as exile from the biosphere, is metaphysically related to the exploitative use of language to impose psychological power structures. The need for communion in *Power Politics* is paralleled by the realization that language tends to warp in the hand from tool to weapon: "The things we say are/true; it is our crooked/ aims, our choices/turn them criminal," and there is a corresponding recognition of the value of silence: "Your body is not a word,/it does not lie or speak truth either./It is only here or not here."

In "Hesitations outside the door", Bluebeard's castle is the place where "you twist all possible/dimensions into your own"; it is the house "we both live in/

but neither of us owns." As the self defines itself in relation to others, so Bluebeard cannot be himself without a victim/wife. Each induces the other to participate in the structuring of the myth. There is a surrealistic sense in which language itself, because it is habitually and unconsciously used to erect and impose false structure, is Bluebeard's castle. The "wife" cries to "Bluebeard" "Don't let me do this to you,/you are not those other people,/you are yourself/Take off the signatures, the false/bodies, this love/which does not fit you/This is not a house, there are no doors,/get out while it is/open, while you still can ..." To use language at all is to risk participation in its induction structure; to define is to risk committing or inciting violence in the name of love.

Why this should be so is suggested by George Steiner in his analysis of the current barbarisms of Western culture: there is a sense in which the grammars themselves "condescend or enslave".

> Indo-European syntax is an active mirroring of systems of order, of hierarchic dependence, of active and passive stance ... The sinews of Western speech closely enacted ... the power relations of the Western social order. Gender differentiations, temporal cuts, the rules governing prefix and suffix formations, the synapses and anatomy of a grammar — these are the *figura*, at once ostensive and deeply internalized of the commerce between the sexes, between master and subject ...

For Atwood, the basis of the victor/victim patterning she sees in human relations in *Survival* and reflects in the male/female relations of her own literary structures is also psycholinguistic — that is, inherent in the monotheistic, patriarchial social reality structure of Western culture, within which man habitually defines himself by aggression and which has reached a pinnacle of alienation in sexist, technological society, the "America" of the alienated self. The narrator of *Surfacing* remembers her brother's childhood obsession with "wars, aeroplanes and tanks and the helmeted explorers," and realizes that his sadistic treatment of his experimental animals and his military interests are intimately related to his adult habit of imposing moral categories upon nature:

> Below me in the water there's a leech, the good kind with red dots on the back, undulating along like a streamer held at one end and shaken. The bad kind is mottled grey and yellow. It was my brother who made up these moral distinctions, at some point he became obsessed with them, he must have picked them up from the war. There had to be a good kind and a bad kind of everything.

In Atwood's poem "Hesitations outside the door," Bluebeard in his castle is both the suffering Christ, the emergent masochistic half of the sadomasochistic

Judeo-Christian tradition, and the culturally defined sadistic male, participating with his wife in the melancholy inevitable fusion of Eros and Thanatos:

> What do you want from me
> you who walk towards me over the long floor
>
> your arms outstretched, your heart
> luminous through the ribs
>
> around your head a crown
> of shining blood
>
> This is your castle, this is your metal door,
> these are your stairs, your
>
> bones, you twist all possible
> dimensions into your own.

The myth is a destructive one: it defines love as sacrifice and suffering, and consummation as death. As in *Surfacing*, the sadistic male uses women mechanically as keys to self definition by aggression:

> In your pockets the thin women
> hang on their hooks, dismembered
>
> Around my neck I wear
> the head of the beloved, pressed
> in the metal retina like a picked flower.

If men possess and use women as keys, women have been conditioned to worship men as icons (the Victorian locket, the religious medal). These interlocking attitudes have had the effect of fragmenting and destroying for Atwood's persona the perhaps mythical but longed-for natural order ("women . . . dismembered": "the head of the beloved . . . like a picked flower"). The concept of ownership or romantic 'possession' resulting in exploitation by the man and idealization and obedience by the woman is found throughout *Power Politics* in many of its versions and inversions of the basic prisoner or victim of love theme. In "After the agony in the guest/bedroom", the would-be lover, resting in the woman's arms in a parody of the *pietà*, "wine mist rising/around him, an almost/visible halo", asks "do you love me" and is answered by cruciform manipulation:

> I answer you:
> I stretch your arms out

one to either side,
your head slumps forward.

followed by a further relocation and another kind of purgation:

Later I take you home
in a taxi, and you
are sick in the bathtub.

