Margaret Atwood: Words and the Wilderness

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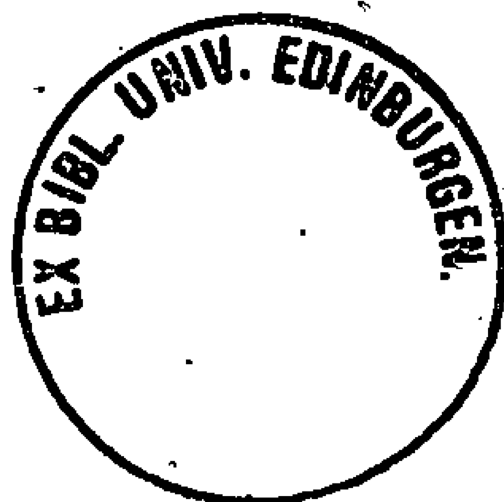

CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations p. 3

Abstract : From the Wilderness to the Word p. 4

Chapter 1 : The Circle Game p. 6

Chapter 2 : Food in The Edible Woman p. 71

Chapter 3 : Survival and the colonial experience p. 133

Chapter 4 : History and The Handmaid's Tale p. 159

Conclusion: From the Wilderness to the World p. 205

Bibliography p. 208

List of Abbreviations

CG : The Circle Game

EW : The Edible Woman

HT : The Handmaid's Tale

SVL : Survival

CLSR : Canadian Literature - Surrender or Revolution

Abstract: From the Wilderness to the Word

This thesis is a study of several texts written by Margaret Atwood, and is motivated by a desire to demonstrate the polysemous irreducibility of literary meaning and to suggest ways in which critical theory and textual practice may meaningfully interact and correspond.

The first chapter examines poems in The Circle Game in order to observe how Atwood's persistent scrutiny of the constitution of images creates a world almost entirely detached from a consciousness of time and history, and considers how this generates a radical split between textual self-sufficiency and the psychic wilderness through which the poems move. Here we can see Atwood deploying language in a pared-down, restrictive manner that circulates through the book with particular tension.

The second chapter studies her first novel The Edible Woman, and attempts to trace through analysis of its linguistic patterns, how Margaret Atwood controls her subject matter and deploys her chosen narrative form in a way that expresses the conflict between consumption and production which is embodied in the novel's architectonic symbol. Moving through a specific historical period, her characters struggle to achieve self-definition and linguistic mastery of their environment.

The third chapter is concerned with her critical study of Canadian literature, Survival, and the relational framework it suggests between Canada's uneasy

post-colonial status, the writer's expressive predicament, and the universal experience of victimization. Consideration is given to aspects of Atwood's political and social philosophy, and comparison made between her conclusions and those of other contemporary Canadian writers.

The fourth chapter delineates how pertinent aspects of the history and historiography of seventeenth century New England are woven into the design and purpose of <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>. The chapter examines how her period of study at Harvard under Perry Miller is here used by Atwood to elaborate an increasingly sophisticated perspective on the struggle between the actions of the individual and the determinations of the broader political community.

Chapter One: The Circle Game

The opening poem in The Circle Game[1], Margaret Atwood's first significant volume of poetry, is 'This is a Photograph of Me'. It is a poem whose themes and developments indicate the range of circle games that are played out in many of the subsequent poems – games of opposition, of concealment, and of the tension between what lies on the surface and what lies on the levels of transparency beneath.

In his study of Margaret Atwood's work, Jerome Rosenberg explores the idea that in this poem the reader's position is one of being "thrust into the middle of a phenomenological paradox"[2], where the fluidity of status to which the narrator lays claim can only be appreciated within the broader confines of the time-bound relationship between photograph, speaker, and audience. Rosenberg assesses 'This is a Photograph of Me' as canonically representative of Atwood's poetry:

> Structured like so many of Atwood's poems, 'This is a Photograph of Me' posits two worlds, one in which reality is obscured and made distant by romantic, descriptive images ("in the background there is a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills") and another that conveys the facts of the matter, that this "photograph of me" does not seem to contain me because it "was taken / the day after I drowned."(Rosenberg, p. 16)

What is paradoxical about his reading here is that,

[1]Margaret Atwood, The Circle Game, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1966). Subsequent references to this work (CG) are given in the text. See also List of Abbreviations at front of thesis.
[2]Jerome H. Rosenberg, Margaret Atwood, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p. 17. Subsequent references to this work (Rosenberg) appear in the text.

although these two worlds are postulated by Rosenberg as being distinct and separate, the language of his argument works to the contrary. His propositions are essentially interchangeable, since one can as reasonably infer that a lake with some low hills behind it represent "the facts of the matter", as assert that the idea of a photograph of an invisible subject taken posthumously is a "romantic descriptive" image. For the poem is concerned as much with demonstrating the uncertainty of received fact as the illimitable subjectivity of perceived image.

There is undeniably a forcible and provocative sense of dislocation within the framework of time and space in the poem, and as a result it is also, as Jean Mallinson has noted, a piece that has been "subjected, over the years, to more high serious criticism than any other single poem written by Atwood"[3]. "Subjected" is a word that cuts both ways, not least given the poem's "subject", that is, the "photograph of me". Mallinson here implicitly associates the persona of the poem with the writer's "life":

'This is a Photograph of Me' is a postcatastrophic poem, though this information is, characteristically, given to us in parentheses. The strategies of this piece are typical of Atwood's way of making a poem at this time in her writing life. (Mallinson, p. 33)

Mallinson's own writing takes on something of the qualities she attributes to the poem's voice:

[3]Jean Mallinson, 'Margaret Atwood', in Canadian Writers and Their Works, Vol.9, edited by Robert Lecker, Jack David, and Ellen Quigley, (Toronto: E.C.W. Press, 1985), p. 25. Subsequent references to this work (Mallinson) appear in the text.

> The tone is flat, laconic, matter-of-fact; the speaker's stance is that of a guide, and she uses the mode of direct address; the description is diagrammatic: an anatomy, not a visual picture...The poet as voice is firmly in control, having contrived the whole display, which is also a disappearing act.(Mallinson, p. 33)

This explanation points towards the paradoxical nature of the poet's technical control, but Mallinson does not further explore the assertion, concluding instead:

> It is the perfect solution; hence, the poem, though it describes a plight, has a self-satisfied tone: the speaker is hidden, and yet the centre of attention - the perfect solution to have manoeuvred herself into.(Mallinson, p. 33)

Jean Mallinson's "perfect solution" is one that, in effect, applies both to poem and interpretation, the critic and the writer. For the further the poem's subject recedes into the picture, the more prominent becomes the tone of the commentary. A quest for chronology dominates Jean Mallinson's analysis, a desire to have the poem framed and dated.

She describes 'This is a Photograph of Me' as a "postcatastrophic" poem, though the catastrophe is as much to do with evolutionary development as it is with revolutionary change. Mallinson initially describes as "shocking" the parenthesised disclosure "(The photograph was taken / the day after I drowned...)"(CG, p. 17). She subsequently modifies the force of her statement by describing the poem's revelation instead as a "fiction or contrivance...a stratagem of disappearance, which bears a relationship of ironic reversal to the opening announcement"(Mallinson, p. 55). And this, she decides, is "a cheat, a false version" of that "longed-for

consummation" she does not believe Margaret Atwood successfully accomplishes until the writing of Two-Headed Poems.

'This is a Photograph of Me' gives every impression of being full of facts and detail, but many of them are provisional, if not deceptive. The opening line, which declares that the photograph "was taken some time ago" locates the photograph in a time not only prior to the observer's present but also, so the first parenthesized stanza reveals, at a point subsequent to the usual chronology of self and story, having been "taken / the day after I drowned"(CG, p. 17).

The poem thus develops from two connected but apparently incompatible moments, so that when the photograph starts to reveal images after its initial state of suspension they seem indistinguishable from the paper, a mere smeared impression of blurred lines and grey flecks, outlines of a meaning that as yet remains indistinct, blended with the paper. The second stanza clarifies some of the picture, so that "then, as you scan it" certain details are disclosed to the participatory "you" who is following the path traced from left to right across the surface of the photograph - images of a tree, a house, a lake, some hills. The part of the tree that can be seen is introduced with a degree of ambiguity, described as being "a thing that is like a branch" and in the first unresolved parenthetical dilemma of the poem the tree is identified as being "(balsam or spruce)".

If the poem is indeed typical of Margaret Atwood, one

can argue the case for the tree being a Canadian balsam fir, 'Abies balsamea', for it is from this tree that the fragrant resin 'balm of Gilead' is extracted. Gilead, of course, is the name of the futuristic fundamentalist state in The Handmaid's Tale. 'Balm of Gilead' is also the name for "a North American hybrid female poplar tree, Populus gileadensis (or P. candicans), with broad heart-shaped leaves"[4].

The location of the house is given, but in a way that shows at the same time the irreducible difference between the flat surface of the photograph and the spatial dimensions of the world it seeks to portray:

> ...halfway up
> what ought to be a gentle
> slope, a small frame house.(CG, p. 17)

There is a certain irony to this frame within a frame, and to the fact that someone confronted by poem or photograph cannot otherwise confirm the presence of the slope, but must trust the word of this observer who is shortly to prove so slippery a customer.

For the second part of the poem disturbingly inverts our usual conceptions of the relationship between an image and its subject. The speaker is drowned, dead "some time ago", and though still in the picture:

> 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(CG, p. 17)

[4]Collins Dictionary of the English Language, edited by Patrick Hanks, Thomas Hill Long, and Laurence Urdang, (London & Glasgow: William Collins, 1979 repr. 1985), p. 111.

as the idea of "distortion" becomes the poem's predominant focus of interest. The last stanza of the poem bears much of the weight of the paradoxes and contradictions generated by what goes before it, for it promises revelation if regarded with sufficient persistence:

> ...if you look long enough,
> eventually
> you will be able to see me. (CG, p. 17)

Discussing this passage, Jerome Rosenberg notes:

> In an early manuscript version of the poem, Atwood had substituted the word "long" for the original, scratched-out alternative "hard", a shift that signals her deliberate decision to emphasize the process of time. Time, rather than the intensity of the viewer's perception, would bring about the speaker's return. (Rosenberg, p. 17)

"Eventually" is a word, however, that suggests a possibly lengthy delay before such a moment occurs, and there are other elements to the poem that remain unresolved by this reading. In her book Stealing The Language, Alicia Suskin Ostriker describes the poem in language that echoes both Mallinson and Rosenberg:

> This is typical Atwood in its flat tone with the twin undertones of acerbity and yearning, and in its complicated manipulation of social and literary convention.[8]

In her analysis of the two final stanzas, however, she goes on to suggest that:

[8] Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language: the emergence of women's poetry in America, (London: The Women's Press, 1987), p. 64. Subsequent references to this work (Ostriker) appear in the text.

We may read the poem not merely as a tease but as an earnest game, an adult version of the game of the child who hides and hopes to be found. If we set the rational and judgemental aggressiveness of "to say" against the patient receptiveness of "to see", the final lines emerge from irony into earnestness, like a photograph emerging from its negative, and carry the whole poem along with them. (Ostriker, p. 65)

Yet Ostriker's image of the photograph emerging from its negative, around which she centres this interpretation, to an extent misrepresents the process of developing and fixing the photographic image. For the negative remains physically disconnected from the photographic paper on which this photograph is materializing, and so the negative retains its insubstantial and shadowy reverse vision of the world whilst the emergence remains confined to the surface of the paper being exposed.

In a poem near the end of The Circle Game, 'A Place: Fragments', Margaret Atwood enjoins us to be aware that, in a somewhat Yeatsian phrase:

> There is no center;
> the centers
> travel with us unseen (CG, p. 90)

for it becomes apparent that these fragmented yet interconnected details which form identity do not, as Jean Mallinson has indicated, resolve themselves here. Margaret Atwood concludes in the later poem that "We must move back" because in the moment of initial vision "there are too many foregrounds" and something supplementary is needed, a perspective from a distance. This is a subject she later develops in one of the prose poems in Murder in the Dark, 'Instructions for the Third Eye' where she

declares:

> After that there are no more instructions because there is no more choice. You see. You see.[8]

The instructions concerning 'This is a Photograph of Me' remain ambiguous, not least because within a photograph there can be no real movement, for perspective is a trick of water and light, and depth an illusory quality when everything takes place on the surface.

Jerome Rosenberg considers the "quality of the photographic image" in terms which indicate that he sees it as a finished product rather than something that is developing through time, taking its place in the gallery rather than taking shape in the bath of developing fluid, when he declares that its blended flecks, blurring and smearing:

> ...cannot be tolerated by the rage of the human mind for order, however, and so the mind imposes discernible images in a detached, aesthetic manner, creating an effect similar to the casual, emotionless description that one encounters in such a Robbe-Grillet story as 'The Secret Room'. Atwood's language, like Robbe-Grillet's, becomes that of the museum tourguide describing a painting. (Rosenberg, p. 16)

Margaret Atwood and Alain Robbe-Grillet might seem at first sight an unusual coupling, and Rosenberg does not press the issue. Yet there is much in Roland Barthes's essay on Robbe-Grillet, 'Objective Literature', that can meaningfully be applied to an analysis of Atwood's writing, not least in regard to the correspondence between these two writers' conceptions of time. Margaret

[8] Margaret Atwood, <u>Murder in the Dark</u>, (London: Jonathan Cape. 1984), p. 62.

Atwood's painterly narrator in the novel Cat's Eye declares:

I began...to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water.[7]

Roland Barthes reiterates this theme in his essay:

Time dislocates space, arranging the object like a series of slices that almost completely cover one another: and it is this spatial "almost" which contains the temporal dimension of Robbe-Grillet's object. It is the kind of variation crudely - but recognizably - indicated from frame to frame in old films, or from drawing to drawing in a comic strip.[8]

And describing Robbe-Grillet's writing techniques, Barthes concludes that his purpose:

...is to establish the novel on the surface: once you can set its inner nature, its "interiority," between parentheses, then objects in space, and the circulation of men among them, are promoted to the rank of subjects. The novel becomes man's direct experience of what surrounds him without his being able to shield himself with a psychology, a metaphysic, or a psychoanalytic method in his combat with the objective world he discovers.[9]

In The Circle Game these struggles between interior self and external reality, and between object and subject are repeatedly enacted within a very similar framework of temporal variation, and apart from a change of gender there is much in Barthes' commentary that could apply equally illuminatingly to Atwood's novels.

'This is a Photograph of Me' keeps its narrative 'I'

[7]Margaret Atwood, Cat's Eye, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989), p. 3.
[8]Roland Barthes, 'Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet' translated by Richard Howard, in Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 21.
[9]Barthes, p. 25.

and the observing 'you' separate both in time and space. 'After the Flood, We', as its title would indicate, places them together, in rather closer conjunction. Mallinson considers the poem to be prototypically "postcatastrophic" and describes its structure thus:

> An "I" or "We" is introduced, speaking; a minimal setting is given; and the poem moves into an elucidation of a situation which is desperate, but not within the fiction of the poem, solved. (Mallinson, p. 33)

But though these two figures are in the same place at the same time, they are far from being of the same mind. Frank Davey has described them as:

> parallel subjects...inhabiting parallel but self-contained worlds.[10]

They are survivors, of a sort, the "only ones / left" in a misty, isolated and isolating forest, but ones who are not completely cut off from civilization, for there is a bridge they can cross. The safety afforded by crossing this is, though, provisional. The high ground they chart a course towards reveals to them a natural world that has been bizarrely inverted and where:

> fish must be swimming
> down in the forest beneath us,
> like birds, from tree to tree(CG, p. 18)

and where the treetops are "like islands", a set of images reminiscent of an early stage in the colonizing process. Thus one early Victorian traveller wrote that:

[10]Frank Davey, Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), p. 41. Subsequent references to this work (Davey) appear in the text.

It was painful to witness the hundreds of acres, which had unavoidably been drowned by reason of the dams, and to see the dead trees of the forest standing, with their grey trunks and leafless boughs, like ghosts in the water.[11]

In the poem there is a city not a mile away, but like Atlantis it is lost undersea, concealed by the mist that washes "around my legs like water". A sinister metamorphosis has afflicted the world, one that the hitherto inactive "you" remains oblivious to, sauntering "beside me / talking of the beauty of the morning". The man is unaware of this flood, or at least unable to assimilate its significance, reacting by:

> tossing small pebbles
> at random over your shoulder
> into the deep thick air.(CG, p. 18)

But stones so casually sown can also change. They are like dragon's teeth coming slowly to life, transformed by the amniotic fluid that surrounds them into "almost-human / brutal faces". The metamorphosis of inorganic material is something the "you" seems destined to remain ignorant of, "not even knowing", "not hearing", "not seeing" how these stones, which have been described earlier in the poem as being:

> ...the sunken
> bones of the drowned mothers
> (hard and round in my hands)(CG, p. 18)

hover between inanimate nature and the formative human image, struggling towards identity.

[11]Sir J.E. Alexander, in George Woodcock, The Century That Made Us, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 199 - 200.

This process is reversed in the next poem, 'A Messenger', where the man who suddenly and mysteriously appears with a message to deliver is prevented from communicating it, and is eventually obliterated by the narrator's obsessive interiority. The poem centres on the line "Meanwhile, I wonder" as the persona avoids having to participate in dialogue or exchange by retreating into solipsistic meditation. The messenger appears almost like a parachutist, in a position that seems to deny the laws of gravity:

> outside my window
> suspended in the air
> between the ground and the tree bough (CG, p. 20)

trapped in limbo between nowhere and nowhere.

