THE CIRCLE GAME

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> ... landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind
>
> — Margaret Atwood, *Survival*

WE SENSE RIGHT FROM THE OPENING POEM of *The Circle Game* — "This is a Photograph of Me" — in which the poet is unable to place herself in any sort of harmony with the landscape, that the haunting mood of isolation in the book is associated, in some undefined way, with geographical wilderness. No human form is visible in the photo; we get the feeling that wilderness somehow precludes human existence. If the setting (the geographical details of the print) is not overtly hostile, it is at least mutely obliterating: "the photograph was taken/the day after I drowned". The poet impresses us as a not-too-unwilling victim: "I am in the lake, in the centre/of the picture, just under the surface". The idea is startling, it works, but the closing lines appear deliberately puzzling, and so forced:

> It is difficult to say where
> precisely, or to say
> how large or small I am:
> the effect of water
> on light is a distortion
>
> but if you look long enough
> eventually
> you will be able to see me.

Mood, voice and setting in this poem are typical. *The Circle Game* is full of oceans, lakes and rivers, trees, rocks, islands and sand. The prevalent moods, especially in the opening poems, are those of solitude, isolation, and sometimes outright despair. Owing in part to the repeated conjunction of wilderness setting with moods of fear and alienation, physical landscape very soon comes to imply

a good deal more than neutral, external reality. The voice is calm and objective — but wait: we are being addressed by the same person who claims to be the invisible victim in the photograph. This schizophrenic touch is more than an eerie flourish; it effectively serves to compound her isolation. She is cut off, blotted out, even from herself. There is no direct relation between the two people implied by the poem, the two selves.

Neither is there a connection between herself and others. The atmosphere of detachment she inhabits is not diminished by the introduction of another character. Her companion in "After the Flood, We" is irrelevant, part of another world. He walks along, speaking "of the beauty of the morning,/not even knowing/that there has been a flood". And here again, nature is working against people ("We must be the only ones/left"). Not only is it an obliterating force, it has now taken on a sinister, almost human quality; and when the poet speaks of "the almost-human/brutal faces forming/(slowly)/out of stone", she achieves the reverse process as well: humanity takes on some of the blank, oppressive character of the wilderness. The equation of the internal and external worlds, the subjective, personal self and the objective, physical, real world, is made more explicit by this transference. Hence the unspecified conflict between poet and landscape is internalized within the poet herself to the extent that the wilderness world comes to stand for the outside correspondent of some internal state. The element of schizophrenia evident in several poems is, in this light, not only explicable, but indeed quite justified.

Atwood's treatment of civilization — what we might be tempted to regard as the opposite of wilderness — affords evidence, if any be needed, that her use of landscape is predominantly and consistently figurative. Modern writers have, of course, long made use of the ironical truism that as more people crowd into an area, the more superficial becomes the contact among them. In other words, the city (and all it implies) has long supplied writers with contexts and symbols of human alienation. But Atwood provides her own twist: she portrays the city as nothing more than a variation on the wilderness theme. Civilization is a glass and steel and asphalt veneer, not a change so much as a disguise ("the landscape behind or under/the future cracks in the plaster"), and a temporary one at that, for the day will come

> when the houses, capsized, will slide
> obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
> that right now nobody notices.
>
> ("The City Planners")

As she writes in "A Place: Fragments":

> The cities are only outposts.
>
> Watch that man
> walking on cement as though on snowshoes:
> senses the road
> a muskeg, loose mats of roots and brown
> vegetable decay
> or crust of ice that
> easily might break and
> slush or water under
> suck him down

Like the wilderness, the city exists in an emotional vacuum. Civilization obliterates humanity as surely as a flood or the plague. Although "there is always/ someone in the next room" ("The Circle Game"), personal encounters are random, fruitless; each person dwells in a private bell-jar of isolation; messengers "come from nowhere", "are going nowhere", and attempt to communicate by shouting "in a silent language" ("A Messenger"). In effect, urban and rural landscapes are indistinguishable. The old men of "In My Ravines" dream of "impossible flight" — neither more nor less possible than the flight of a corpse from a lake bottom. If technology is a constructive impetus, it is nonetheless horrifying: the man with a hook ("Look, he says, glittering/like a fanatic, My hook/is an improvement") is every bit as powerful a symbol of desolation as a desert or a burnt-out forest. In whatever setting, people are trapped, impotent. The poet can say "outside there is a lake/or this time is it a street" ("Playing Cards"), because it really makes no difference. The outer world, in whatever form, is wilderness.