Atwood's delineation of the lovers' agonizingly compulsive tendency to relate primarily through suffering, brutally exposes the sadomasochistic nexus of the monotheistic, patriarchal society. The woman of *Power Politics* brings to her love relationships the advantage of intellectual enlightenment, but her analytical approach serves only to invert the power structure:

I approach this love
like a biologist
pulling on my rubber
gloves & white labcoat

You flee from it
like an escaped political
prisoner, and no wonder . . .

Please die I said
so I can write about it

She is aware of her own propensity toward sadistic sublimation.

In Atwood's exploration of sexual politics within the patriarchal value structure, orgasm becomes "a kick in the head, orange/and brutal, sharp jewels hit and my/hair splinters," a redemption by death of the self: "no/threads left holding/me, I flake apart/layer by/layer down/quietly to the bone." There is great ambivalence. The desired ego-transcendence, with its suggestion of a joyous return to a mythic primitive state of consciousness where the "skull unfolds to an astounded flower," is also dangerous, for "learning/speech again takes/days and longer/each time/too much of/this is fatal." In Atwood's poetry, the psychological basis and the value in human relationships of the individualism of Western man is very much in question: partly by reference to her sense of self-definition by violence explored in the transactional social worlds of the two novels, where individualism becomes a potent carrier of death; and partly by reference to a presumed primitive, non-linear, and pluralistic state of being which functions as a mythic reference in most of her poetry from the earliest work on, emerging in

Surfacing as a utopian alternative to alienation. In the love poems the tension between individuality and isolation, on the one hand, and loss of identity and sexual fulfilment on the other, is extreme and cannot be resolved. Imagistically it is an anguished oscillation within the *either/or* psycholinguistic structures of Western man,[13] the existentialist trap the wilderness guide describes as the "walls" of "logic". An oscillation between the polarities of civilized/primitive, individual/generic, male/female (in terms of Atwood's camera imagery, focussed/unfocussed), in which reciprocity of being, psychosomatic wholeness, and a sense of genuine communion, as *integrated qualities of experience*, remain mythic states forever beyond reach. The channels of communication and action are patriarchal almost beyond redemption. ". . . you rise above me/smooth, chill, stone-/white . . . you descend on me like age/you descend on me like earth". In her earlier poem, "Dream: Bluejay or Archeopteryx," there is an attempt to invert the hierarchic structure: "in the water/under my shadow/there was an outline, man/surfacing, his body sheathed/in feathers, his teeth/glinting like nails, fierce god/head crested with blue flame". *(Procedures for Underground)*

Atwood suggests that the end of sexual politics might come only with the end of civilization, as in "The accident has occurred . . . we are alone in . . ./the frozen snow", when problems of physical survival would replace problems of psychic survival. Images of desert, ocean, and tundra are attractive in that they presume a settler-like equality of the sexes, working together, an absolute need for compassion; but repellent in that they are places of isolation from humanity where the known forms of self-definition and of personality, however unsatisfactory, are absent. The isolation and limitation of romantic love is mirrored everywhere in the landscape of Atwood's poetry; the couple marooned on the island, stranded in the car, or in the house in a snowstorm, surviving the holocaust, and, finally, buried together. The couple-structure of love is opposed by the community of the dance, "the circle/forming, breaking, each/one of them the whole/rhythm . . . transformed/for this moment . . ." *(Procedures for Underground)*; by the circle or flux of playing children; and by the dissolving of the ego-structure into sleep or into landscape as celebrated in "Fragments: Beach." "In the afternoon the sun/expands, we enter/its hot perimeter . . . light is a sound/it roars/ it fills us/we swell with it/are strenuous, vast/rocks/hurl our voices/we/are abolished . . . the sleepers/lose their hold on shore, are drawn/out on a gigantic tide/we also make the slow deep/circle/until/the sea returns us/leaves us/absolved, washed/shells on the morning beach." *(Procedures for Underground.)*