The narrator subjects him to an evaluation that keeps the messenger at an impotent distance. This reserve is derived from a previous obsession that all conceivable communicative media, from the "cryptic headlines" of newspapers, to "coded menus" and women in streetcars with "secret packages", could be controlled and deciphered. The speaker is possessed of a near-paranoid conviction that all such signs are exclusively "sent to / me". The poem's most painful irony is that this manic over-interpreter should be unable to recognize for what it is the one message that is "(specific)" in so being addressed.

No move is made on the narrator's part to offer the arrival help, or to understand what he is trying to say. He is viewed with a slightly superior detachment, "clearly...clearly this...merely", categorized according

to "origin; occupation; aim in life", even searched for "identification papers". The most authoritarian and banal characteristics are relied upon here, for the persona's expressed desire is to solve the mystery in the most orthodox of ways, to get the man to descend and thereby be assimilated into something respectable for what is felt to be "this district of exacting neighbours".

As an encounter he is denied distinctive features, and is not accorded any distinguishing status or purpose, described instead as being:

> ...clearly
> accidental; clearly this one is
>
> no green angel, simple black and white
> fiend; no ordained
> messenger (CG, p. 20)

for he is contained within the triad of green, black, and white. These are the reference points for the matrix of divinities and myths available to him that he must have "swallowed by mistake" and which in turn are now consuming him from within. Echoing the casually jettisoned pebbles in the previous poem, the messenger is described as:

> ...merely
> a random face
> ...not meant for me personally
> but generic (CG, pp. 20 - 21)

and it is only as his features start to dislimn that too late the narrator becomes aware there is intention in his presence:

shouting at me
(specific) me
desperate messages(CG, p. 21)

for it has become clear at last what his mission is. That discovery, however, contains within itself its own moment of failure. He becomes translucent, losing sight skin and speech so that, deprived of language, he ends up, as foretold or predestined by the narrator's inactions, "going nowhere".

The next poem examines the opposition between stasis and movement from the viewpoint of a traveller who seems, at first, to be suffering from a very different dilemma to that of the messenger, as the opening lines "It seems I am always / moving" suggest. But the title, 'Evening Trainstation, Before Departure', with its merger of train and station into one word, conveys the sense of suspended motion that permeates the poem. The procedures of movement are established by the text's repeated suggestions to the listener "moving...moving...move with me" which draw one into the space between the parenthesised lines "and behind me" "and in front of me", and what may be seen from these positions. A location is given, but it is vague and provisional:

Here I am in
a pause in space
hunched on the edge
of a tense suitcase(CG, p. 23)

an innocuous-sounding rhyme scheme that encloses Pandora's box.

This pause is like a bubble, a fragile union of colliding surfaces. Inside it is the suitcase whose

contents are anarchic debris, "barbed wire" as a souvenir of colonial technology to demarcate and inflict unnecessary suffering, "scissors" to express the ambivalent possibilities that acts of cutting entail, "plastic bottles" as a testament to capitalism's utilitarian junk, and the "soiled clothing" which accumulates as testimony to our mortal corruption, and a "lady and a man", the lady behind the observer who'd been "thinking / of nothing", and the man "three flights up" in front considering a razor, "what it is for". An accumulation of details aggregates amidst the environmental static, with the result that "In a minute everything will begin / to move", as this hiatal bubble is ruptured, and catastrophic change follows:

> ...the man
> will tumble from the room, the lady
> will take the razor in her black-gloved hand
> (CG, p. 23)

a change, though, that seems to resolve nothing, for change and departure are already acts of repetition as the narrator concludes this section "I will get on the train / and move elsewhere once more".

The beginning of the next sentence (third of the poem's six) relays us in time and space back to the last station the observer stopped at, in a space whose location remains indeterminate, and a poster underneath the electric clock, "part of some obscure campaign" poses the unanswerable question "WHERE?". These stations are differentiated by minimal dualities, "at this one...the names and places", "at the next one...a lady and a man". In the former the declamatory loudspeaker is heard

uttering indecipherable noise "like static", shot through by "thin", cutting silences. These are like "razorblades" on an evening that has already been considered as "a razor". It's a fraction of time that contains the couple who reappear at the next station waiting once more to be excised, for they represent to the observer not much more than:

> some other face or evidence
> to add to the
> collection in my suitcase. (<u>CG</u>, p. 23)

Like the recurrent pattern of a spiral, it becomes evident during this nightmarish journey that there is a process of contraction at work which will cumulate in some elemental change: "The world is turning / me into evening". This journey is one of radical metamorphosis, between self and evening and the Occamite razor, and reaches a point at the heart of the paradox that Margaret Atwood elsewhere describes as a "lucid impasse"[12].

Here, however, the moment of real change is deferred, the declaration being "I'm almost ready". And the poem returns to the surface of suitcase and world, with the confinement of circles cracked but not subject to substantive alteration:

> I move
> and live on the edges
> (what edges)
> I live
> on all the edges there are. (<u>CG</u>, p. 24)

These connotations of universe and geography are

[12] Margaret Atwood, <u>You Are Happy</u>, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 27.

further explored in the following poem 'An Attempted Solution For Chess Problems', where the game played out between the speaker's younger sister and the white king ends in stalemate a stalemate, an artificial stasis caused by the nature of the game, of:

> forcing her universe to his
> geographies: the choice imposes
> vestiges of black and white
> ruled squares on the green landscape,(CG, p. 26)

where the triadic colour scheme of the consuming myths in 'A Messenger' recurs. Here, like Andrew Marvell's "green thought in a green shade", colour annihilates everything. Outside the confines of the house, the world recoils into dark memories:

> the land unrolls without landmark
> a meshing of green on green(CG, p. 25)

featurelessly interwoven, denied the history with which the young girl is declared to be obsessed. Every chess piece becomes a sign of time:

> each wooden totem rises
> like the cairn of an event(CG, p. 25)

an event that is waiting to be enacted by the wearers of "the embroidered costumes" that have been unpacked and lie in lines in the darkness of the cellar. These, in turn, "lose their stiff directions" whilst upstairs the young girl hesitates above the armies, wondering what move should be made, what direction taken.

The house itself is in retreat from greenness, from "the brightedged vacancy / of leaves", back into its own

archaic belongings. But the narrator's "failed solution" (contained within the attempt at a solution put forward by her older sister) leads to a world of rigidity, of mathematical, militaristic paralysis under a coin-round sun, "a hole burnt in the sky", a rupture that is untouchable. This sun also bears down on the blank landscape outside, breaking up the membrane of interiority. It is a world of futile endeavour:

> kings and queens
> hunting the mechanical unicorn(CG, p. 26)

and a girl's footsteps that echo through "the concrete mazes" within which these figures are destined to be confined by the "failed solution". We are left with the expectancy of the costumes that are no longer embroidered, but "mailed". They have become armour for the male, the white king, the heir presumptive with his appropriation of space, and his attempted conquests.

Thus, as Davey comments:

> Male space is not merely inherited, defined by "memories and procedures", but...is mathematical, imposes "ruled squares on the green landscape". Female space is its Other - the "girl" who must be fitted into the pastoral conventions, the "green landscape" that must yield to chessboard pattern. Male space is substantial, ostensibly unchanging; female space is insubstantial, anonymous, subject to time, and often expressed as organic matter.(Davey, p. 17)

Yet it should be remembered that it is the older sister's mathematical and formal invention which frames the poem's undercutting of the devices she is employing.

The next poem, 'In My Ravines', explores an imaginative memory of the ravines of Toronto, establishing in its opening line "This year in my

ravines" a circulating triad of time, place, and self in which roam "my old men". These men could be characterized as relatives of the daffodil man whom Joan Foster encounters in these same ravines in Lady Oracle. Like him, they are associated with nature, but in terms of its decay and dissolution:

> old men, ravelled as thistles
> their clothing gone to seed
> their beards cut stubble(CG, p. 27)

old men who sleep at night under the bridges in "my (still) / ravines". The parenthesised "(still)" joins within its circle the stasis of the world created by the word and the enforced immobility of these men with their:

> dreams of slaughter
> dreams of
> (impossible)
> flight(CG, p. 28)

for their best hope is escape, but it would be from nowhere to nowhere. They are confined in perpetuity in these ravines both animal and vegetable, where the boys (destined to follow in their father's footsteps?) climbing in the trees find themselves to be in "the leafless eyelid / veins of a tree", a nature empowered with overseeing sight. All of them have been brought to life in but are now unable to leave this structure of so-called "organic matter" that is itself part of a body, of a land made flesh.

'A Descent Through the Carpet' reconstructs the movement of self that occurs in 'This is a Photograph of Me', unwinding a dreamy movement through those surfaces

that are accessible to the poetic consciousness. It's a movement that represents them as a collage of unresolved conflicts, and is described by Barbara Blakely as "a descent through the conventional categories in which woman exists"[13]. Once again the poem takes us "Outside the window"(CG, p. 29), but only to the image temporarily engraved upon it. For the picture we see of the harbour is only another surface, and the significant features that it incorporates (mountains, sailboats, destroyers) remain "depthless on the glass" whereas, on the inside, the carpet with its decorative pattern provides a mode of access to the sea that is both within and without "this housetop aquarium".

The carpet's floral symmetries resemble "convoluted gardens / at eyelevel"(CG, p. 29), for it is here in these "marginal orchards" filled to excess with fecundity down past which the "I" drifts that a promise exists of a contrary impulse to what is depicted under the sea. And so while snow ceaselessly falls on the surface of the sea, underneath there are:

> only the cold jewelled symmetries
> of the voracious eater
> the voracious eaten(CG, p. 30)

re-enacting the desperate circle of need and compulsive consumption. It's the same game that has been played out many times before "among the shattered / memories of battles". The underwater world affords no mythological

[13]Barbara Blakely, 'The Pronunciation of Flesh', in Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, & System, edited by Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), p. 44. Subsequent references to this work (Blakely) appear in the text.

comfort in utopian retreat or primeval eden for the submerged persona. For here are only creatures whose blind volcanic impulses betray an insatiable appetite for destruction, so that for the conscious self:

> ...here
> to be aware is
> to know total
> fear. (CG, p. 30)

In such an environment the only possible totalizing unity that exists is one of sheer paranoia, as she is drawn into a world that is almost perfectly enclosed. Utterly self-absorbed in a system that is both reflexive and reflecting, the narrator can only be released by a sudden "catastrophe", the violently projected sound of a gunshot outside. Fired from beyond the window at the appropriate final moment that marks a new beginning, it signals the emergence of consciousness into life:

> I was born
> dredged up from time
> and harboured
> the night these wars began. (CG, p. 31)

We are returned to the surface of the carpet which initiated this exchange. Here the peripatetic narrator is left, clutching expressive remnants, scales, bones, and fangs, ancestral souvenirs which show that something, however tenuous, can be rescued from beneath the membrane of water. For in Barbara Blakely's words:

> They throw into suspension man's illusions of safety that trap speech and cast doubt upon illusions of solidity that keep man's body intact...Woman surfaces from its depths, breaks the membrane which encloses it, and returns to the circle game. In this realm, there is no transformation of the players and operations of the

game. (Blakely, pp. 44 -45)

The tensions of a game 'Playing Cards' are bound into the text as the couple discover how far their identities have become polarised, ossified "In this room we are always in" (_CG_, p. 32). The only game they play is double solitaire, in which each is determined to achieve some sort of pyrrhic victory. So solipsistic has their relationship become that "the only thing / either of us might win" is, in effect, defeat. Wearied of all these other games of failed communication, they are transformed into flat surfaces. They play themselves as cards, with their own personalities split like these cartomantic images, so that she becomes one queen, two queens, "or is it one / woman with two heads?" and a king (or kings) whose signifying referent is either a sceptre for red hearts, or the black sword of spades. These partners of partners are fixed in an ordered pattern that flattens the opposition of "the flowers and the swords" (_CG_, p. 33), and the indeterminacy of whatever is exterior to this couple of protagonists.

The world outside is either a lake with the sound of a passing motorboat, or a street with the noise of a truck; but though this room they're in is "lighted", they are unable to illuminate each other. They are trapped, deprived of the comfort and convenience of their prefabricated postures, and left with no costumes to wear. Disillusioned with these masks of partial identity, they are stripped of their emblems, and are left with nothing but the ritual of continuing to play the game, an activity that is itself a compulsive,

chronic repetition.

'Man with a Hook' is named after a man, something of a prototypical David Lynch figure, who has learned how to manipulate fire with his new, technologically superior arm. In his eyes it is a fine design, a "steel question- / mark" that can turn and open as the most efficient of interrogatives have the power to do and compel disclosure with a precision that his companion is unable to muster. For he can use it in such delicately threatening manoeuvres as unscrewing the ash from his burning cigarette. Such an act is conqruent in his domain of sado-masochistic violence with the failed attempt at bombbuilding which blew his arm off in the first place. His new arm, fabricated from steel, plastic and leather is so constructed for those necessary gestures of cutting and touching that now, though quite literally he has no feel for what he is doing, he is resolutely convinced that:

> ...My hook
> is an improvement(<u>CG</u>, p. 34)

for it can handle fire without flinching, an action that demonstrates the depths of his dangerously fanciful madness.

A great number of men like this (though none so individually desperate as him) reappear in the subsequent poem 'The City Planners'. They are "political conspirators", part of the "obscure campaign" in 'Evening Trainstation, Before Departure', whose insane faces and solitary-celled conspiracies have created a city that is

a flat statement of their reductive plans. Houses are linearly arranged in "pedantic rows" and dominating their artificial city is a sense of intense organisation on the surface of things that reflects the remoteness of these men's received perceptions from the experience of reality, where cars collide with stray objects that have unsuccessfully been excluded.

In the world they have devised there is no room for growth and development. The grass must be cut so often that it becomes "discouraged"; no allowance is made for any random occurrences that might undermine and disturb a world of overdecorous new order, where:

> ...the driveways neatly
> sidestep hysteria
> by being even(CG, p. 36)

an excess of control that is unable to prevent the existence of certain things which:

> give momentary access to
> the landscape behind or under
> the future cracks in the plaster(CG, p. 36)

as time's conventional divisions are revealingly collapsed.

This world is shown to be one where the edgy surfaces of time, place, and society converge and the houses of the city capsize into the omnipresent mud, disintegrating chaotically. The arrangements of the city planners are betrayed by their inability to see beyond purely mathematical geometries. Their certainties are shown to be unstable, unable totally to delineate the landscape. For they remain isolated from each other,

incapable of co-operating for the common good in the primordial wilderness of these "unsurveyed / territories", incapable of co-operating with each other. But still they persevere in sketching:

> transitory lines...
> on a wall in the white vanishing air
>
> tracing the panic of suburb
> order in a bland madness of snows. (CG, p. 37)

Their cartographic frenzy renders them blind to what actually surrounds them, and their behaviour remains inflexible in a world that is ceaselessly changing as its recognizable features cohere and then fall into disarray, become erased.

The next poem, 'On the Streets, Love', considers emotion in terms of Darwinian contest, as:

> these days
> ...a matter for
> either scavengers
> (turning death to life) or
> (turning life
> to death) for predators (CG, p. 38)

a feeling that is embodied in the composite figure whose denatured image is introduced (again, a parenthetical woman):

> (The billboard lady
> with her white enamel
> teeth and red
> enamel claws...) (CG, p. 38)

whose description echoes the world of Tennysonian nature, red in tooth and claw. It is a world filled with cardboard and other shoddy substitutions, and where the individual is so decomposed that nobody can be certain

that they themselves:

> ...are not parts of those
> people, scraps glued together
> waiting for a chance
> to come to life(CG, p. 39)

flesh created out of collage. Images proliferate through the diversity of media sources, generating forces that conspire to enforce an ascendancy of text and reference over pure unsullied relationship.

Love becomes a matter of possession, something that is dead rather than alive. Under this repressive regime, there are people filled with blind craving, like the "grey man" who provokes the "voracious women" into desiring him to glide down from his poster into their sphere of existence. But they do not want him to come to life, rather the reverse, asking hopefully "are you dead? are you dead?". The lovers in the poem are caught in an equally paradoxical situation as they struggle with each other. The one touching the other's throat hears a faint crackle of paper and gets the response:

> ...you, who think
> that you can read my mind
> from the inside out, will taste the
> black ink on my tongue, and find
> the fine print written
> just beneath my skin.(CG, p. 39)

The pair are drawn into an endless struggle of language, but no communication is achieved, or victory made possible, only an endlessly deteriorating metamorphosis that etiolates through over-extension.

This process is examined in further detail in 'Eventual Proteus', where the declaration "The early /

languages are obsolete" is balanced further on by the statement "this shape is final", for geology or rather what the passage of time has turned into something nearer archaeology, has sedimented and stratified into inertial weariness. Experience has been rendered entirely monotonous, and exchange reduced to bitter silence. The male hero finds his bubble burst:

> you cannot raise
> the green gigantic skies, resume
> the legends of your disguises(CG, p. 41)

for the Protean shape-changer has been cornered at last, embalmed and fossilized in redundant banality. Here and now, "your flesh has no more stories / or surprises", for he's reduced to a skin where everything has been revealed, but nothing really disclosed.

Even as he approaches, he can only increase the distance between them, driving her away with his touch:

> my face flinches
> under the sarcastic
> tongues of your estranging
> fingers,
> the caustic remark of your kiss.(CG, p. 41)

It is a kiss with which he desires to re-mark her, to signal graphically his possessive powers of physical control and domination, but although his message cauterizes her skin, she has nonetheless achieved a certain limited escape. She has not been captured, and has successfully outlasted his metamorphoses and games.