BUT THE WILDERNESS, we have said, symbolizes something within the poet. That something, the barren side, the gravitation toward chaos, the isolation, prevents any type of valuable human relationship. An assimilation is never achieved, never even a happy alignment; instead there is always actual or potential repulsion, the reaction against, a jerky attraction reversed, like magnets.

> These days we keep
> our weary distances:
> sparring in the vacant spaces

of peeling rooms
and rented minutes, climbing
all the expected stairs, our voices
abraded with fatigue,
our bodies wary.

Physical touch is useless, painful:

my face flinches
under the sarcastic
tongues of your estranging
fingers,
the caustic remark of your kiss.
("Eventual Proteus")

The need for love is real and strong, but it finds little sustenance and no parallel outside itself. Wilderness is dominant; human desire, the hunger for love, is nothing more than

a furtive insect, sly and primitive
the necessary cockroach
in the flesh
that nests in dust
...
In spite of our famines
it keeps itself alive

: how it gorges on a few
unintentional
spilled crumbs of love
("A Meal")

The black side of the self rules and everywhere she looks, every way she turns, she sees this wilderness reflected. The real world is brutal, hostile, for she cannot reconcile her inner world. She is, in short, the ultimate outcast, isolated from any sort of community and cut off from herself. She has no place, belongs nowhere, can find no stasis. "I move," she writes,

and live on the edges
(what edges)
I live
on all the edges there are
("Evening Trainstation").

"The Circle Game" is the pivotal poem in the volume. It amplifies notes

struck previously: the city as wilderness ("these scuffed walls contain their circling trees,/that low clogged sink/their lake"); human relationships as hopeless, destructive ("all your word-/plays, calculated ploys/of the body, the witticisms/ of touch, are now/attempts to keep me/at a certain distance"); and it crystallizes the feeling of entrapment and impotence that has been building. The image of the children's "tranced moving" captures the endless, empty, pointless ritual of existence particularly aptly, I think, because the emptiness is presupposed, regarded as basic, an unopposed end in itself, even at the level of innocence:

> ... the whole point
> for them
> of going round and round
> is (faster
>   slower)
> going round and round

The circle becomes the symbol of constriction, and at the same time makes us realize that because it is infinite, so final, the urge to refuse to resist its isolating power is very strong; and to realize as well that it is a temptation into which the poet has fallen. One of the causes of her entrapment — perhaps the most important one — is her attitude toward her predicament, her unquestioning acceptance of it. Hitherto, she has been passive, helpless; the possibility of change, of escape, has not been raised. The simple, powerful resolution at the close of the poem signals a shift from acquiescience to an active determination:

> I want to break
> these bones, your prisoning rhythms
>   (winter,
>   summer)
> all the glass cases,
>
> erase all maps,
> crack the protecting
> eggshell of your turning
> singing children:
>
> I want the circle
> broken.

Granted, this is only a stated wish, a desire for change; but it is the first such evident desire; the decision is the vital first step.

In the poem immediately following, the intention has been translated: she

refuses to be passive, malleable, to be composed and fastened within the framework of a photo. We recall "This is a Photograph of Me" in which the opposite was true: she was helpless, wilderness was in control, and she was quite content that this should be so. Here, she is not yet free of the "glossy square of paper" but she is getting there:

> that small black speck
> travelling towards the horizon
> at almost the speed of light
>
> is me
>
> ("Camera".)

So, too, has she begun to struggle against the dark side of her self. The flaw of *The Circle Game* may well be that there is no specific reason for her gradual about-face. If the poet were a character in a novel, we might argue that her resolution lacks convincing motivation. Whatever the source of her determination, though, we can observe its effects. In "A Sibyl", she isolates her wilderness side, or a part of it. This enables her at least to identify what she is fighting; a scientist must isolate a virus before he can hope to combat it. In this poem, the disease is mortality:

> . . . You must die
> later or sooner alas
> you were born weren't you
> the minutes thunder like guns
> coupling won't help you

To face the self honestly is to admit that

> time runs out
> in the ticking hips of the
> man whose twitching skull
> jerks on loose
> vertebrae in my kitchen

Yet the admission is a sort of liberation. By accepting the fact of mortality she robs it of its dread and is able to abstract it from her consciousness:

> I don't care
>
> I leave that to my
> necessary sibyl
> (that's what she's for)

> with her safety bottled
> anguish and her glass
> despair

A direction is plainly emerging. The poet's perspective is changing, the voice becoming more confident. The polarization of the inner and outer worlds is a stride toward reconciliation. The wilderness is becoming less intimidating.