THROUGHOUT HER WORK Atwood speaks of other languages: "multilingual water" and "the jays, flowing from tree to tree, voices semaphoring, tribal" of *Surfacing*. In *Procedures for Underground*, she tells of learning "that the earliest language/was not our syntax of chained pebbles/but liquid". *Surfacing* abounds with examples of oral aggression or the sadistic use of language for self-definition. Linguistic channels of communication are felt to be analytic, dissecting, futile, impelling the narrator to break out of her received mental categories by psychic anarchy. To the alienated self, linear, logical thought structures operate like knives on the body of love. The narrator remembers her abortion in imagery that is a paranoid echoing of Sadian mechanization: "Nobody must find out or they will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machine, legs in the metal framework, secret knives." Imagining her future child, her "lost child surfacing within her," by reference to her utopian organismic realm, as "covered with shining fur, a god," she decides, "I will never teach it any words."

The anguished lack of communion between the lovers in *Power Politics* is, for Atwood, the inability of the alienated self to break through the thought structures of Western culture. In Atwood's story "Polarities" (*The Tamarack Review*, No. 58, 1971), overt demands for what the American poet Gary Snyder calls "inter-birth" — self-fulfilment through participation in a web of inter-relationships — are regarded as symptoms of madness. The protagonist Louise, who is isolated, even from her intellectual peers, by her deviance from the typical feminine role, tries to create a sense of wholeness by manipulating her friends into a literal acting-out of the title of Atwood's earlier book of poems, *The Circle Game*. Louise has a vision of the city as a topographical image of human relations: "The city is polarized north and south; the river splits it in two; the poles are the gas plant and the power plant. . . . We have to keep the poles in our brains lined up with the poles of the city, that's what Blake's poetry is all about." Her disorientation from conventional reality causes her friends to take her to the hospital where she is put into a chemical straitjacket.

Later, her colleague Morrison wants to rescue her, but is finally disgusted by his ability to achieve masculine self-definition only in response to drug-induced tellurian femaleness: "He saw that it was only the hopeless, mad Louise he wanted, . . . the one devoid of any purpose or defence. . . . a defeated formless creature on which he could inflict himself like shovel on earth, axe on forest, use without being used, know without being known." Morrison realizes that

Louise's description of him is essentially accurate: "Morrison refuses to admit his body is part of his mind." He has a sudden perception of human warmth as the only answer to "futile work and sterile love," and of the impossibility of achieving it through mechanical means, either technological ("the grace of the power plant and the gas plant") or magical ("the circle game"). The eyes "yellowish-grey," "alert, neutral" of the wolves in the pen at the game farm where he has gone after leaving the hospital, foreshadow the wolf's eyes of the hallucinatory image of the father in *Surfacing*. Without human communion, Morrison realizes, leaning against the wolf pen, "dizzy with cold", there is only "the barren tundra and the blank solid rivers, and beyond, so far that the endless night had already descended, the frozen sea." Morrison's spatial co-ordinates accurately symbolize his psychic predicament.

Louise attempts to create a body of love by substituting the paleologic of children and primitive peoples[14] for the unsatisfactory social syllogisms of the patriarchial reality structure. Mapping the repressive social polarities onto the landscape, she practices a form of primitive magic to overcome the collective insanity of communal isolation in "apartments". To read Atwood's description of insanity by social definition and of psychic iconoclasm in "Polarities" and *Surfacing* in conjunction with contemporary works which analyze the social construction of reality is to realize that what Atwood calls "mythologizing" is usually a conscious or unconscious enforcement of the sexual "polarities" inherent in the myths of romantic love, nuclear marriage, the machismo male, and the "feminine" woman. As an intelligent woman and a poet, Atwood indicates that we must somehow escape from this alienating cultural definition of personality and human relations. In *Surfacing*, the schizoid personality's magic ritual accomplishes her mental escape from role-engulfment into the personal eclecticism or search for new forms spoken of by Steiner.