Yet she remains embedded in the circle game, desiring it in part because she believes it is her only possible destiny. At some level, however, the narrative

persona is aware of the necessity for radical change, that there must be some transformation of what is said and who is saying it. A more fundamental catastrophe will have to occur, however, in order to effect the explosion of this vicious, downwardly spiralling circle.

In the next poem, 'A Meal', images of consumption and exclusion are introduced that are also explored in Margaret Atwood's first published novel <u>The Edible Woman</u>. Here a straightforward opposition is served up to us. There is a man whose distant remoteness from the mess of experience converts sensations into pure abstraction, who uses language to cut and dissect, separate and polish off:

> ...you are talking
> with words that fall spare
> on the ear like the metallic clink
> of knife and fork. (<u>CG</u>, p. 42)

He does this to attain a state of "safety", of hygienic control. The words he speaks are the supplement to his actions, in the same way that the clash of knife and fork is incidental to the food being consumed.

But the speaker, although similarly cauterized and expurgated, still preserves within herself some fragment or marginal vestige that represents the freedom of autonomous identity. It has been concealed and flattened, reduced to living parasitically, feeding itself "on other peoples leavings", creeping out of the darkness to eke a subsistence living on detritus. Here, however, despite famine and insecticide and the "careful soap" that presages an internal examination, this all but silenced voice makes the most of what (little) it can

get, in order to sustain its existence:

> ...it gorges on a few
> unintentional
> spilled crumbs of love. (CG, p. 43)

Like the pebbles scattered at random, or the dents in the car doors, these crumbs, too, are "unintentional", events that by their nature are free and unconstrainable, and so all the more radically disruptive in their consequences.

The seven sections of 'The Circle Game' are composed of recurring phrases that echo between each of these separate circles yet never resolve themselves into a consciously achieved harmony, so that like the children dancing about on the lawn to whom the poem frequently returns "They are singing, but / not to each other" (CG, p. 44). Two quite separate systems of communication are set in motion, both achieving forceful expression through repetition of word and movement. Outside there are the children engaged in their own rituals, and inside the two lovers grapple with the uneasy symbiosis of their relationship.

Within each section insistent parenthesising of phrases and stanzas reinforces an impression of exclusion and fragmentation. At the same time the narrative persona finds itself becoming restricted to limited, recirculating patterns of defensive behaviour, lines of tactical retreat scarred over her body. The atmosphere is one of intimidation and threatened violence, which Barbara Blakely suggests is a deliberate strategy to emphasize the study of oppression as a central theme of the poem. She writes:

> In the definition of oppression discussed by Paolo Freiere [in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed], one group oppresses another when the first group names and determines the other's existence, allowing the second group no power to define its existence for itself. In Atwood's circle game, man oppresses woman through the operations of eye, body, and word so completely that she is trapped in the circle of his consciousness, unable to name herself or to name him. Further, Atwood suggests that man's refusal of woman's being provides the paradigm for other oppressions, other violence, and that the destructive use of power is most often sexual at its core. (Blakely, p. 37)

The opening section goes round and round with the children, and introduces the reader to these recurrent, obsessive patterns whose cycle of enclosure and emptiness informs the design of the rest of the poem. The children are described as being caught up in an automatic ritual, a trance-like state that transforms their behaviour into a self-consuming, self-fulfilling action. For them, the whole point:

> of going round and round
> is (faster
> slower)
> going round and round (CG, p. 45)

so that they become the separate but united parts of one body engaged upon one common endeavour, and need no longer maintain individual states of identity. There is unity, a "full circle" of purpose and relation.

But there is a price to be paid for such plenitude, and that is the absence which results from this joining of neighbouring bodies, the lack of any separate apperception of their environment. They're all looking at the same thing:

> ...their eyes

fixed on the empty
moving spaces just in
front of them. (<u>CG</u>, p. 44)

It appears that to the children nothing exists outside their game of disorientation and disindividuation, and it becomes increasingly clear, too, that there is a certain disequilibrium undermining their activities, for "their feet move / almost in time to the singing" and perfect synchronisation is not achieved. Elements of discontinuity persist, hints that disruption and incipient chaos accompany the narrative circle of the poem as it expands to incorporate the observers of the scene.

The role of the observers in this first section follows its own small cycle of repetition, moving from "We can see" to "We might mistake" and back once more to "We can see". But all that is achieved is a reinforcement of these strictures of unification. For now the behaviour of the adults directly mimics that of the children. They also are shown to be linked (in brackets of course) "(arm in arm)". The result of this is that both parties are drawn into ever diminishing circles, where what is naturally available to be seen and interpreted is excluded, passed over by the whirling eyes of the children who are described as being:

intent, almost
studious (the grass
underfoot ignored, the trees
circling the lawn
ignored, the lake ignored) (<u>CG</u>, p. 45)

for whom "the whole point" of what they're doing is not to move in any given direction, but rather to remain

where they are, going round and round "(faster/slower)", like a dog chasing its own tail.

The second section moves from outside on the lawn to the interior and personalized world of "Being with you / here, in this room" embedded in the one circle, the relationship between these two people that is ensnared in solipsism and paranoia. Each is so determined to observe the other as a crooked, distorting mirror of themselves, and they discover that as their identities refract and reform they are unable to escape each other, to accomplish the act of separation that would release them. In the next room another couple play similarly hopeless games:

> arguing, opening and closing doors
> (the walls are thin)(CG, p. 46)

as thin perhaps as the reflective metal of the mirrors in their own room.

Between this "you" and "me", however, these thin walls seem to resemble the frail barriers of skin that are the only certain guarantee of some degree of freedom and individuality. Distance from the other is no source of safety for there is no privacy available in such a world of deteriorating metamorphosis:

> You shift, and the bed
> sags under us, losing its focus(CG, p. 46)

and "the next room" proves to be encased in the man's head, which exists as a vehicle for paranoid observation, for listening at a distance. Barbara Blakely provides an analysis of this scenario:

> The field of the circle game...has the face of woman and man. They are this field which they mutually constitute in the dimensions of eye, body, and word.
>
> Man possesses by sight, but woman's sight is pierced, her eyes excised. Man colonizes and consumes the flesh of woman and world; woman permits herself to be used as crucible. Man asserts his words against the refusal of things to be named and withholds from woman the name that she requires. Man is the self-projection he relays through woman; he is the illusion he creates in his seizure of her gift of reflection. He exists for his assertion of the truth of his own order, requiring her to be mapped. Woman is man's construction of her; she is what is necessary for this definition. She exists for her mirroring representation of him, held by his imposition of face before her eyes. In the circle game of power politics, man is violence, woman is violated. (Blakely, p. 43)

Such a closed-off universe induces in them both a sense of hysterical watchfulness, for danger seems to them to persist everywhere, though its source cannot be precisely located. The images projected back and forth by the mirrors hung around this room reflect inwards, denying the possibility of exit, and "even / the back of the door" has a mirror hanging on it. The couple are only able to identify themselves through the constant operation and manipulation of these mirrors, so that their mutual presence:

> is like groping through a mirror
> whose glass has melted
> to the consistency
> of gelatin (<u>CG</u>, p. 45)

and where their confused identities cannot be determined without some kind of specular confrontation:

> You refuse to be
> (and I)
> an exact reflection, yet
> will not walk from the glass,
> be separate. (<u>CG</u>, p. 45)

The connections of difference that imprison them together are co-ordinated through these mirrors. But the bracketed words "(and I)" suggest that within the terms of the language through which she is permitted to communicate, that is, confined to parentheses, she perceives herself as a figure subordinated to his image. Her judgement is:

> Anyway, it is right
> that they have put
> so many mirrors here(CG, p. 46)

for they blur the relationship between reality and the imaginary, reflecting their own reflections in an endless play of what is seen and what is created by being seen.

The third section initiates a more thorough examination of the behaviour of these dancing children, suggesting that there are as yet undisclosed purposes to the games they play:

> however
> abstract they
> at first appear(CG, p. 47)

though the repeated use of "however" in the opening few lines betokens a certain desperation in her pursuit of "some reason" for their obsessive activity. Their reactions are deferred and unpredictable, resurfacing at a later date rather than expressed immediately. Thus their subsequent activities, discovered "the next night" are shown to be in response to the legends they have been told by the adults. The imaginary world of gore and brutality they have conjured up the children have appeared at the time of telling to remain oblivious to:

completely without fear
or even interest
as the final sword slid through
the dying hero(CG, p. 47)

for their own wounds, inflicted by real rather than fictional heroic gestures, merit greater consideration, as the youngest child prefers to consider a "slight cut on his toe", and the others yawn and fidget and distract themselves.

It does, however, become clear later on to the adults that this inattention was not so thorough as they had imagined, when:

walking along the beach
we found the trenches
they had been making:
fortified with pointed sticks
driven into the sides
of their sand moats

and a lake-enclosed island
with no bridges(CG, pp. 47 - 48)

a succession of trenches and barricades fortified with water and wood and with perhaps one final, inaccessible place of retreat, for safety or heroic death. These defences, created in the form of concentric and excluding circles prefigure the fascination the children are to display at the elaborate fort that has now been converted into a museum. Here they see a compendious exhibition of guns and armour from what are referred to as "other times and countries": yet for them these objects seem to possess intimate and contemporary resonances that cannot be shut out.

The fortress they make in the sand, with its

pretence of an impenetrable barrier, its imitation of the earliest settler's defensive posture, becomes in turn another echo of those hostile surfaces that extend beyond the protective margins of the page, inscribing a barrier that is indefinite, yet circumscribed by prohibitions. Jacques Lacan has concerned himself with examining how young children acquire knowledge about the relationship between their bodies and the surrounding world and how thereby they constitute their identies through a process of development identified as the "mirror-stage" and he writes that:

> Correlatively, the formation of the I is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium - its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) symbolizes the id in a quite startling way. Similarly, on the mental plane, we find realized the structures of fortified works, the metaphor of which arises spontaneously, as if issuing from the symptoms themselves, to designate the mechanisms of obsessional neurosis - inversion, isolation, reduplication, cancellation and displacement.[14]

Symptoms strikingly similar to these are manifested here by the children's protective structures, their attempts to expel and deny dangers that they imagine, but cannot clearly see. Yet the timeless nature of their gestures to ward off evil is undermined by the very transience of the physical world. There is "some reason" for their behaviour, and it is no longer "abstract" but concrete. Even so, decay circulates outside their attempts to stop time in its tracks, as their labours are:

[14]Jacques Lacan, Ecrits, translated by Alan Sheridan, (London: Tavistock Press, 1977), p. 5.

(however
eroded by the water
in an hour) (<u>CG</u>, p. 48)

for this island and complex of defences the children have co-operated to create will inevitably be erased by time and tide. The children discover, if they remember to look, that there is no physical protection against that which is "sword hearted", the hero who is taken over and consumed by that which has destroyed him.

The fourth section opens on a line that links audience and protagonists, with both them and us "Returning to the room" that has been introduced in the second section. Yet the overall effect is of being "(here and yet not here...)" as the circle game is pushed to its paradoxical extreme. From its opening, speech and body conspire together to implicate the language of the text in operations that provide one solution to the dilemma first elaborated in 'This is a Photograph of Me':

I notice how
all your word-
plays, calculated ploys
of the body, the witticisms
of touch, are now
attempts to keep me
at a certain distance
and (at length) avoid
admitting I am here (<u>CG</u>, p. 48)

the solution to the earlier poem being that, eventually, you can look at something so long that rather than reveal itself in its entirety, the object disappears as though into a black hole.

The speaker's language, almost obsessively meticulous in its plays and ploys of expression and

emphasis, copies the man's gestures in the above passage, and this precision and clarity seems to work in a way that replicates her own sense of exclusion. Aware of their incommunicable and irreconcilable differences, to him it seems as though she is:

> a suddenly discovered part
> of your own body:
> a wart perhaps(CG, p. 49)

a suspicious, almost parasitical growth. For the couple have become each other's suspicious mirrors, where:

> I watch you
> watching my face
> indifferently(CG, p. 49)

and with everything under such close observation nothing is properly seen.

Through the superimposed circles of time we are relayed through memories of memory to the man's childhood, and how he was a "tracer of maps" and a "memorizer of names", one who controlled rather than created. His intentions then were to fix "these places / in their proper places" and it becomes apparent that in his mind he is still patrolling these childhood borders. He is described in action:

> So now you trace me
> like a country's boundary
> ...
>
> and I am fixed, stuck
> down on the outspread map
> of this room, of your mind's continent(CG, p. 49)

the man's possessive imagination draining everything of presence and identity so that he is capable of ignoring even his own body. In turn he reduces the woman's body

to a flat message that can be pinned down and contained, as she is:

transfixed
by your eyes'
cold blue thumbtacks(CG, p. 50)

in an image that foreshadows the first poem in Power Politics. There we are told:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye[18]

and his acquisitive eyes delineate and take possession, carrying out such manoeuvres regardless of purpose or propriety.

In this regard, the world becomes a succession of surfaces to be penned down: one where partial and discordant images of reality, those which might contradict his dominating project, are forcibly incorporated within the reductive horizons of his map-mythology. It is a world that he imagines he is the master of, with his encyclopaedic control that incorporates the proliferating chains of signs and signals. But in their compulsively self-regarding universe, both characters find themselves deluded by the destabilising distortions of these chipped and crooked mirrors, unable to achieve a totalising vision that will integrate their selves and their bodies. The man is forced to adopt the mechanisms of obsessional neurosis

[18]Margaret Atwood, Power Politics, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), p.1.

mentioned by Lacan in an attempt to ensure that these mirroring images and all he perceives to be his own territory or property are kept under the control of his touch, his sight.

The fifth section takes the lovers from their room, and the children out of their defensive rituals, to a place whose buildings and belongings express another aspect of these aggressive and defensive tensions. It is a physical presence in space where past and present are representatively displayed as symbols that encapsulate the violence that has underpinned and reinforced all the previous circle games. The children wander about the former fort that has now been converted into a museum, cutting their youthful imaginations on the collection of weapons that had once been used in real combat. These objects have spent their time sharpening themselves in the practice of conquest, but now they are confined behind protective panes of glass that effectively render them useless.

It is on account of this very sense of distance and redundancy that there is the possibility of expressing through the children's recreational activities this dislocation. What the children allow themselves or are allowed to see, they transform into pictures that they continue drawing for days afterwards:

> ...of swords
> archaic sunburst maces
> broken spears
> and vivid red explosions. (<u>CG</u>, p. 50)

Here the children explore the explosive possibilities

unleashed by the act of communication as the trace of memory is committed to textual experience, impressed as a print on a surface. These representations of heroic combat are ripped apart and recombined just as in their imaginations the monstrous battles and brutal deaths of the stories they'd earlier been told are now given concrete rendering within the confines of a greater, imperial circle.

While the children clamber over the cannons, a (parenthesised) disclaimer is issued about their behaviour, "they aren't our children", and this denial of ancestry implies the orphan nature that is the subject of the exchanges of the next section. There, the game of desire and negation is given voice by the not-so-communicative exchanges of the adults. Here however, while the children engage themselves in the games appropriate to this arena of play, the adults stroll:

> ...outside along
> the earthworks, noting
> how they are crumbling
> under the unceasing
> attacks of feet and flower roots; (CG, p. 50)

in the process discovering that the world outside their room is in a perpetual state of entropic flux. These two characters find themselves tangled up in a world that is eroding and erasing itself all the time, so that humanity's own footsteps conspire unwittingly to destroy that which was intended as their defence.

Just like the fortifications erected on the beach by the children, it is a place that denotes a "refuge human / and secure", but it represents a security can never be

established on a permanent footing. For all these manmade structures are by their very nature fragile and ephemeral. The tension that holds their surfaces together is insufficient to exclude what's inside from the activities of what's outside, and some eventual irrevocable disruption will crumble them away, returning the site to primordial wilderness.

The matrix of ideas and images deployed in this poem certainly seem to suggest that colonisation and acculturation are the procedures of aggressive, if not indeed pathologically disordered mechanisms. These are the actions of bodies or machines who establish a particular pattern of order through time, and who are resentful of their inability to resist the way in which this same elapsed period of time is what undoes them and renders their projects superfluous, redundant. Here the poem asks:

> Why is it
> ...
> that in this time, such
> elaborate defences keep
> things that are no longer
> (much)
> worth defending?(CG, p. 51)

The fortress, like the lovers' own bodies, encloses much that it should no longer be necessary or desirable to fight over or commit to solipsistic self-preservation. It has become clear that the sanctuary sought by the self for itself cannot be obtained at the expense of excluding everything that is other.

For there will always be a surplus of things to be excluded, and a limit to what can be included or

incorporated within the protective circle. There will never be balance, or self-sufficiency on both sides, whilst one body persists in attempting to maintain a protectionist surplus of power in order to retain control of its destiny by superimposing its will upon the environment to which it is in proximity. This struggle is, or so it seems, a manifestation of the contact between lives through the passage of time.