While the idea of abandoning the old self, of establishing a viable stasis, is attractive and promising, the actual process turns out not to be so simple. As "Migration: C.P.R." demonstrates, places of "absolute, unformed beginning" are scarce in the real world and non-existent in the mind. The attempt to begin again, to find a new setting, is fruitless. During the journey from east to west the travellers notice that the inner lakes are reminiscent of "ancient oceans". Though moving, they are going nowhere. The west, once reached, turns out to be not the anticipated place of absolute, unformed beginning: "There are more second-hand/stores here than we expected". Even the wilderness is not new.

> In the forest, even
> apart from the trodden
> paths, we can tell (from the sawn
> firstumps) that many
> have passed the same way
> sometime before
> this

Nowhere does Atwood use the wilderness metaphor more brilliantly than in *The Circle Game*, and nowhere does she employ landscape imagery more tellingly to reflect the condition of the mind perceiving that landscape. There is a fine irony to the lines "though we brought nothing with us/(we thought)/ we have begun to unpack", for they have brought, besides material things, ways of feeling and thinking that move along well-trodden and ineradicable paths.

Geographical freedom, or at least change, is not freedom at all. How, then, is any type of liberty to be attained, any reconciliation to be won? We have said that the need for love, to share with and enter into another person, has always been there. But it has been "furtive" and outpulled by the gravitation toward isolation. Now, in "Against Still Life", the need resurfaces, no longer furtive but open and acknowledged:

> Your silence
> isn't enough for me
> now, no matter with what

> contentment you fold
> your hands together; I want
> anything you can say

At times, the need approaches an obsession:

> ... I'd crack your skull
> like a walnut, split it like a pumpkin
> to make you talk, or get
> a look inside

She wants now to break down the subject/object bifurcation, perhaps because to this point the distinction has been so acute. She will not settle for the mere fact of an "orange in the middle of a table"; rather, "I want to pick it up/in my hand/I want to peel the/skin off." Neither, it appears, will she settle for being a separate object.

And in fact her relation to others has been changed. The resolution to escape the circle evidently has allowed her to think not exclusively in terms of "me"; she has begun to speak of "us", of "two". In "Migration: C.P.R." and in "Some Objects of Wood and Stone" the first-person plural voice is taken for granted. Even "Spring in the Igloo" — in which once again we witness helplessness in the face of nature, the inability to act with no less than self-preservation at stake — even here the tone is calm and assured, a fact which derives, perhaps, from the "us" in the poem. Calamity, though unavoidable, is somehow less calamitous when shared.

The problem, however, refuses such a simple solution. Love itself turns out to be a dubious blessing. As the need for an involved human relationship approaches satisfaction, a counter-reaction grows proportionally stronger. Hence the poet, struggling to escape isolation, suddenly finds herself saying "How could you invade/me when/I ordered you not/to." Whenever the existence of a love relationship is assumed, this repellent force is very powerful. New variables are brought into the equation of self, and these are as difficult to understand and solve as the old. The emotions associated with the relationship demand classification and become finite, and because the feelings that would bind the two are so intense, the element of coercion is never far off:

> Love is an awkward word
>
> Not what I mean and
> too much like magazine stories
> in stilted dentists'

waiting rooms.
How can anyone use it?

I'd rather say
I like your
lean spine
or your eyebrows
or your shoes

but just by standing there and
being awkward

you force me to speak

love.

("Letters, Towards and Away")

In the end, the release accomplished through the merging with another turns out to be a negative thing, not freedom so much as a new mode of entrapment, equally unsatisfying:

What you invented
what you
destroyed
with your transient hands

you did so gently
I didn't notice at the time

but where is all that wall-
paper?

Now
I'm roofless:

the sky
you built for me is too
open.

The invention of the relationship, and so of a new self, implies a destruction of the old. "Letters" affirms the need for separateness — to this point regarded more as a curse than a need — seemingly contradicting the requirement of human involvement. An important question thus arises: how does one reconcile the need for individual identity, for separate wholeness, with the simultaneous and

equally urgent need for others, an escape from total isolation? In other words, we have come full circle and arrived at the question that has been implicit from the outset: how to reconcile the inner and outer worlds?

IT WOULD BE a gross oversimplification to say that physical wilderness is neutral, incapable of love, and that the inner, private world of self resembles external nature only when the capacity for love goes unused; but surely the poetry is drawing us in the direction of such an understanding. At the least we could say that nature, generally, is benign when the perception of it is shared. Even a landscape of threat is less terrifying through a common lens. We could say also that those poems dealing directly with the two-person relationship ("Eventual Proteus", "A Meal", "'The Circle Game", "Letter, Towards and Away") tend to contain very little wilderness imagery.