> I . . . step into the water and lie down. When every part of me is wet I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper . . .
>
> My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes . . .
>
> When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface . . .

In *Survival*, Atwood distinguishes between Nature's order, "labyrinthine, complex, curved", and the order of Western European Man, "squares, straight lines, oblongs". The Canadian settlers having a strong preconception of order as inherent in the universe, build their "straight-line constructions, but kill something vital in the process ... often Nature in the form of a woman." In Atwood's poem "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer", the settler who fails to impose order on nature has his head invaded by "the Nature which he has identified as chaos, refusing to recognize that it has its own kind of order." The interplay between images of fence/garden, vegetable/weeds in *Surfacing*, and the narrator's voluntary exclusion from the fenced-in garden as part of her magic ritual, are an obvious development from this earlier exploration. Atwood also comments that the pioneer's final state of insanity may be a progressive development from an implicit earlier state, since "suppression of everything 'curved' may itself be a form of madness."

In *Surfacing*, the final hallucinatory vision is of the father, the scientist, the man who has both imposed intellectual order on nature and, presumably, taught his daughter the skills of survival in the wilderness. At first she projects on to the father, whose back is to her, her own realization of the limitations imposed by linear structures:

> He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love. He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation.

But then she progresses through her "insanity" to a further stage of enlightenment:

> He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone ... it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent.... Reflectors. It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself.
>
> Then its head swings away with an awkward, almost crippled motion: I do not interest it. I am part of the landscape, I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.
>
> I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become.

The dissolution of all mental structures returns man completely to nature: *he* becomes *it*. By first experiencing a dissolving of the ego into landscape and then objectifying in the human figure with wolf's eyes the consequences of maintaining this "participation" as a state of consciousness, the narrator is able to visualize

the furthest limits to which the dissolution of mental structures can be pushed without the permanent merging with the landscape that occurs in insanity, when the ego appears to dissolve into a totally schizophrenic state from which there is no returning.

Thus the father becomes a "protecting spirit" embodying both the vital anarchic impulse of the self, the husk-dissolving creative spirit, and the essential conservative element. As in the suspended animation of the final hallucination, the fish jumping, turning into a primitive artifact or rock drawing in mid-air, hanging there suspended, "flesh turned to icon", then softening and dropping back into the water, an "ordinary fish" again, there is a sense of all life as a temporary configuration of psychic energy, part of a greater flux of what earlier poets like Pratt thought of as cosmic energy structuring itself in personality and through work.[13] For Atwood, despite the apparent oscillation between ideal and real[13] implied by the image of the fish leaping, integrity of form resides primarily in the natural structure, not in the imposed social form or myth; thus being has a biological rather than a transcendental authority.

The narrator of *Surfacing* returns to sanity with the realization that she can refuse to participate in the destructive "mythologizing" of her society: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. . . . The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death." Arising renewed from the non-evaluative plurality of nature, the wilderness guide comprehends that reality is, as William James said, a "multi-dimensional continuum." For the first time she understands and has compassion for the subjective dimensions of others. She realizes "the effort it must have taken [her father] to sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order," and how her mother's "meticulous records" of the weather "allowed her to omit . . . the pain and isolation." Her perception of her lover is altered. "He isn't an American, I can see that now . . . he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him." She has escaped her former sense of total closure, thus achieving a liberated self and a basis for action within the world.

Atwood's sense of "participation mystique" as an alternative to alienation plays its numinous part in a personal dialectic of myths, restoring to sanity the wilderness guide of *Surfacing*. However authentic or inauthentic her concept of the primitive may be outside of the world of her alienated women, it manifests the search for new forms of reality spoken of by Steiner. The last chapter of *Surfacing* makes essentially the same statement as Birney's lines: "No one bound Prome-

theus/Himself he chained," but makes it within the new context of awareness supplied by such fields as cultural anthropology, the sociology of knowledge, and environmental studies. Interdisciplinary insights are leading us quickly towards what Atwood might term an ecology of human energy, a bioethic to replace what Steiner calls "the blackmail of transcendence".[16] Atwood's poems and stories are not resigned and "graceful" sublimations of what is usually referred to as the human condition. Rather they are frighteningly precise image structures, iconoclastic keys to getting mentally outside of Bluebeard's Castle.