The sixth section returns us to the body politic of the male lover, whose self-consciously acquisitive will to power is played out in another interiorized game of image and exchange. He is attempting to force his partner, the poem's speaking voice, to play what was earlier called "double solitaire": another game whose conclusion to the battle between the sexes was to promise the faint hope of a pyrrhic victory. It is a game which flows between inside and outside, between sympathy and rejection, as the man starts playing "the ragged winter game / that says, I am alone" a statement of pathetic isolation which is though, compromised by his urging her to reciprocate the gesture, emulate his self-indulgent sense of alienation:

> (hungry: I know you want me
> to play it also) (CG, p. 51)

so that their consuming desire for shared exclusion is represented as a battle of abstinences and denials. The man uses this game to establish a sense of want and craving, as he plays "the game of the waif who stands / at every picture window", a game of images that is modelled upon the sentimental propaganda of Victorian

Christmases. The self-portrayed waif tries to have the best of both worlds because at the same time as he employs its tactics he also affects to despise the gaudy tinsel vision of more traditional familial and relational circles where indoors:

> ...they have their own forms
> of parlour
> games: father and mother
> playing father and mother (CG, p. 52)

and in the language laboratory of their own parlour they play out the charade of uncommunicative exchange that is their complicated adult interpretation of childhood games. The portrait he attempts to create of himself is of the orphan victim pitifully freezing in the cold and wintry dark. But the way he hugs himself is more demonstrative of his self-regard, and his accusation directed at his partner or accomplice that "You do it too" throws back at his opposite number a charge that is both undeniable and an imposing lie, a dissimulating blend of truth and calculated fiction.

His game is one of covetous resentment and is played with the intention of reinforcing at every point the way their relationship is constituted. For now it has become one on paper only, standing in name alone, divorced from what exists outside the boundaries of their individual and mutual excursions into the external world. Thus, as suggested above, when conjuring up the image of the family unit he is rather too careful to ensure that "the cheap paper shows". His sense of superiority is reinforced yet at the same time effectively emasculated

by the disdain towards his own rhetoric and behaviour he can't help but display.

At the end of this section the woman, accused of committing crimes of dispassion like his admits the grain of truth in these statements but crucially adds:

> although I tend to pose
> in other seasons
> outside other windows(CG, p. 53)

a statement whose possibilities of autonomous otherness seem almost exhilarating after the poem's previous sense of constriction and denial, as well as being in a sense a gesture towards the author's other literary productions. It is the sudden proliferation of perspectives vouchsafed here which lead the poem into its final section, where the various intersecting circle games collide and swirl around a more expansive circle. This section, with its shift from the masculine oppression of winter back to the "Summer again", juxtaposes edges of text and feeling in order to strike a mood of defiance. Even so, there is still in this something of a pose rather than an absolute change of heart.

The seventh section opens with a picture of the wheeling children as they are caught by the reflections in the room's mirrors. As a result they appear to be dancing upon the "casual" bed as much as upon their grassy lawn. They too are drawn into the room out of which you think you can see everything but where all that you see is contained within the infinite claustrophobic play of these mirrors. The walls depict trees that they can never come into contact with, and the lake has been

diminished through tranformation into "that low clogged sink".

A succession of events are played out, then recorded and deciphered for their potential significance. As a result, in this pervasively paranoid atmosphere, casual details are rendered with a clinical detachment that is the consequence of a self-consuming and excessive search for causal meaning:

> (a wasp comes,
> drawn by the piece of sandwich
> left on the nearby beach
>   (how carefully you do
>   such details);
> one of the children flinches
> but won't let go) (CG, p. 53)

because on every side symptoms of these obsessive mechanisms are stored and accumulated, as the child's fear of pain is controlled and overridden by the social necessity of conforming to the patterns of the ritual.

In her novel Surfacing Atwood presents us with another approach to the problem of wasps, her narrator there informing us that:

> ...wasps, when there are too many of them, you pour boiling water down their tunnels. "Don't bother them and they won't bother you," our mother would say when they lit on our plates. That was before the house was built, we were living outside in tents. Our father said they went in cycles.[16]

On this occasion the parents offer separate but compatible statements and the child chooses the appropriate course of action to follow, either by killing them when there are too many wasps, or, as when eating,

[16] Margaret Atwood, Surfacing, (London: Virago Press, 1979), p. 65.

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avoiding confrontation by letting well alone. In the poem, the wasp is drawn to the remains of a similar picnic, and a child who reacts with calm and caution. But the attention which is drawn to the careful depiction of this scene also indicates its particular underlying arrangement, for it has been recreated as a view in another of these mirrors which the man uses to promulgate his vision of things.

The "closed rules of your games" devised by the male within the apparently exitless room are joyless and pointless in their repetition and so in turn the children find themselves condemned to keep revolving in their orbits. They spin themselves into forming a protective web, a glass carapace and cage which they sing into being with their "thread-thin / insect voices". In their state of frozen perpetual motion these dancing children transform themselves into their own chrysalis, a paper-thin eggshell of protection; and the lovers, now lying in bed though still lying to each other, find themselves similarly linked "arm in arm, neither / joined nor separate" as they attempt to blend their voices in unison with those of the children.

Once again however, their efforts to simulate union are destined to fall short of pure synchrony with "our lips moving / almost in time to their singing". It is in the space allowed by this minute but irreducible difference that the woman's means of escape from her subjugation is marginally inscribed. The woman takes within her parenthesised body his imposed hierarchies of power and control, those displacements hypothesised by

Lacan whereby:

> (your observations change me
> to a spineless woman in
> a cage of bones, obsolete fort
> pulled inside out)(CG, p. 54)

as she finds the structures and surfaces of her self and world catastrophically inverted. This image of the "cage of bones" prefigures that at the end of the final poem of this collection, 'The Settlers', where a "fence of ribs"(CG, p. 95) encloses the space where horses graze and children run free.

Here though there are no open hands extended, only an ever-present sense that within these apparently inescapable circular systems lurks a pervasive, endemic danger. Spontaneity and joy have been eliminated by the man's "closed rules". The dancng children create a mirror by their motion, "a round cage of glass", while in the next room someone is searching, but for something that may well be just another reflection of themselves:

> ...as we lie
> here, caught
> in the monotony of wandering
> from room to room(CG, p. 54)

unable to escape the games of their defensive procedures. They have discovered that for them there is no place that they have not conspired to turn into a prison. The system has become so reflexive and encompassing that there is no possibility of escape within the terms it lays down.

All that now remains for the poem's female persona is absolute denial of the male's imposed principles to

which she has previously subscribed, as she initiates the revolutionary rupture of refusal. She says "I want to break", break down the fundamental principles of this ascending hierarchy of closed systems, crack open and erase the "prisoning" surfaces of all that has passed before. The abject and degraded self finds itself at the innermost margins of its being, reduced to the circle of degree zero, as even the cycle of the seasons only seems to demonstrate his mastery over the forces of nature. Now she has no complicitous choices left to make and must declare an ending, or beginning: "I want the circle / broken"(CG, p. 55).

The consequences of this are explored, albeit somewhat tentatively, in the remaining poems of the volume. For at last something approaching her true desire has been voiced. She has expressed the wish for radical change to what has hitherto received her participatory acquiescence. No longer is she unequivocally prepared to accept the rules he lays down as the only possible way of conducting affairs.

Yet refusal is in itself an insufficient prerequisite for independence. A sense of hopeless ambiguity permeates the sequence 'Letters, Towards and Away', where initially she declares "everything depends on you / staying away"(CG, p. 82); and she discovers her worldview still remains so bound up within the textuality of his territorial contexts that she ends up requesting "Quickly, / send me some more letters"(CG, p. 86). For freedom brings its own absences and uncertainties, and these at first may well seem less desirable than the old

familiar pain of confinement.

The first poem after 'The Circle Game' is called 'Camera' and depicts a moment of release, but it is one that ironically returns us to the world of 'This is a Photograph of Me', for the release is just the one that operates the shutter of the man's defining image-fixing camera. Discussing this poem Jerome Rosenberg finds that its conclusion is less "clearly delineated", more uncertain than that of 'This is a Photograph of Me', for he argues that:

> Atwood's voice here expresses skepticism at the transit from death back to life. That renewal is only implied by the archetypal cycle of seasons controlling the poem's structure. In the bare, realistic imagery of decay, dissolution and death Atwood illustrates the problem we face: that it is easier to perceive concrete evidence of time's destructive power than to conceive of its more metaphysical ability to bring about radical transformations and rebirths of the spirit. We may marvel at the seemingly miraculous metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a radically different creature, but such magical changes can be explained in nonspiritual terms. (Rosenberg, p. 19)

I would certainly not disagree with the substance of his judgements, but one should note that the poem is also concerned not so much with such transformation of large shapes as with the limited freedom that pertains at the level of the smallest particles, "that small black speck" attempting to escape at the poem's conclusion.

The picture taken here signifies a desire on the man's part to contain the woman in a frame of time, so that she will be utterly composed by the camera lens's superimposing circle. For the lens is a device which manipulates the image of the world it receives, and the male can thus manufacture what he sees and he assimilates

her reality into what he decides are his own best interests. As she says of him "You want this instant", in order to design the perfect arrangement for the pair of them, a kind of wedding photograph. It is taken "in front of a church, for perspective", but during the subsequent course of the poem the "camera man" is exposed himself to the text's own system of natural derangement and decomposition. The seasons in the poem are collided or collaged, for where to begin with it is described as "nearly spring", at that later moment when the photograph is consulted as memory, or "souvenir", it transpires that it is now the end of autumn.

As in 'After the flood, We', this couple are out walking, but here it is through the illuminating clarity of sunshine rather than the allusive elementality of the earlier poem's rising mists, with "sunlight knitting the leaves before our eyes" and a "wind empty as Sunday". The natural power of the wind is depicted as subject to the control of human orthodoxy and timekeeping, so that their human bodies seem to be being marked and consumed by nature, with the persona telling of "the vestiges of night on our / lightscratched eyelids, our breezy fingers"(CG, p. 56) as they are caught up in the transforming web of the photograph.

The man, however, remains insistent upon what is in reality impossible, that all motion ceases, all processes that threaten change and decay, like the church's "boggy foundations" be halted, stopped in their tracks; but the focus of the poem is reversed as the photographer, caught in the act, is asked:

Camera man
how can I love your glass eye?(CG, p. 56)

For in this "organized instant" there is no space for any love that is not a love of order. The frame of the poem incorporates both lens and "I", and seeks to ascribe a certain order to events through a protective veil that both discloses and encloses. This is one which the woman now finds insupportable.

The second half of the poem undoes, or rather wildly accelerates, the development of the photographic image. For the catastrophe has already occurred, and "there has been a hurricane" which leaves in its trail a legacy of chaos, of unravelling and collapsing. In response to these destabilizing impulses the narrator chooses however to assert her presence, even if it is as the trace of her departure. She declares:

that small black speck
travelling towards the horizon
at almost the speed of light

is me(CG, p. 57)

as she celebrates the anarchic possibilities of her position of exclusion and excommunication.

The next poem, 'Winter Sleepers', examines a couple in a state of hibernation, completely withdrawn from the world, islanded in their dreams, where "no things / in this deep sleep are solid" and they are preserved insubstantially under the nullifying whiteness of silence and snow. In the enforced absence of any available 'stadium' for the warring selves, a level of symbiosis

occurs between them. There is a hint of reconciliation between the elements that previously have been depicted as non-integrable equations:

> The drifting land
> merges with the inside room
> gradually through the window(CG, p. 58)

and inside, the bed on which they are lying side by side, equal in their indifference, is also a "life-raft", that in this season of whitening enables them to "weather seas / that undulate with danger".

Underneath the bed, as we descend through the surface of the winter ocean we find another level where things are submerged, the sedimental debris of mind and nature, dust, leaves, twigs, and bones, over which the couple are cast adrift. The old men of 'In my Ravines' dreamed of "(impossible flight)", but here the masculine project to deny this levelled unity of winter leads only to engulfment in the void, where "Outside, the land / is filled with drowning men". These men, after attempting to escape the enforced isolation and silence of winter, continue to assert a vision of their external environment as a collection of hostile objects that they can divide and subdue.

In the resultant collision, "Camera man" is reinterpreted as Titanic man, for "he foundered and went down / some time before she knew"(CG, p. 59). The territorializing, invasive, masculine ego is stretched out upon a plane that is vast, unremitting, and primarily textual. His simultaneous remoteness and proximity is now implied to be more threatening to himself than to his

partner, even though she too remains bound to her role within the body of the circle game.

The seasons have progressed as we turn the page to 'Spring in the Igloo', which Mallinson suggests is:

> ...about the invention of a fiction of peril in order to sustain a desired version of reality. In this poem, the catastrophe is acknowledged to be perversely courted in order to prolong an illusion. (Mallinson, p. 35)

When the couple do come out of hibernation, they are endangered by the consequences of having shut themselves off from the world for too long, as they attempt to maintain the exclusiveness of their relationship. Only at the last moment are they alerted to the actual climactic change:

> The sun had been burning for a long time
> before we saw it, and we saw it
> only then because
> it seared itself through the roof. (CG, p. 60)

and their narcissistically preserved darkness is shattered.

Where they had perceived themselves in memory and imagination to be "the center of a vast night", at the nodal point of their self-constructing phantasies, they discover in the light of day how wrongly they have calculated, and the repercussions of this echo through their room. Before, when ignorance had been a kind of bliss, the miserly self-containment of "hoarding our own heat" had seemed sufficient. But now the narrator is compelled to admit to having had the house built "because I wanted the / coldest season", that time of year when the man's assumed position of superiority and definition

would give him no advantage, and he would become for her a kind of frigid sun to substitute for the real thing.

The ocean around them grows warmer, and they find themselves trapped on the foundering ship of winter. They are adrift, but have become enfeebled through their frozen state of preservation in "glacial innocence". They are unaware of the new customs and cycles of nature as they discover:

> ...the earth
> turns for its own reasons
> ignoring mine, and these human
> miscalculations(CG, p. 60)

and the consequence of this is that they must swim in order to survive. But for them any such action would be "implausible". The outcome remains uncertain within their "shrinking" circle of limited possibilities for the ice which has fossilized their lives and emotions and made them unable to escape, now becomes "the only thing / between us and disaster"(CG, p. 61) as their self-interested folly condemns them once more to the abysmal drowning of diminished and disintegrating psyches.

'A Sibyl' traces another mode of dissent, or rather descent, as it opens "Below my window", before returning to enumerate the shelves of a room, where an accumulation of tranquillizing bottles is stored. Their original contents of wine and ovaltine have long been consumed, and now they are colonized by the titular "sibyl", the absolutely necessary feminine accessory of which it is said "(every woman / should have one)", though like the earlier messenger the sibyl remains voiceless, something of a Cassandra figure. The poem delineates a situation

where the self has become an abstraction, pure object, as reference is made to:

> The thing that calls itself
> I . . .
>
> I don't care(CG, p. 64)

for she prefers to keep her self in a state of abeyance and negation. In one of these containers "safely bottled" dwells the prophetic medium who speaks through the "many voices of the children", an echo perhaps of Federico Garcia Lorca's "ancient voices of children". She can decipher the prognosticated omens of rockets, tricycles, flowerbeds, and twitching, desire-burdened men.

But to all of these things the speaker remains substantially indifferent, for she is absorbed in her acts of alienated observation: "I stand looking / over the fading city" utterly encased in the perplexing intelligence games through which, like an infant, she learns and is rewarded:

> Right now
> my skin is a sack of
> clever tricks, five
> senses ribboned like birth-
> day presents unravel
> in a torn web around me(CG, p. 63)

as she attempts to deal with the drunken man who wants to seduce her. For after birth soon enough must follow death. The sybil makes this plain through the children's voices, declaring:

> not I want to die
> but You must die

later or sooner alas(CG, p. 63)

fulfilling a role which Mallinson anatomizes thus:

This sibyl has to be kept bottled up because she is a reminder of mortality...The bottling of the sibyl is a way of containing catastrophe, and her warning suggests that the disaster towards which the poems moves, or which they contrive to avoid, is death...Impaled on this knowledge, the speaker cannot move towards love - here deflatingly called "coupling" - or community - here reduced to plurality.(Mallinson, pp. 35 - 36)

This woman whose senses are unravelling has been turned inside out and exposed as a functioning diagram of a machine on whom others operate. But though she hears what the sibyl says, she finds that there is little she can do with the message.

The sybil is destined to remain bottled-up. The prophecies she makes remain powerless to influence events, unacknowledgeable. Emphasis is laid on a condition of paranoid solipsism, as the sybil is contained in the bottle with her "glass despair", that cannot be vocalized and through which no direct contact can be initiated. The psyche is minimally inscribed as a "pickled / baby". Abortion and violence are in the air, enforced through procreation, and the passage of time which is inevitable, inescapable:

you were born weren't you
the minutes thunder like guns(CG, p. 63)

as the self is conveyed from the cradle to the grave within a body upon whose surface is marked either the transparence of reflection, or the inscriptions of a dismembering society.

Where 'Evening Trainstation, Before Departure' ended

with the narrator still in a position of stasis, declaring: "I live / on all the edges there are" (CG, p. 24), in the next poem, 'Migration: C.P.R.', a journey is successfully undertaken. And as opposed to the discovery which was forced upon the protagonists of 'Spring in the Igloo', where movement is away from one untenable situation towards one that is represented as being equally dangerous, here they become aware that:

> Wanting
> a place of absolute
> unformed beginning(CG, p. 65)

represents an impossible desire.

The inheritance of allegories that so preoccupies the conscious self cannot simply be sloughed off by travelling from one placo to another. It is not enough just to travel from the "misty east" to the west's "inescapable mists", for this nebulous fog is a part of those "old nets / of thought" that bind and constrict self and senses. There is no place where communication is pure and unmediated, for everywhere it seems "language is thc law".