"The Islands" is irrefutable evidence that physical landscape reflects quite clearly the inner state of the perceiver. Here the sight of the geography is actually "pleasing". While the poem is about islands, it is no coincidence that there are "two of them". They carry considerable symbolic weight, especially given the context of the poem in the book; so, when she writes "We know they are alone/and always will be", we can hardly help feeling that she is referring as much to "the two of us" as to "the two of them". We have, then, for the first time, an acceptance of aloneness, of personal isolation, and the very acceptance robs the fact of its terrifying connotation. Again, a kind of freedom is attained. The most significant point, though, is that she can accommodate herself to the condition of solitude only in the presence of someone else. What enables her to accept with such equanimity is the realization that her state is shared; everyone is cut off. Ironically, when things are shared — even things like despair and alienation — bonds are made, invisible bridges formed between islands, and insularity overcome.

The effect of landscape is altered by an alteration in attitude towards it. The change has come about through the poet's recognition of her affinities with others, and, by extension, with the outside world. It is not the conflicts between self and nature that she dwells on now, but the likenesses; and once you start seeking overlappings, affinities, you find them: everyone is mortal, after all, everyone is "part of this warm rotting/of vegetable flesh/this quiet spawning of roots" ("Pre-Amphibian"). Significantly, this realization takes place while she is merging with another:

but here I blur
into you   our breathing sinking
to green millenniums
and   sluggish   in our blood
all ancestors
are warm fish moving

The natural, external world has its own integrity and communicates in a manner as logical and real as speech. Speaking of pebbles on a beach, she writes,

They were sea-smoothed, sea-completed.
They enclosed what they intended
to mean in shapes
as random and necessary
as the shapes of words
("Some Objects of Wood and Stone")

A carved animal, passed from hand to hand around a circle, communicates primitively, almost magically, so that "the skin wonders/if stone is human", and those who have held the animal "keep/the image of that/inner shape" long after the animal has gone.

Animal, vegetable and mineral become confused. Ultimately, the inner world of thought and feeling and the outer world of spruce and granite contain each other in much the same way that the wilderness in "A Place: Fragments" contains the woman's house, which in turn contains its own wilderness:

a cushion with a fringe;
glass animals arranged
across the mantelpiece (a swan, a horse,
a bull); a mirror;
a teacup sent from Scotland;
several heraldic spoons;
a lamp; and in the centre
of the table, a paperweight:
hollow glass globe
filled with water, and
a house, a man, a snowstorm .

Where does it all end? Where is the point of reference? "The centres/travel with us unseen/like our shadows/on a day when there is no sun." There is a point within each person at which the inner and outer worlds, the two sides of the self, conjoin; in the metaphor of this poem, the point is the doorway, "the fulcrum where

> this trivial but
> stringent inner order
> held its delicate balance
> with the random scattering or
> clogged merging of
> things: ditch by the road; dried
> reeds in the wind; flat
> wet bush, grey sky
> sweeping away outside.

A tentative balance has been struck, a reconciliation achieved. The poles of isolation and community are not mutually exclusive. The poet is on her way toward creating a viable inner order; it remains now only to extend the integration by applying its implications back out to the real, physical wilderness. The connection is made through the direct juxtaposition of the outer landscape with the personal one, its human corerspondent.

> Now, clutter of twigs
> across our eyes, tatter
> of birds at the eye's edge; the straggle
> of dead treetrunks; patch
> of lichen
> and in love, tangle
> of limbs and fingers, the texture
> of pores and lines on the skin.

Inner and outer worlds do not differ in kind; the two selves need not conflict. Each is an integral part of something more, something

> that informs, holds together
> this confusion, this largeness
> and dissolving:
>
> not above or behind
> or within it, but one
> with it: an
>
> identity:
> something too huge and simple
> for us to see.

In the recognition of this identity, the terror of landscape disintegrates.

Death itself becomes relative in the new perspective; bones grow flesh again, come up "trees and grass". We recall the closing lines of the initial poem, the

poet's assurance that if we looked long enough at the image of the landscape, "eventually/you will be able to see me." And sure enough, the landscape has become less a place of dread than a source of solace and humanity:

> Still
> we are the salt
> seas that uphold these lands.
>
> Now horses graze
> inside this fence of ribs, and
>
> children run, with green
> smiles, (not knowing
> where) across
> the fields of our open hands.
> ("The Settlers").