NOTES

[1] By William Kimber for the Anansi edition. Kimber's design appears again on the jacket of the first American edition, Harper & Row, 1973.

[2] "J", *The Sensuous Woman* (New York, 1969).

[3] Phyllis Chesler documents *Women and Madness* (New York, 1972) by reference to these studies.

[4] In my review article "*Surfacing* in the Interests of *Survival*" (*West Coast Review*, January, 1972), I suggest that *Survival* is really an ethical treatise presented as a thematic guide to Canadian literature. The present article, accepted for publication in March, 1973, is a development from this previous consideration of Atwood's work in relation to the psychology of R. D. Laing.

[5] Atwood's vampire story, "The Grave of The Famous Poet," *72 New Canadian Stories*, ed. David Helwig and Joan Harcourt (Oberon Press, Canada, 1972), should be read in conjunction with *Power Politics*. As in *Power Politics*, the lovers form a closed system, a deadly dyadic field characterized by violence and exhaustion. See references to Atwood in my review article, "Breaking Through Patriarchal Nets to The Peaceable Kingdom," *West Coast Review*, January, 1974.

[6] The movement from bondage to liberation is not a chronological development of theme. *The Edible Woman* was written in 1965 (letter, Atwood to Onley, Dec. 30, 1972).

[7] The mirror is one of Atwood's favorite images. See "Tricks with Mirrors," in *Aphra*, Fall 1972. "Mirrors/are the perfect lovers,/... throw me on the bed/ reflecting side up,/fall into me,/it will be your own/mouth you hit, firm and glassy,/... You are suspended in me/beautiful and frozen, I/preserve you, in me you are safe./... I wanted to stop this,/... this life of vision only, split/and remote, a lucid impasse./I confess: this is not a mirror,/it is a door/I am trapped behind/I wanted you to see me here,/say the releasing word, whatever/that may be, open the wall./Instead you stand in front of me/combing your hair." *Cf. Surfacing*, 175 and 190.

[8] New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1972.

[9] For the narrator of *Surfacing*, "American" signifies not a national identity but a mode of existence. See Chapter 15.

[10] New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971.

[11] *Cf.* R. D. Laing's description of Julie in *The Divided Self*, Chapter 11.

[12] *Saturday Night* (November, 1972), 26. "Atwood plays the role of psychic iconoclast, pulling the categories of existence apart and presenting a broken, confused reality that her readers must often back into order for themselves. . . . she demands uncomfortable mental confrontations that most people would obviously prefer to avoid."

[13] According to the cultural anthropologist Melville J. Herskovitz, the tendency to dichotomize experience by using thought structures based on polarities is characteristic of Euroamerican culture. *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York, 1972), 238-239.

[14] Before his death Lévy-Brühl came to realize that there is in fact no difference between primitive mentality and our own. As Herskovitz comments, all human beings think "prelogically" at times (*op. cit.*, 28-29). Louise is not thinking and acting in terms of objectively provable causation, hence to the Euroamerican mind she appears to have regressed to a childish or "primitive" mode of thought. Much of our thinking and behaviour is similarly based on questionable premises, but if there is a consensus of opinion that the premises are valid, then the behaviour is held to be reasonable or "sane."

[15] Sandra Djwa, "E. J. Pratt and Evolutionary Thought: Towards an Eschatology," Dalhousie Review (Autumn, 1972), 417.

[16] Weyland Drew, in "Wilderness and Limitation," (*The Canadian Forum*, February, 1973), suggests that the real strength of the ecological movement lies in its association with the Romantic and libertarian traditions — "traditions which have respected the subconscious and the primitive" (18). His observation that "the only context in which Canadian nationalism can be acceptable is in the service of the ecological movement . . . as a responsibility to the land" seems to apply to the wilderness guide's dread of "creeping Americanism" in *Surfacing*, and to her pragmatic yet mystical relationship to the Canadian wilderness.