The poem presses forward through insistent parentheses, intermeshed wheels as fluid as those of a train. But running underneath them is a subtext of "reflections / remnants", all that marginal grit which hinders and disturbs the march of civilizing progress. Language itself is used to emphasizc the sense of motion in both external world and inner self, with a tightly structured series of rhymes and echoes running through the course of the poem: train/brain, ark/bark,

flood/blood, prairies/prehistory, brought/thought, conical/iconic. This is the ambiguous division between communicative systems and the corporal body:

> the books
> and the index -
> fingered gloves. (CG, p. 69)

In the uninhabited wilderness the couple travel through, the emptiness is of so vast a nature that anything they happen to see is as a result accorded a momentous excess of significance:

> ...each of the
> few solid objects took some great
> implication, hidden but
> more sudden than a signpost (CG, p. 66)

with their meanings carried away out of reach even as they are being revealed.

Frank Davey refers in his discussion to the poem's narrative persona as "the quester", and argues that she is "desperate for meaning, for some 'tree' of knowledge", but he also suggests that try as characters like her may, they are doomed to continue to "see their surroundings as cryptic, indecipherable" (Davey, p. 121, p. 105). But the problem lies also in the inaccessibility of the points of reference that make her journey so problematic. Not only objects themselves are possessed of indeterminate value, but also the language with which she is attempting to identify and comprehend them, as the lines at the end of the poem's first section "again / these barriers" imply.

For the processes whereby the elements of the outside world are construed and accorded significance

prove once more illusory, filled with pitfalls and snares. The land is replete with the imaginative possibilities of symbols, but their precarious relationship to a communal version of the past cannot entirely be concealed. There are some fragments discovered that illuminate what is presently on the surface, but they have been recovered from the most excluded and marginal areas of human cultivation:

> dug at a desert level
> where they thought
> no man had been(CG, p. 66)

shards inscribed with unknown messages, bones charred in a now secret ritual.

Language remains as always a kind of facilitating obstacle, and though they throw away their possessions from the caboose, which doubles for them as both guard's van and prison and imagine themselves at last "unbound", they arrive in their new country and realize the consequences of a land that does represent for them an "unformed beginning" substantially "without meaning". All too soon they discover that they have not automatically attained the status of free agents, for they have brought more possessions with them than those that had been physically contained in their suitcases. Even in this newish world the dictates of civilized necessity replenish old desires, and they find that they need all sorts of acquisitions in order to survive and protect themselves, houses, dishes, husks, the recycled provisions of "secondhand / stores".

From the scratches on the bedstead they learn that

their role as "brides and grooms" denies them any more individuality than that initial generic. These marks, like the carved hieroglyphics denoting the trees to be cut down for paper-mills and construction work indicate the presence of many colonizing strangers having beaten the same path as themselves. Natural abundance and replenishing fertility add to the confusion, as the narrator observes:

> Things here grow from the ground
> too insistently
> green to seem
> spontaneous(CG, p. 69)

so that around the couple arises a sense of the inescapable forces and patterns of chaos, of that apparent disorder which grows from the simplest of organized structures.

Thus the liquid mechanics of the sea prove to be too powerful for the manmade harbour walls, and it takes on the characteristics of "opaque / air", just as the air becomes watery mist, and the "small drowned hands" are infants transformed into seaweed. Their attempted acts of meaningful interpretation are once again enveloped in uncertainty. The traveller's faces have indeed been "scraped as blank / as we could wish them" (CG, p. 68), but beneath their features remain the old inscriptions and presumptions.

In the next poem, 'Journey to the Interior' a further exploration is undertaken, and whereas several important similarities are emphasized, space is also accorded to moments of significant difference, as the poem's persona begins to sustain an individual quest

apart from her companion. The poem is balanced between what is "Mostly the travel", similar to their old travails through the forests of entangling dualisms and the occasional calamitous abyss, and the different threats posed by the unchartable interiority of memory. The difference is "mostly the danger" generated by the absence of stable reference points, and it brings on the realization that it is not possible to position the self with the co-ordinated invariance that marks a point on the atlas, because she already knows that such journeying:

> ...is not the easy going
> from point to point, a dotted
> line on a map, location
> plotted on a square surface(CG, p. 70)

not what is indicated by conventional cartographic theory.

It is the particularity of details that unnerves, of objects and language so out of place yet not so unfamiliar that she can't help but wonder reflexively (and parenthetically):

> ...(have I been
> walking in circles again?)(CG, p. 70)

Linda Wagner remarks, "she has moved away from geographical exploration into the search for herself as self"[17], but this self can only be traced like the movements of a charged particle through the complex

[17]Linda W. Wagner, 'The Making of "Selected Poems"', in The Art of Margaret Atwood, edited by Arnold E. Davidson & Cathy N. Davidson, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1981), p. 84.

profusion of its surroundings:

> ...I move surrounded by a tangle
> of branches, a net of air and alternate
> light and dark, at all times(CG, p. 70)

as the poem oscillates between similarities and differences that are both disconcerting.

The narrator remains caught in a world which is curiously lacking in dimensions, where there are "hills / which the eyes make flat as a wall", like the hills imaged by a photograph (or is it the hills have eyes?), and where the texture of things remains "inaccesible" to perception until felt physically, subject to the possessive conventions of touch. This is an environment where language itself comes to life in a decaying way, with "a sentence...sodden as a fallen log", and where there also operates "the distraction of small details", that surplus of information from which all too little meaning can be derived. Here, directions are seen as both confused and confusing, and the mechanical compass is useless, for nature operates erratically:

> and words here are as pointless
> as calling in a vacant
> wilderness(CG, p. 71)

and the self becomes the focal centre of this sense of danger, because the turning inwards that results from the rejection of the significant import of external events necessarily involve a further degree of narcissistic embroilment in the mirror-image.

However the construction of that image may have been imposed by outside authorities, once it becomes drawn

into this web of defensive and obsessive self-regard, escape no longer seems the most important gesture to make. The "lack of reliable charts" enforces a certain self-reliance which is as much a burden as a source of freedom, and is difficult to guarantee can be sustained:

> whatever I do I must
> keep my head. I know
> it is easier for me to lose my way
> forever here, than in other landscapes(CG, p. 71)

for the knowledge of how easy it is to lose your way is the corollary of finally attempting to find the right path through the wilderness of totemic images from an unacknowledged history.

At last, at least, some revelation has been afforded that being aware need not involve "total / fear"(CG, p. 30), and that solipsistic isolation is not the inevitable result of attempting a more clear-sighted analysis of the consequences of rejecting and thereby initiating the fragmentation of the most tightly-bound game of circles that has been insistently played out in this collection of poems.

Chapter Two: Food in *The Edible Woman*

After the manuscript was apparently lost at the publishers for several years, *The Edible Woman* did not come out in print until 1969, by which time Margaret Atwood was well established as a Canadian writer. It's not her first completed novel (the unpublished *Up In The Air So Blue*), and *The Edible Woman* displays a sophisticated sense of timing and structure, as well as delineating a pattern of emergent social radicalization as Marian MacAlpin's attempts to come to terms with society are shadowed and sometimes mirrored by the author's manipulation of the possibilities of language.

Critical response to *The Edible Woman* initially focussed upon the way in which the novel combines satire and melodramatic farce, and how its titular symbol helps determine the structuring of the story. In an article in *The Malahat Review*[1] Robin Skelton raised the question whether the novel's characters weren't too much at the mercy of purely thematic concerns, and Frank Davey in his book *From There to Here* complained of finding the novel and its successor *Surfacing* rather too thesis-like, lacking what he called "depth of characterization and credibility of action"[2].

Developing this line of argument, John Moss has claimed:

[1]Robin Skelton, rev. of *The Edible Woman*, *The Malahat Review*, No. 13 (Jan. 1970), pp. 108 - 109.
[2]Frank Davey, *From There to Here: A Guide to Canadian Literature since 1960*, (Erin, Ontario: Porcepic, 1974), p. 34.

Atwood is a behaviourist at heart. Her characters are not responsible for their own conditions or conditioning, and at times come perilously close to illustrating social theories rather than having fictional lives of their own.[3]

And George Woodcock, who initially praised the novel's treatment of what he termed "emotional cannibalism"[4], has subsequently expressed reservations about the strength of Atwood's fiction beside that of her poetry, suggesting instead that she:

...offers the example of a prose writer who can be classed as an ironically didactic realist and yet as a verse writer stands among the major post-modernist influences in Canadian poetry.[5]

In counterpoint to these critics' focus on how the novel's schema operates, Linda Hutcheon suggests a more positive interpretation, writing that Atwood's book:

...may on the surface look like straightforward realist fiction, but its feminist and anti-consumerist politics actually find their particular expression through the articulation of postmodern contradictions in metafictional themes and forms that we usually associate with more narcissistic, formalist impulses in fiction.[6]

And she offers the opinion that it is precisely through such tensions that the novel is driven along.

One crucial moment in the novel that brings these twin polarities into contact occurs when Peter asks

[3]John Moss, editor, <u>Here and Now: The Canadian Novel</u>, Vol. 1, (Toronto: New Canada Publications, 1983), pp. 9 - 10.
[4]George Woodcock, 'The Symbolic Cannibals', <u>Canadian Literature</u>, 42 (Autumn 1969), pp. 98 - 100.
[5]George Woodcock, introduction to <u>Canadian Writers and their Works</u>, Fiction Series Volume 9, edited by Robert Lecker, Jack David and Ellen Quigley, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), p.5.
[6]Linda Hutcheon, <u>The Canadian Postmodern</u>, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 140. Subsequent references to this work (Hutcheon) appear in the text.

Marian to suggest a date for their marriage:

> I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, "I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you." I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it.[7]

So oblivious has Marian become to what she "really means" that the things she says and the things she means are radically at variance. This split in her ability to voice utterances marks the result of the accumulation of contradictory pressures upon her, and how they generate progressively less predictable responses.

Here, asked to propose a wedding date to Peter, she finds herself unable to make her usual defensive riposte of a joke in a situation that requires a positive assertion of her demands, and instead totally cedes control to him. But even as she relinquishes what power she still possesses to him, she remains sufficiently aware of her essential nature to be able to register astonishment at what she hears herself saying. The processes of eating and the techniques of writing are combined and intertwined through the course of the novel. The prefatory quotation sets the tone:

> "The surface on which you work (preferably marble), the tools, the ingredients and your fingers should be chilled throughout the operation...."
> (Recipe for Puff Pastry in I. S. Rombauer and M. R. Becker, The Joy of Cooking.)(EW, p. 5)

The prescriptive tone of this recipe certainly foreshadows the chilly terrain Marian MacAlpin will find

[7]Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1979), p. 90. Subsequent references to this book (EW) are contained in the text. See also List of Abbreviations at front of thesis.

herself in. As foreshadowed by the novel's title, the dominant image is that of woman consuming and being consumed. The impulses that direct Marian MacAlpin's life are brought together at the climax in the cake she bakes that is, literally, an "edible woman".

The dominant image of the book is, unsurprisingly, the topic of its title. The Rorschach test cake she bakes brings to a climax the contradictory forces that have been prevailing against each other to take control of her life. There are various ingredients blended together in its novelistic recipe.

Ildiko de Papp Carrington attempts to reduce this to a bare question and answer, describing the novel as:

> "an anti-comedy" that asks the question its symbolic title satirically answers, "What is a woman in a consumer society?" The answer that she is a seductively packaged female, both hunting for and hunted by the hungry male, is partially denied by the novel's ending: Marian, its ironically named heroine, decides against marrying.[8]

The novel, though, makes it apparent that it is in the gap between Marian's perception of what her role should be and her inability to perform it appropriately that the novel's true impetus derives. She remarks:

> Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration, though I can't see anything wrong with that. (EW, pp. 13 - 14)

Her problem is that her disguises are almost too effective and she can't see her own nature for all the

[8] Ildiko de Papp Carrington, 'Margaret Atwood', Canadian Writers and their Work, Fiction Series Volume Nine, p. 41. Subsequent references to this work (Carrington) appear in the text.

camouflage. Thus she manages doubly to handicap herself in her conscious and unconscious struggles against the forces of oppression.

John Lauber suggests there is more to the novel than its decorative icing, and quoting a comment made by one of the characters in the novel about the nature of Alice in Wonderland, writes:

> Any temptation to accept that easy label "sexual-identity-crisis book" (which here carries the implication that only female identity is in doubt) and to treat 'The Edible Woman' as a "feminist" work should be resisted.[9]

This view is leant partial support by Margaret Atwood, who has herself written:

> I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist: there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I'm not gifted with clairvoyance, though like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors.(EW, p. 8)

Lauber further argues that in the novel:

> Masculine identity seems as problematic as feminine (how can we consider one in isolation?), and the novel insistently asks whether and how anyone can achieve identity in the artificial society it presents. The setting may be recognizable as Toronto in the mid-sixties, but the issues are no more limited to that time and place than is the consumer society itself. Indeed, the nature of that society and the possibility of personal fulfillment within it, in spite of it, are the issues. (Lauber, p. 20)

It may well be, though, that the answer to John Lauber's rather wistful question on sexual identity, "how can we consider one in isolation?", is already contained within

[9] John Lauber in Here and Now: The Canadian Novel Vol. 1, edited by John Moss, (Toronto: New Canada Publications, 1983), p. 20. Subsequent references to this work (Lauber) appear in the text.

the novel, since for Peter and Trigger and their hunting chums, the easiest way is through the lens of a camera, or down the barrel of the gun.

Here, as in the poems of The Circle Game, the power of manipulative media and specifically the camera in the construction of images and desires is a central concern. Linda Hutcheon comments:

> One could argue that there is, of course, an implicit aggression in any use of the camera. Margaret Atwood has perhaps been the Canadian writer who has most openly acknowledged the paradoxical non-interventionist violence of photography. The protagonist of 'The Edible Woman' not only comes to fear her hunter/photographer fiance, but also makes an important connection between photography and acquisition: fostering a consumer relationship to events and experience, photography can be seen as a mode of surrogate possession.(Hutcheon, p. 48)

Another opposition is suggested by the "artificial" version of reality John Lauber describes the novel's Toronto setting as presenting, for, as Coral Ann Howells indicates in her study of Canadian women writers Private and Fictional Words, another system of bifurcation courses through Atwood's writing:

> Pockets of wilderness survive in many of Atwood's urban fictions, where Toronto's ravines provide a wilder dimension to that city's neat lawns and ordered spaces in 'The Edible Woman'.[10]

And it is to one of these ravines that Duncan takes Marian towards the end of the novel, thus enabling Marian there to start practising what Coral Howells describes as her "psychic insurrection".[11]

Sherrill Grace has pointed out how, in Atwood's

[10]Coral Ann Howells, Private and Fictional Words, (London: Methuen & Co., 1987), p. 16.
[11]Private and Fictional Words, p. 48.

conception of writing:

> A novel is not intended to simply reflect the objective world, but to offer us a mirror in which we may detect the shapes and patterns of our experience. Language itself is deceptive and dangerous; hence, the constant stretching and probing of words in the fiction (as in the poetry) until one senses that nothing can be assumed or taken for granted.[12]

Analyzing the way in which Marian's state of revolt is given voice by the structure of the novel, Grace outlines the shifts of tense and language Marian uses during the course of her narration:

> The first and very brief third sections of the book are told in the first person singular, past tense. The long second section...is presented in a third person past voice that is, in fact, Marian's...A further obstacle to understanding the significance in shift in narrative voice in 'The Edible Woman' is the use of a first person present in chapter Twelve, the brief final chapter of Part One. This is the only point in the novel where the present tense is used, and the effect is curious. (Grace, pp. 88 - 89)

The effect, however, is even more curious than Grace acknowledges. For the novel's opening sentence starts with the words "I know..." (<u>EW</u>, p. 11). But this present tense knowledge swiftly slips back into the past.

Another such slippage occurs soon after as Marian's description of where she and Ainsley stay begins "We live...", before present moves back into the past when she goes downstairs, "that morning I made it safely". Safety, as well as consistent articulation of presence, prove elusive. She is caught by their landlady who compels Marian to participate in a conversation-cum-inquisition which intertwines, tense, participle and the

[12]Sherrill Grace, <u>Violent Duality</u>, (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1981), p. 80. Subsequent references to this work (Grace) appear in the text.

landlady's daughter:

> The child had taken this mention of her name as an excuse to stop practising, and was standing now in the velvet doorway of the parlour, staring at me. She is a hulking creature of fifteen or so. (EW, p. 13)

The tenses here shift through degrees of the past, "had taken", "was standing", to the present moment, "now", and as the narrative cuts into the narrator's own timescape, so action gives way to description in the words "she is a hulking creature".

A significant gap, however, has developed between her controlled awareness of what's been happening in history prior to the moment, and the sudden, momentary flashes of present tense that are directly uttered by the relating voice. The brevity of Chapter Twelve is thus connected to the difficulty Marian finds in sustaining her own voice and individuality in opposition to the accumulated force of social pressures, whether matrimony, career, or eating. As I have indicated, it is the novel's title which provides the dominant image of the book, of what is consumable and of who it is that may be consumed in the process. The Edible Woman is a product that presents the self both as consumer and its own self-consumer. The cake that Marian bakes is the symbolic apotheosis of the contrary antagonisms determining the shape of her life, and this representation of her bodily shape eventually becomes a somewhat brittle reconciliation of the hunter and prey, the raw and the cooked, the proof that you can have your cake and eat it too.

Ildiko de Papp Carrington suggests that on one level

the novel re-enacts Atwood's own dilemmas of the time, writing:

> To resolve Marian's inner dualism, Atwood has her bake a false image of herself and offer it for consumption to the other characters. Atwood resolved her own conflict the same way. Her edible woman is 'The Edible Woman', a false image of its creator in a double sense: because her persona is split between two doubles instead of three, and because both doubles are fictional. The idea of concealment so insistent in the novel is perhaps an echo of an inner voice insisting on freedom for that one talent which it would have been death to hide.
> (Carrington, p. 52)

Although the idea of there being autobiographical elements in this book is not an original notion, the reduplication of doubles in this argument does cause some perplexity. The third double in the novel is, so Carrington maintains, the neutral but perplexing Duncan. He argues that:

> ...by making Duncan Marian's double, Atwood suggests two of her own choices: unconscious fertile maternity or self-conscious sterile scholarship. But for her, there was also a third choice: writing. She finally rejected scholarship: "...if I had done scholarship true justice, how I would ever have had time to write?" This question reveals the final reason why the effeminate Duncan is not a woman: to disguise the fact that he is.
> (Carrington, p. 52)

Although Duncan does undeniably cut something of an ineffectual figure, to call him "effeminate" and assert that he is a woman in disguise must be something of an overstatement. He remains, to Marian and the reader, a "dark shape"(EW, p. 265), a shadow whose exposure would be meaningless. His rarefied existential ambivalence as to the latency of his sexual impulses makes him a perplexed victim of what he calls the "alternation of distractions"(EW, p. 190). But he does share with Marian a knowledge that time is relative, and sexual chemistry

more than a matter of prescription:

"It isn't something you can dispense, you know...you have to let me take my own time."(EW, p. 254)

Carrington also diagnoses a coincidence of crises between the fictional Marian and the writer's own life at the time, between having to confront, in his terms, a choice between scholarship and maternity, the "self-conscious sterile" and the "unconscious fertile" as he rather contentiously puts it, with the third element of this triad of polarities being what is to prove for Margaret Atwood her solution; that of choosing to become a writer. Thus, his argument runs, Margaret's book presents Marian's cake, which represents itself as the productive solution to the problem both are presumed to embody. There is a history of books that have been labelled "confections", of course, elaborate pieces of simplicity produced to be devoured by the passage of time, and patterns of taste. The book's dedication, "For J.", combines with the prefatory quote about the chilling of surfaces to ironize relational duality in life as well as art.

The novelist herself has provided us with a description of the moment in time which gave rise to the book's central conceit:

The title scene...I'd thought it up while gazing, as I recall, at a confectioner's display of marzipan pigs. It may have been a Woolworth's window full of Mickey Mouse cakes, but in any case I'd been speculating for some time about symbolic cannibalism. Wedding cakes with sugar brides and grooms were at that time of particular interest to me.(EW, p. 7)

Food is one of the main ingredients in Marian and Peter's

fictional relationship, with a wedding feast its ultimate goal. She frequently declares how much she enjoys looking forward to meeting him for dinner, though in the novel these meals invariably end in tears if they're not postponed.

The speculation of the novel then operates along these lines: what brings about the circumstances that leave women feeling all eaten up? The book remains poised between light and darkness with its end as Atwood herself implies representing a summation rather than the resolution of a definite new departure. She comments:

...it's noteworthy that my heroine's choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it.(EW, p. 8)

To say her prospects remain "much the same" does not mean that nothing of significance has occured in between. And Atwood goes on to remark that the passage of time since the writing of the novel has not so far substantially or irrevocably effected an improvement in conditions for the plurality of women, and that the drama of rejecting repressive prohibitions demands sustained and repeated statement.

The novel demonstrates Marian's efforts to escape the anaesthetizing prescriptions her society wishes upon her. The world she moves in is perceived by her to be only minimally less rigid than that of her childhood. Comparing her attitudes with Ainsley's she remarks:

Ainsley doesn't come from a small town as I do, so she's not as used to people being snoopy; on the other hand she's not as afraid of it either. She has no idea about the consequences.(EW, p. 14)

Such an upbringing of suspicions and indirect inquiries has made her particularly vulnerable to the metropolitan world's pressures of conformity and assimilation. The routine daily dilemmas she's confronted by, of how best to present herself to fiances employers and other male predators, are the only ones the society she moves in desires her to believe she should, so to speak, be worrying her pretty little head about. The result is that her attention is distracted from those actual choices of control and self-determination that are presently being decided for her without her awareness or consent.

The first chapter of Part One of the novel opens in the first person present, with Marian asserting her presence from the outset:

I know I was all right on Friday when I got up; if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual.(EW, p. 11)

It's a sentence that seems uncomplicated enough, but the partial syntactic split of the semi-colon plunges us directly into the heart of Marian's dilemma. What self-insight can she be said to betray when she declares herself to be "feeling more stolid than usual"? To be feeling stolid is to be showing little or no emotion or interest, and so to be feeling more stolid represents a state of fairly desperate alienation. The presence of Ainsley in the kitchen distracts her immediately. As their initials suggest, the two flatmates, Marian and Ainsley, M. & A., would be, according to Carrington's analysis, the text's doubles of the author, M. A.

Ainsley is almost excessively expressive, pre-occupied with her social disappointments of the night before, and unacquainted with stolidity. Marian finds her "moping" at the recollection of the dentists' "bad party" she's attended, which she "swore...depressed her so much she had consoled herself by getting drunk", for "the most reaction" she can elicit is over her description of an abscess, at which they drool. This leads to the telling observation: "most men look at something beside your teeth ". Ainsley unquestioningly expects to be reified, regarded by men in terms of their ideal vision of woman, subjected to comparison by appearance. Marian, nursing her own emotions in a kind of abscess, devotes her attention not only to Ainsley's utterances but also to her needs, preparing cures for her hangover. The "sympathetic noises" Marian makes while she listens are banal in their commiseration, and the suggestion she makes concerning one possible appropriate behavioural response in such a situation "Couldn't you have changed the topic?" betrays her own patterns of deference and discursive evasion.

Ainsley, however, who moves in a world of generic types of men, actors and artists and dentists, has behaved in the opposite way, denying her own knowledge of the subject and pretending to be "terribly interested". She engages in this feat of dissimulation in order not to threaten their male sense of importance, saying "those professional men get so huffy if you know anything about their subject". Marian's man Peter apparently falls into this category. But Ainsley's choosing to remain silent

is an admission that by playing the game according to the men's rules she is placing herself in a position of inferiority to them.

Marian's response to this remains purely practical. She suggests to Ainsley:

"You'd better eat something before you go to work," I said, "it's better when you've got something on your stomach."(EW, p. 12)

From first moment to last in the book, food is an abiding concern of Marian's. She is something of a compulsive consumer, yet she finds herself never entirely satisfied. Ainsley also expresses dissatisfaction with her life, examining the world of production and consumption as a tester of defective toothbrushes, facing "another day of machines and mouths". Ainsley's job reveals a world of women who will go to such lengths to keep their image whiter than white, that, misunderstanding the codes of product advertisement, they brush their teeth with Ajax bleach powder.

Ainsley's problems have taken up so much of her time that Marian has insufficient time left to minister to her own needs, tripped up by a mixture of servility and smugness. As a result she has to curtail her own breakfast despite knowing she will soon be wanting more:

I had to skip the egg and wash down a glass of milk and a bowl of cold cereal which I knew would leave me hungry long before lunchtime. I chewed through a piece of bread while Ainsley watched me in nauseated silence.(EW, p. 12)

Her awareness of the problems of others leaves her insufficient time to look after herself. It would appear too that Marian is able to judge the extent of

dissatisfaction and loss and its grip over time, but unable satisfactorily to strike a balance in her own relationship with food. The encounter with their landlady downstairs involves a problem with the cooking of food. Asked to explain the occurrence of "another fire", she says: "Everything was under control...It was just the pork chops"(EW, p. 13). Marian, on account of her "respectable" appearance, is the one held responsible for these domestic disarrangements even though the landlady pins the blame on Ainsley.

For whereas Ainsley dresses herself to be noticed in "neon pink", Marian goes in for sober garments which form, as Ainsley points out, a "camouflage or a protective colouration". But she finds her invisible presentability harder to accomplish than Ainsley's instant self-advertisement: "She's a quick-change artist; I could never put myself together in such a short time"(EW, p. 14). The unresolved complexities of Marian's character make her behave in a way that is judgmental in terms of her sense of "moral superiority" but indecisive in practical effect. She disapproves of Ainsley's sleeveless dress, only for the weather outside to make her wish she'd put one on herself.

The colour pink is a constant thread running through the novel, with its associations both of raw flesh and assigned femininity. At Marian's workplace conventional proprieties are called on to be observed: the Ladies' washroom is "pink...with a sign over the mirrors asking us not to leave our hairs or tea leaves in the sink"(EW, p. 20). Pink swans glide across the silver surface of

the shower-curtain in Peter's apartment. When they meet in the rooftop bar of the Plaza Park Ainsley is wearing a "pink and light-blue" dress with matching pink bow in her hair, and the toilet in which Marian hides when she discovers she's started crying is a "plushy-pink" cubicle she shares with a "helpless" toilet-roll "waiting passively for the end", consumed in the name of bodily hygiene.

Marian feels herself turning into a pinkish "crayfish" when she has to hide under the bed at Len Slank's flat. Lucy, the most resolute of the Office Virgins increasingly affects mauve shadings in her pursuit of a man, a colouration foreshadowed in Marian's description of "that pale-mauve hostility you often find among women" where pink is suffused by the choleric purple of repressed emotion. After Clara's most recent childbirthing episode, Marian wishes she'd bought her some "salmon pink" flowers. These would have matched the "pink-lace jacket" another female patient is wearing. Basking in her impregnatory seduction of Leonard Slank, Ainsley smiles at Marian with a "small pink mouth", and in the novel she is last seen having undergone the most profound of her transformations yet, no longer so pink but perceptibly pregnant in a "bluegreen dress". When Marian and Peter do manage to go out for dinner together, she finds herself unable to eat what she's ordered, a lightly-cooked reddy-pink steak.

Even in its absence, Marian perceives pink as a matter of gender, so that when Ainsley produces some blue baby-wool she is moved to remark "So it's going to be a

boy". Shopping in the supermarket, where the cashier has her cheeks plastered with "dark pink" make-up, the tomatoes are flavourless and "hothouse-pink", denatured and artificially stimulated, the same colour perhaps as the tomato juice Marian fixes for Ainsley at the start of the novel. For Marian's wedding bouquet, Lucy makes an appropriately conventional suggestion that the flowers in it should be "pink tea-roses". And confirming the link between pink and the consumption of food is the warning story another of the Office Virgins, Emmy, relates:

> ...an account of trichinosis and a lady she knew who got it - she mentioned the name with almost religious awe ("She ate it too pink in a restaurant, I'd never dare eat anything like that in a restaurant, just think, all those little things curled up in her muscles and they can't ever get them out"). (EW, p. 177)

The upshot is that pork becomes another comestible Marian discovers she cannot keep down.

Having forgotten Valentine's Day, and assailed by guilt the day after, Marian buys Peter a heart-shaped cake with pink icing. In the peculiar distortions reflected off the taps of her bath Marian sees herself as a pink and "curiously sprawling" thing. Silver and pink decorations cover the cardboard box in which lies the red dress which she buys to complete her transformation into an object worthy of the hunt. At the hairdresser's Marian goes to on the afternoon before the engagement party her hair is shampooed by a girl wearing a pink smock. The walls of Peter's apartment building are painted in a deep orange-pink shade.

Later, scrutinising her image with the aid of Peter's

full-length mirror, Marian discovers that the only parts of her body that are not concealed beneath some kind of disguise are her "naked arms", but they too reflect something strange and artificial:

> They were the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but in the glass even they looked fake,. like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible...(EW, p. 229)

This recalls the rubbery face and skin and blonde hair of one of Marian's childhood dolls, not the dark one with the red felt tongue that she feels watches over her but the one she asked for as a Christmas present because it was washable. Similarly, observing Ainsley's "latest version of herself" at the Park Plaza Marian remarks that she:

> ...was like one of the large plump dolls in the stores at Christmas-time, with washable rubber-smooth skin and glassy eyes and gleaming artificial hair. Pink and white.(EW, p. 68)

Marian's choice of language also recalls Duncan's earlier explanation of his interest in amoebas, when he describes them as "sort of shapeless and flexible" adding that "Being a person is getting too complicated"(EW, p. 201). He covets the amoeba's "immortal" simplicity as a solution to his own uncertain identity.

In the hotel bedroom to which Marian and Duncan retreat in order to make love there are a pair of frayed towels, one pink, the other "baby-blue", as well as a Japanese seashell ashtray made of "pink china with scalloped edges". In the end, Marian finds it necessary to resolve her problems by putting them to a test that is absolutely decisive, which reduces language to a simple

yes/no. In her third person state she says:

What she needed was something that avoided words, she didn't want to get tangled up in a discussion. Some way she could know what was real: a test, simple and direct as litmus-paper. (EW, p. 267)

Something that will turn pink or blue. And so she bakes a cake that she then shapes into the image of Peter's ideal "edible woman". Before its decoration the body greatly resembles her own naked arms as seen in the mirror:

Now she had a blank white body. It looked slightly obscene, lying there soft and sugary and featureless on the platter. (EW, p. 269)

Using "bright pink" butter icing she dresses the cake in a succession of clothes and ruffles, and adds a "smiling, lush-lipped pink mouth" and pink shoes and fingernails to accompany a mass of chocolate hair.

Peter cannot stomach the idea of the cake, and exits Marian's life, and it is Duncan who polishes off the cake with relish, sealing its disappearance with the words "It was delicious". The litmus-paper pink of the icing releases Marian from her obligations, though as Duncan points out her testing of Peter through this culinary experiment is as much part of the vicious cycle of relationships as Peter's own actions: "Peter wasn't tring to destroy you. That's just something you made up. Actually you were trying to destroy him" (EW, p. 280). The end of the novel resonates with the qualified optimism of Marian's comment (on Ainsley's future with the critical theoretician Fischer Smythe) "she's got what she thinks she wants, and I suppose that's something".

In a similar way, Marian has freed herself of something, the 'modus operandi' of Peter's world, though as Duncan points out change for them all just means they are "cast out into the world again".

Throughout the novel Marian has demonstrated an extreme wariness, evaluating every situation in depth, treating society with a mixture of caution and calculation, yet seemingly remaining unaware of the extent of the choices, apart from panic and running away, that are available for her to make. She seeks reflections of herself in bath taps, and is disturbed because in some way she finds their distortions truthful. Discussing the relationship between the developing child and the mirror, Jacques Lacan writes:

> The mirror stage is interesting in that it manifests the affective dynamism by which the subject originally identifies himself with the visual Gestalt of his own body: in relation to the still very profound lack of co-ordination of his own mobility, it represents an ideal unity, a salutary imago; it is invested with all the original distress resulting from the child's inter-organic and relational discordance.[13]

Marian's own sense of dislocation, as she attempts to appreciate the illusion of herself as the holistic unity pictured in Peter's mirror, echoes this ambivalence:

> The difficulty was that she couldn't grasp the total effect: her attention caught on the various details, the things she wasn't used to - the fingernails, the heavy ear-rings, the hair, the various parts of her face that Ainsley had added or altered. She was only able to see one thing at a time. What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?(EW, p. 229)

Marian's problem is like that afflicting the voice

[13]Jacques Lacan, Ecrits, pp. 18 - 19.

in the poem 'A Descent Throught the Carpet', where "to be aware / is to know total / fear"(CG, p. 30). Knowing only too well from experience what the likely outcome of any action is going to be, she is reduced to a state of paralysis and paranoia. She acquiesces in the demands of her landlady's unuttered "law of nuance", whereby nothing is specifically forbidden but for Marian is thus implicitly contra-indicated. And so even though the landlady "had seemed much easier to deal with before we had signed the lease" she doesn't protest, because living there makes other problems easier to deal with, for their rooms are cheap and close to a bus stop.

Marian that first morning in the novel has already taken what is effectively a subsidiary role in the "symbiotic adjustment of habits" which she and Ainsley evolve to deal with the consequences of their flatsharing. They proceed by "unspoken agreement" and "mutual refrainings", and amidst these fragile silences of assumed consent are traces of resentment, what Marian disparages as womanly "pale-mauve hostility". Marian has persuaded herself that theirs is a reasonably "frictionless" relationship, and that: "...if I do the breakfast dishes, Ainsley does the supper ones; if I sweep the living-room floor, Ainsley wipes the kitchen table"(EW, p. 16). But as the plates and dishes pile up in the kitchen sink during the course of the novel, what Marian calls "equilibrium" turns out to be closer to "the greater stasis" that prevails at her office, a kind of inertial entropy.

Marian reflexively assumes that some of her habits

must secretly irritate Ainsley, yet it is her own sense of injustice and disordered impropriety which registers most strongly. She feels that Ainsley's bedroom floor with its swampy piles of discarded clothes must represent a "fire-hazard", but, for the sake of a quiet life, speaks none of her thoughts aloud. After a bus journey conducted in silence because Marian prefers the one-way communication of advertisements to talking, she starts feeling hungry again and buys a package of peanuts. Their parting conversation turns from food back to drink and drinking. Another suppressed injustice is brought to Marian's attention when Ainsley tells her they're out of whisky again. For they share the cost of the bottles, "but rarely the contents".

Her ability to consume liquor is curtailed by childhood prohibitions, the associations of religion and self-denial. She recalls a Sunday-school essay she wrote, illustrated with pictures, diagrams, and charts all bearing out the message of abstinence or at least temperance, and of the importance of avoiding the temptations of excess. Her feelings of restraint serve, too, to leave her feeling at a disadvantage with Peter, who likes her to keep up with his drinking.

She feels unable to escape her background and cannot "take a second drink without a mental image of a warning sign printed in coloured crayons and connected with the taste of tepid communion grape-juice"(EW, p. 17). She further confesses to a certain lingering envy of Ainsley's job, because of its very insubstantiality and pointlessness. Marian, as we shall see, is very much

more securely ensconsed in the corporate hierarchy, and her job in market research is "only to be expected" of a young female graduate at this time.

Ainsley, on the other hand, feels no particular obligations to her employers and her "unusual" job, and furthermore, unlike Marian, has some idea of "what she wanted to do next". Marian desires attention even as she tries to avoid it. The result is that, although convinced she has "much more mechanical ability" than her flighty flatmate, she is less dextrous in her manipulation of these skills. Thus, when she does arrive for work, she again finds events conspiring to cause her embarrassment: "By the time I finally reached the office I was three-quarters of an hour late. None commented but all took note"(EW, p. 17).

The opening of the second section leads the reader into a world where, like Ainsley's "defective electric toothbrushes", more machinery is not working as it should be. It's a Friday, "always a bad day at the office", and the air-conditioning fan is not working so that where normally it would be "stirring the air around like a spoon in soup" now, in the reverse of Brownian motion, it is only spurring the workers from "inertia on to an even greater stasis". Marian, easily distracted from her "damp typewriter" accompanies the company's dietician Mrs. Withers, whose brisk and unwiltable image and "Betty Grable hairdo" is fashioned after the image of another, to the kitchen for a test-tasting. The rice puddings she samples are to be rated on a scale which betrays their origins as chemical concoctions, "Natural, Somewhat

Artificial, or Definitely Unnatural".

Marian's response is to do her best to avoid committing herself to a definite opinion on any of them, instead suggesting changes to the parameters of the test or the recipe. She wishes to be as helpful as she can, but without, as she puts it in the context of the end of this chapter, "volunteering information". As she puts it: "Deciding for them what they wanted to know wasn't part of my job"(EW, p. 19). Her own job is directed more towards purely linguistic ends, whereas what Mrs. Withers is seeking is the "pure taste-test". Marian's role is as an intermediary between the company's psychologists and the general public, for she has to transform incomprehensible jargon into "simple questions which can be understood by the people who ask them as well as the people who answer them"(EW, p. 19). The people who ask them, of course, being the interviewers rather than the people who devise them, the psychologists.

In reality her job as a translator is less precise than its description suggests, and involves just being of general assistance, "calling up garage mechanics" and "handing out pretzels". Therefore, uncertain of the exact parameters of her own job, she feels reluctant to intrude upon the territory of anyone else. Her sense of insecurity is reinforced by her more general uncertainty as to the nature of the business in which she finds herself. Although she's aware that there are plans afoot for her, that she's being "groomed for something higher", the prospect of turning after a long time into a Mrs.

Bogue or her assistant doesn't exactly thrill her. Indeed, the more she sees of "Seymour Surveys" the less she likes it.

Appropriately enough for a company so obsessed with the details of food as a product, she describes it in terms of a particularly edible artefact:

> The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle. (EW, p. 19)

The company is made up of chilled surfaces, as advised in the novel's prefatory recipe, between which Marian finds herself messily compressed, like the spongecake body she eventually submerges in coloured icing. Indeed the novel itself is structured along similar lines, with its third-person second part squeezed between two first-person outer sections.

On the floor above Marian the male executives conduct their operations, arranging things with their clients, that is, the producers rather than the consumers. These are the sort of men Peter is intimate with, "the soap men" as Ainsley calls them, and to whom Marian is introduced at "cocktail parties...dinners and get-togethers". She describes them thus:

> The friends collectively were all well-dressed and on the verge of being successful, and they all had wives who were also well-dressed and on the verge of being successful. (EW, p. 176)

Their office world is one of the refinement that supposedly goes with power, "carpets and expensive furniture and silk-screen reprints of Group of Seven

paintings on the walls".

On the floor below her are further machines, and people used as machines, the genderless "operatives" who work amidst a "factory-like clatter", their lack of status denying them any individual significance. Marian works in the department of market research, which is almost exclusively staffed by women, and serves as a kind of refuge of feminine order, with its "pink washroom" and "chintz-curtained lunchroom". The interviewers are "all housewives" on piece-work, working in whatever spare time they have to make ends meet. In the office they are represented as tacks on a map of Canada, just as the figure in 'The Circle Game' feels herself "stuck / down on the outspread map" of the man's "mind's continent"(CG, p. 49).

What worries Marian most about her future in Seymour Surveys is that, apart from the unenviable prospect of becoming a new Mrs. Bogue, a model company woman who "regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company"(EW, p. 24) her options are distinctly limited:

> I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person or one of the questionnaire-marking ladies, as that would be a step down.(EW, p. 20)

She does not yet appear to question the premise that a career can only be meaningfully defined in terms of steps up or down the ladder of corporate success. Her next encounter in the office is with Mrs. Grot from Accounting, who reminds her that she's now been working for the company long enough to be compulsorily eligible for the Pension Plan, another way in which society

attempts to cater for her future by taking away from her present. Mrs. Grot is the possessor of another chilled surface, with "hair the colour of a metal refrigerator-tray", and her moral superiority is in a different league from Marian's, whose protests are smartly dealt with:

> "Isn't it too soon for me to join the Pension Plan? I mean - don't you think I'm too young?"
> "Well, it's just as well to start early, isn't it," Mrs. Grot said..."Now I've brought the necessary documents; all you have to do is sign here."
> (EW, pp. 20 - 21)

Marian contracts herself into the plan with her signature, but the episode clearly bothers her "more than it should have" and she admits to feeling "suddenly quite depressed" about what she may have signed away of herself. It is her signature on the document that seems to worry her most:

> It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn't think about it. (EW, p. 21)

The ramifications of this sentence are quite complicated. The panic referred to here surely prefigures her panic in the rooftop bar, symptomatic of an increasing awareness on her part of feelings of powerlessness. Her physical trace on the pages of this "magic document" seems like an act of momentous significance. To Marian's "superstitious" imagination it is as though a crucial part of herself were being systematically taken out of her grasp: "I thought of my signature going into a file and the file going into a cabinet and the cabinet being shut away in a vault somewhere and locked" (EW, p. 21).

It is the reverse of this journey Marian will end up undertaking, in order to erase her signature and retrace her life in her own image rather than the one imposed by external authorities. Signing her name, she has expressed her resigned compliance to the situation by saying "you get adjusted to that at school", "that" being "the feeling of being subject to rules I had no interest in and no part in making"(EW, p. 21). Such misgivings are starting to undermine the efficiency of her participation in the normative process. Falling behind in her work seems to her the sort of sin for which penance should be made by labour, but a desire to take refuge from her perturbing thoughts effects the contrary: "I welcomed the coffee break at ten-thirty. I knew I ought to have skipped it and stayed to expiate my morning's lateness, but I needed the distraction"(EW, p. 21).

The coffee break is another exclusively female gathering, and is a focal point for communal conversation about food. At this coffec break are "the only three woman in the department who are almost my own age", the "office virgins" as they are collectively referred to by Ainsley, who joins them shortly. One common denominator between the three office virgins is that they are all artificial blondes. Marian herself appears to possess hair that is close in colour to theirs, but she is reluctant to acknowledge the fact. Duncan introduces her to his myth-obsessed flatmate Fischer Smythe as "Goldilocks" and this is her response: "I smiled rigidly. I am not a blonde"(EW, p. 55). The difference remains

undefined, however. The conversation at the coffee break turns, inevitably, to the problems of food, as practical Australian virgin Millie informs them that "the laxative survey in Quebec has been cancelled".

Whilst Lucy conducts a long-running petty power struggle over the raisins (a food item whose tricksiness Marian and Mrs. Withers the dietician have already discussed) in her "toasted Danish" with the waitress, the others discuss the cancelled laxative survey. Millie, the eldest and the longest-serving of them with Seymour Surveys, "who always gets the news first" from her corporate contacts, explains that the structure of the test, with a sample and "thirty-two pages of questions", made it transparently redundant:

"They figure anybody you could take past page three would be a sort of laxative addict, if you see what I mean, and they'd go right on through."(EW, p. 22)

As a psychology graduate, Ainsley's interest is aroused by the question of why Quebec has such difficulties with the mechanics of consumption. Millie thinks the Quebecois must be constipated because they eat a lot potatoes, but Ainsley, who tends to think more in terms of the collective than the individual, believes that the reasons are psychological, based on difference as a source of stress:

"It must be their collective guilt-complex. Or maybe the strain of the language-problem; they must be horribly repressed."(EW, p. 23)

Atwood herself elsewhere demonstrates more than a passing knowledge of psychological concepts, referring in the

Introduction to Second Words to the "approach-avoidance reactions"[14] generated by having to write commissioned articles, unable to approach and simultaneously equally unable to leave the act of writing.

More generally throughout the novel however, the worlds of food and language are both rendered as problematic expressions of self. The description of the restaurant where they meet as "wretched, but the closest" matches the convenient proximity of their flat to the bus-stop in its tone of abased resignation. The scene here concludes with a few choice words for women to describe other women, the "elegantly coiffured" Lucy calling the waitress a "bitch", and Marian referring to "all those old crones like Mrs. Grot" who she believes are feeding off her contributions to the Pension Plan. Millie has long ago subsumed herself within the organization and shows "no interest" in Marian's worries, contenting herself with the comment: "You'll get over it. Gosh, I hope they've fixed the air conditioning"(EW, p. 24).

Millie's Australian ancestry draws our attention to another continent mapped and colonized by the British Empire, one whose vast extent, like that of Canada, makes it a particularly problematic environment for words and individuals as they traverse the wilderness. Differences exist between them, as Stephen Leacock pointed out over half a century ago in his essay 'Migration in English Literature' where he remarks of Australia that part of

[14] Margaret Atwood, Second Words, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1982), p. 12. Subsequent references to this collection (SW) appear in the text.

the power of Australian literature seems to derive from it being "lucky enough to have no history" and laments that:

> In Canada, with romance and history broadcast over our country, how little have we done with it.[15]

Nowadays, however, it is clear that this lack of history is a reflection of an even more thorough suppression and marginalization of Australia's original inhabitants than that performed during the conquest of North America.

The Canada that Marian returns to at the start of Chapter 3 after lunch hangs on a wall-map above her desk and flags the company's interviewers in little towns up and down the country, some of whose names it is now part of Marian's job to replace, either on account of disloyal pregnancy or being chased out of houses by women wielding meat cleavers. For female rage against oppression here remains directed against women rather than against men, or any other appropriate target. Marian again finds herself behind schedule on account of another person's actions, "because someone in mimeo had run one of the question sheets backwards"(<u>EW</u>, p. 24).

As a consequence of Marian's continuing feelings of guilt about her lateness in to work, she is manoeuvred by Mrs. Bogue, who is described as "at her most genial when she wants something", into agreeing to work through the weekend as an interviewer pre-testing the new beer questionnaire and advertisement. This pre-test involves

[15]Stephen Leacock, 'Migration in English Literature' in <u>My Remarkable Uncle</u>, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1942 repr. 1989), p. 210.

its own forms of hunting and gathering to alleviate the worries of the men upstairs as to the effectiveness of the test they've devised, for as Mrs. Bogue says, "you only need to get seven or eight men". She leaves Marian, however, embroiled in further anxieties:

> "You'll get overtime, of course," Mrs. Bogue said as she walked away, leaving me wondering whether that had been a snide remark. Her voice is always so bland it's hard to tell.(EW, p. 25)

The world of Seymour Surveys is one of blandness and obsessive conformity, and so it is appropriately ironical that it is this extra work to make sure there are no unforeseen problems with the test which starts to make Marian directly aware of her own unforeseen problems. Here, however, she very cautiously pre-tests the pre-test, dialling in to check the jingle has been installed. She says that "Since the survey wasn't actually being conducted till the next week, someone might have forgotten to hook up the record, and I didn't want to make an idiot of myself"(EW, p. 25). The language is conventional, somewhat banal, but there underpins it a fear of excluding difference expressed in Marian's desiring not to make an "idiot" of herself, an individual remarkable for the wrong reasons.

The beer itself is a corporate brand produced by "one of the large companies". Her subjects, though, will not be required to evaluate the product beer itself, which is, of course, as undifferentiable as any other Moosehead, Molson, Labatt, or Carling, but to assess the advertisement's effectiveness through answering questions

as to "how he liked the commercial, whether he thought it might influence his buying habits, and so on." Thus the product is supplanted by the process of its representation. For the consumer requires more than beer to feel filled. He needs the self-reinforcement of the image which the pictures promoting the beer offer, that feeling "a mystical identity with the plaid-jacketed sportsman shown in the pictures with his foot on a deer or scooping a trout into his net" enables a man to achieve kinship with his community and peer group. Fantasy establishes a reality of its own as the text that is spoken over the jingle emphasizes, 'Any real man, on a real man's holiday...' and synaesthesia ensures that the beer can put 'the tang of the wilderness' into a man's life, the alcoholic equivalent of the scent of blood in one's nostrils. This is the closest to the wilderness these "manly" men can expect to get in their predominantly urban milieu.

The distorting resonances between assimilated image and unmediated reality here prefigure Peter's rabbit hunting story in the Park Plaza bar, which tails off into a technical discussion about the merits of Japanese lenses. And it is at this juncture that Peter puts in his first appearance in the novel, albeit a disembodied one as he rings with the bad news that their dinner is off, a situation that reinforces Marian's sense of fragmentation: "I was hungry again. I had been eating in fits and starts all day and I had been counting on something nourishing and substantial"(EW, p. 27). Marian has only known Peter for four months, but during this

time several of his friends have succumbed to the lure of marital stability now that the "golden age" of their university days is over.

The joys of bachelordom have been corrupted by the artifice of women, so that on their drinking sessions, "when the others did take an evening off from their wives to go along...the flavour of the evening was a synthetic substitute for the irresponsible gaiety of the past"(EW, p. 27). Artificial flavours extend beyond the world of food to the society of friends. And now one of the most long-standing of these bachelors, Trigger, Peter's companion on the rabbit shoot, has fallen prey to the "epidemic". Their relationship had latterly become as mutually constitutive as that of the drinker and his picture:

> He and Trigger had clutched each other like drowning men, each trying to make the other the reassuring reflection of himself that he needed. Now Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty.(EW, p. 27)

Pondering the consequences of this news, Marian decides that Peter will need "careful handling" at their next encounter, and resolves to be "wary", on the grounds that:

> If the other two marriages had been any indication, he'd start seeing me after two or three drinks as a version of the designing siren who had carried off Trigger. I didn't dare ask how she had done it: he might think I was getting ideas. The best plan would be to distract him.(EW, p, 27)

The paradox of her behaviour is that she's doing exactly what he suspects she may be doing, devising a "plan" to counter Peter's perception that she is secretly planning

to compromise his autonomy and independence. She herself is behaving like "a version of the designing siren", and her attempts to distract him run parallel to the sirens' distractions. Duncan, then, is on one level correct in his assertion that she's been trying to destroy Peter. Her strategy is consistent with such an accusation, although her motivation is rather different.

Marian simply can't escape problems with food. A "squashed housefly" has been found in the raisin study, and Lucy, who finds the one as revolting as the other, uses a headache as an excuse to offload the task of defusing the situation. The letter of apology requires one gesture Marian is adept at making, "to avoid calling the housefly by its actual name"(_EW_, p. 28). Once again she is interrupted by a voice at a distance on the phone as her old friend Clara invites her to dinner, thus resolving one dilemma.

But other problems are initiated. Clara, feeling "shitty", consumed by the responsibilities of her proliferating infants, sounds "bitter" and potentially troublesome. Having agreed to go, Marian tries to find a way to shift the burden of attention away from herself, and asks to bring Ainsley along too. Here too, the question of food becomes an issue in her reasonings:

> I told myself it would be good for Ainsley to have a wholesome dinner - she had only had a coffee at the coffee-break - but secretly I wanted her along to take off a bit of the pressure. She and Clara could talk about child psychology.(_EW_, pp. 28 - 29)

Retreating to the Ladies' Room to prepare herself for her evening out, Marian's desire for isolation is thwarted. She must watch three pairs of virginal eyes glittering in

the mirrors, observing her with "wistful curiosity", envious of her "catch", a man to date. This image of multiple observation foreshadows the conjunction achieved shortly after Peter proposes to Marian during an electric storm and:

> As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes. (EW, p. 83)

Her image has become trapped on the surface of his body, and it is this act of possession which is to deprive her of the ability to speak in the first person during the second part of the novel.

In an interview with Linda Sandler, Margaret Atwood remarks that:

> For me it's axiomatic that art has its roots in social realities: when you see an Aztec statue you don't doubt that it had an essential social function. People believed in that god and made sacrifices to it. I don't know why literature should be any different.[16]

And so whilst The Edible Woman is rooted in the social reality of Toronto in the early sixties, in opposition to this the novel conjures up the effect of a city being seen through a state of increasing delirium as Marian prepares to sacrifice herself to society's proper functioning.

Chapter 4 opens with Marian returning after work to the subway station and becoming submerged in the crowds and a sense of incipient hallucination as she walks "through a thick golden haze of heat and dust...almost

[16]Linda Sandler, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', The Malahat Review, No. 41 (Jan 1977), p. 23.

like moving underwater" to meet a "shimmering" Ainsley. Their journey out to Clara's house is again conducted in silence, Marian reading the advertisements on the subway, and then unable to decide what to speak to Ainsley about. She decides not to mention her fears of the Pension Plan, because Ainsley would be unable to understand what was so disturbing about it:

> ...she'd see no reason why I couldn't leave my job and get another one, and why this wouldn't be a final solution. (EW, p. 30)

Marian, however, believes a solution that will resolve everything to be attainable. And for a time she thinks she has found the answer by accepting Peter's marriage proposal, as it seems to her a sensible way of escaping from the Pension Plan. She says:

> I was seeing him in a new light: he was changing form in the kitchen, turning from a reckless young bachelor into a rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability. Somewhere in the vaults of Seymour Surveys an invisible hand was wiping away my signature. (EW, p. 89)

The stability he offers is an illusion, for Peter has not yet finished "changing form" before her eyes, and the cost of her signature being erased will not just be the loss of her maiden name. Marian nonetheless imagines that she will be acquiring something in exchange for what she is willing to give up and declares: "I could feel the stirrings of the proprietary instinct. So this object, then, belonged to me"(EW, p. 90). The logic of the text, though, suggests that the reverse, the mirror-image of this, is the case. Marian's language replicates her own dilemma, that it is Peter whose proprietary

objectification of her is the primary threat to her individual freedom.

Clara's house represents for her "a kind of exile", away from the university where her first pregnancy meant she failed to complete her degree course, but not as far out of town as the oases of suburbia with their signs of affluence, newly-built bungalows and station-wagons. The house itself has been reduced to chaos by the disorderly and disruptive children. Entering. Marian and Ainsley are assailed by articles that are disintegrating, "a nearly-decapitated doll" and "a large teddy-bear with the stuffing coming out". Joe, the husband and father appears looking "harried and uncombed" and leads them through rooms whose floors are full of "scattered obstacles" onto a back porch "overgrown with empty bottles of all kinds." Productivity has gone to extremes, following Clara's embittered declaration, "The more the merrier, that's our motto".

Marian's reaction to Clara's appearance is expressed through an image involving the excessive, and aggressive, consumption of food, as she describes her looking "like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon". Marian also separates "Clara's body" from her head, which with "its aureole of fair hair" incorporates Clara as another blonde in the novel. Detaching a woman's head from her body is a procedure repeatedly invoked in the text. After her visit to the hairdresser's, Marian reflects "They treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented"(<u>EW</u>, p. 208). And Marian's last gesture in Part Two involves such an act of

severance, as in response to Ainsley's cry that she is rejecting her femininity she says "it's only a cake", and plunges "her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head"(EW, p. 273). What she is rejecting here is the way the conventional feminine image is constructed as the embodiment of confected perfection rather than, automatically, the idea of the image itself.

Clara's frustrated comments about being "just a housewife" reflect her inability to surmount the forces of distraction and disorder raging around her. Marian, watching her recline "holding her latest baby somewhere in the vicinity of what had once been her lap", wonders how she ought to act, for she feels like a powerless observer of the scene:

> When she telephoned Clara had seemed to be calling me to some sort of rescue, but I felt now that there was nothing much I could do, and nothing she had even expected me to do. I was to be only a witness, or perhaps a kind of blotter, my mere physical presence absorbing a little of the boredom.(EW, p. 31)

Again Marian opts for a passive role, leaving Ainsley to volunteer to take the baby off the enfeebled Clara. Marian imagines Clara as a "strange vegetable growth" being consumed by what Clara calls a "little leech". And when Clara urges Marian to talk, Marian finds "nothing much" she feels she can talk about, for her own life seems as desperate and unentertaining as Clara's own:

> ...anything I could mention, the office or the places I had been or the furnishings of the apartment, would only remind Clara of her own inertia, her lack of room and time, her days made claustrophobic with small necessary details.(EW, p. 32)

Ainsley's attention has been engaged by the baby, and as

she gazes at it curiously, Marian notices a close resemblance between the two faces, with their pink mouths and blue eyes. Prone to getting dissatisfied with things as swiftly as a baby, too, Ainsley loses interest in the child as soon as it wets its dress.

At dinner they have some of the canned rice pudding Marian tasted earlier in the day, and afterwards Marian sits recalling her friendship with Clara, which goes back to highschool. With her long fair hair, she reminds Marian of a medieval figure in a tapestry, and revealingly adds "Of course her mind wasn't like that, but I've always been influenced by appearances"(EW, p. 36). Clara's appearance suggests to Marian a loss of control over her life and her body that echo Marian's own problems, so that they both appear to be standing helpless as piles of dirt rise about them, and like Clara "her own body seemed beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers."

As Ainsley points out to Marian in Chapter 5, "You're always thinking in terms of either/or. The thing is wholeness"(EW, p. 41). Ainsley's confidence in her own judgements, however, is shown to be based upon her reliance on authority figures to form her judgements for her. She unquestioningly accepts anthropologists' interpretations of "primitive cultures", and as Marian notices, her utterances resemble the collective oracular mode of advertising rather than individual thought. Ainsley says:

"Every woman should have at least one baby." She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should

have at least one electric hair-dryer. (EW, pp. 40 - 41)

Ainsley's reductionist machinations to find a father for her planned baby remind Marian "more than I liked of a farmer discussing cattle-breeding". Ainsley is obsessed with the mechanics of her reproductive act, and also unaware that there is a significant difference between the effects of heredity and environment when she says:

> ...if only people would give more thought to the characteristics they pass on to their children maybe they wouldn't rush blindly into things. (EW, p. 43)

What Ainsley attributes to genetic selection, Marian knows is due to more complicated factors. Her knowledge fills her with unease at the same time as it immobilizes her. She does not wish to "behave irresponsibly", and resigns herself to not interfering, simply adjusting herself to the new situation.

Chapter 6 brings us to the start of the next day, Saturday, and opens with Marian in a state of panic, "startled" out of a nightmarish dream by the relentless time-keeping of the alarm clock. Her confession that she doesn't usually remember dreams is another clear indication of the divorce between Marian's conscious rationality and her pre-conscious neuropsychic impulses. She has been dreaming about her body acting uncontrollably, feet dissolving, fingers becoming transparent. She puts a pair of rubber boots on "just in time" to contain herself, but she is out of time, for before she can assert the unity of her image in the mirror, she is woken up.

The dream portrays her body as something that is

disappearing, and she feels as if she is "like melting jelly", a chilled food product disintegrating when served at room temperature. In the poem 'The Circle Game' Atwood transposes this imagery to suggest the problems of identity and communication between man and woman, describing their attempts to contact each other as being:

> ...like groping through a mirror
> whose glass has melted
> to the consistency
> of gelatin.(CG, p. 45)

In Part Two of the novel, time and the mirror again combine in a way that undermines Marian's sense of integrated identity. When she resolves to run away from Peter's final party, she finds herself in the bedroom with its full-length mirror:

> She avoided the mirror. She had no idea what time it was. She glanced at her wrist: it was blank. Of course; she had taken her watch off and left it at home because Ainsley said it didn't go with the total effect.(EW, pp. 244 - 245)

Marian oscillates between the decentering uncertainty of a fragmented self, and the psychically restrictive image that is imposed by the social order. Her reflection in the mirror is compulsive and yet must here be "avoided". This surface reflection creates order through a system of external disciplines and controls, through establishing limits to how the self can give expressive voice to its desires. Gloria Onley, discussing The Edible Woman, comments that:

> 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.[17]

One of the crucial episodes in Marian's struggles towards untrammelled self-definition occurs in Chapter 8, the evening at the Park Plaza bar. Arriving with Peter, she observes their images in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. Peter presents himself as "ordinariness raised to perfection" with his tailored clothes and matching accessories, and she sees herself in the mirror as something equivalent: "I was thinking I was just about the right height for him." She is as yet only faintly conscious of the consequences of her appositeness.

Before leaving for the bar, however, a problem with food has already manifested itself as Peter complains about the meal she's prepared, frozen peas and boil-in-the-bag smoked sausage. Her sense of restraint has again precipitated something of a crisis:

> Peter pushed his plate away. "Why can't you ever cook anything?" he said petulantly.
> I was hurt: I considered this unfair. I like to cook, but I had been deliberately refraining at Peter's for fear he would feel threatened. (EW, p. 63)

She is in a no-win situation, and, of course, when she does cook something specially for Peter, the cake, he finds it equally indigestible. While Peter talks about Trigger's wedding Marian opts for silence as the best strategy, and her reward for this self-effacement is to be congratulated by Peter with these words: "I don't know what I'd do if you didn't understand. Most women wouldn't, but you're so sensible" (EW, p. 64). Peter's

[17]Gloria Onley, 'Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle', Canadian Literature, No. 60 (Spring 1974), p. 25.

idea of a sensible woman is a silent one: but Marian's silence is subversive rather than compliant, a sign of her psychic insensibility.

Peter is initially suspicious of Marian's old acquaintance Len Slank, but warms to him as soon as he expresses a world view that is consonant with his own. Discussing women, Len says:

"...you've got to watch these women when they start pursuing you. They're always after you to marry them. You've got to hit and run. Get them before they get you and get out."(EW, p. 66)

And Ainsley's unexpected arrival, dressed to lure Len into paternity, precipitates another crisis for Marian. Knowing what Ainsley's planning she wonders whether she should get involved. As usual, however, she decides against:

I knew that if I interfered I would be breaking an unspoken code, and that Ainsley was sure to get back at me some way through Peter. She was clever at such things.(EW, p. 68)

Fear and suspicion once again serve to inhibit Marian, and attempting to compose herself with a breath of fresh air on the patio she once again knots herself into a restrictive double-bind, reflecting "If I wasn't going to take deliberate steps, I'd have to be sure of my self-control so I wouldn't say something by accident." In the event it is her actions which are to betray her uncertain self-control. Her subsequent runnings and hidings are hinted at here when Marian goes back indoors "noting with a faint surprise that I was wobbling slightly."

The evening becomes increasingly delirious and distorted to her, yet her self-consciousness does not radically diminish. Listening to Peter tell Len his hunting story, she thinks:

The sign saying TEMPERANCE flashed in my mind: I couldn't let my perceptions about Peter be distorted by the effects of alcohol, I warned myself. (EW, p. 69)

Another internalized prescription she must burden herself with. But as Marian's perceptions become more "distorted", they increase in accuracy. These contradictions reduce her first to tears, and then to flight. It is Peter gazing at her "fondly but from a distance" and a "peculiar look" Len gives her which trigger Marian's reflections on the men's behaviour:

And then I thought I knew. He was treating me as a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline. He wasn't ignoring me, as perhaps I had felt (did that account for the ridiculous flight?) - he was depending on me! And Len had looked at me that way because he thought I was being self-effacing on purpose, and that if so the relationship was more serious than I had said it was. Len never wished matrimony on anyone, especially anyone he liked. But he didn't know the situation; he had misinterpreted.

Suddenly the panic swept back over me. (EW, p. 71)

She is convulsed with panic because she cannot bring herself to recognize that Len understands her situation far more clearly than she. Len's misinterpretation is an accurate transfer of her own mistaken self-representation. Marian imagines that Peter's reliance upon her is a tribute to her autonomy whereas it is instead an assumption of her compliance, He is dependent on her only in the sense that he has assimilated her into his world order. She describes her behaviour as "ridiculous", because that is indeed what it is, an

unconscious act of mockery and rejection.

Her sense of panic has been growing ever since Peter started relating his hunting story. He tells of how he and his old buddy Trigger shot through the heart and disembowelled a rabbit, covering themselves and the surrounding trees in blood and guts. But he remarks on how fortunate it was the pair of them had their cameras with them so that they, like David with the gory images captured by his camera in <u>Surfacing</u>, were able to get "some good shots of the whole mess." This phrase establishes a central tension of the novel, between Ainsley's desired theory of "wholeness" and Peter's blood-frenzied "whole mess", and Clara's reproductive fulfilment when she describes the end of her labour:

"I watched the whole thing, it's messy, all that blood and junk, but I've got to admit it's sort of fascinating."(<u>EW</u>, p. 128)

Peter establishes connections between the camera and subjectivity, which Marian internalizes by visualizing the scene through the eyes of the victim, seeing Peter and Trigger but not the rabbit. For Peter thinks of her like he thinks of the rabbit, as a trophy to be exhibited, ripped apart and reconstructed on his own consumer's terms. And so her rejection of the values he projects reaches its apogee when she flees their party just before he has the chance to photograph her in a "group picture". Now however she attributes her feelings to the distortion brought on by the effects of drink, and although she tells herself "Don't move", in the next breath she says "I had to get out". She is imprisoned by

her "approach-avoidance reactions" just like an animal trapped by a car's oncoming headlights.

Desiring what she conceives of as normalcy she has attempted to recompose herself. But here the attempt simply betrays how disassociated her psyche and her bodily gestures have become:

I leaned forward, my arms on the black table-top. I wanted Peter to turn and talk to me, I wanted to hear his normal voice, but he wouldn't; I studied the reflections of the other three as they lay and moved beneath the polished black surface as in a pool of water; they were all chin and no eyes, except for Ainsley's eyes, their gaze resting gently on her glass. After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! Something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole. I was going to break down and make a scene, and I couldn't. (EW, pp. 69 -70)

Ainsley's self-absorption is the only normal thing Marian can find, and Marian adopts a similar though less complacent strategy. But inside her something embryonic is stirring, a part of herself searching for a voice. This "tadpole", however, is multiply confined within the "dithering mazes of panic" she feels, as though her signature were struggling behind the locked doors of the Seymour Survey vaults.

She leaves the room "trying to be as inconspicuous as possible", because her reaction to these tears is one of shame and fear. She must deny herself the luxury of making a scene, because if she did, they would all witness her predicament, what she cannot yet bring herself to acknowledge is her victimized state. So when Ainsley asks her what the matter is, she attributes her

crying to the effects of consuming drink and to the environmental factor of humidity. This public denial makes Marian believe she has her private life back in order again, saying "By now I was perfectly under control." But the alliance of compliance she has struck is with the roll of toilet paper in the cubicle, described like the rabbit that's Peter's prey, "crouched in there with me, helpless and white and furry, waiting passively for the end"(EW, p. 70).

The end of Part One of The Edible Woman provides Marian with her last chance to express herself to us in the first person, before she abandons direct recourse to her consciousness and relates events in the third person. Chapter 12 presents us with what reads like a diary entry, opening simply "So here I am"(EW, p. 101). The date is the Monday after the weekend, Labour Day holiday: May 1st. Mayday - help me. Her acceptance of Peter's proposal she attributes to her precipitate actions on the Saturday night at the bar and in Len's flat, which she interprets now as flight towards rather than away, arguing:

It was my subconscious getting ahead of my conscious self, and the subconscious has its own logic. The way I went about doing things may have been a little inconsistent with my true personality, but are the results that inconsistent?(EW, p. 101)

Marian indicates here that she believes her identity must be a kind of fixed formation, "true" to the restrictive roles and superficial adornments society indoctrinates her to desire. Her embrace of marriage is functional: "So much of it is a matter of elementary

mechanical detail...keeping things in order...Though of course we still have a lot of the details to work out"(EW, p. 102). What she imagines will make the marriage work are arrangements and adjustments, but she does not realize that these will all be to her disadvantage.

"Labour Day" has replaced the "evasive flippancy" of her unspoken answer to Peter's asking her to set a date for the wedding, "Groundhog Day", that is, the day when the groundhog marmot comes out of hibernation, a day whose weather is traditionally taken to foretell the coming year's weather. She has chosen to substitute caution with calculation, already starting to leave "the big decisions" to Peter and focussing her mind on a world of trivial details:

> We'll probably have to live in an apartment at first, but later we can have a real house, a permanent place; it will be worth the trouble to keep clean.(EW, p. 102)

She is already planning to clean out her present room, giving away surplus clothes to the Salvation Army, throwing her two old and unattractive dolls "out with the rest of the junk", all those fragments that peripherally cohere around the ego and keep it informed.

The only area of her life she hasn't got neatly packed up and accounted for concern her encounters with the as yet nameless Duncan, which she refers to as "a kind of lapse, a blank in the ego, like amnesia"(EW, p. 103). Her amnesia, however, is more widespread than she will admit, a blind spot that is consuming her from the inside. This is a process which in turn affects her

eating habits, and reaches a nadir when she is at breakfast the night after she has slept with Duncan, and the contracting circles of her life seem finally to have bisected her head and her body as her problems with food reach their apogee:

"Nothing, I can't eat anything," she said, "I can't eat anything at all. Not even a glass of orange juice." It had finally happened at last then. Her body had cut itself off. The food circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outside...She looked at the grease-spot on the cover of the menu, almost whimpering with self-pity. (_EW_, p. 257)

Duncan, who has already offered her "THE GIFT OF LIFE", in one sense through his wilful lack of compliance and destabilizing gestures, does enable her to see, eventually, that freedom depends upon this capacity for rejection. But she has to learn that it does not involve rejection of those elements of herself that seem threatening because unassimilated, but rather denial of the otherwise unquestioned forces motivating the organization of her society.

She has, with increasing lack of success, consumed the whole package that these forces produce for her to put on, accepting these controls instead of attempting, however unsuccessfully, to explore the demands of her instinctual drives, as Clara, Ainsley and Duncan do in their diffused and contradictory ways. She concludes Chapter 12 with another apparently decisive gesture, declaring "I must get organized. I have a lot to do." But she seems unable to escape the fatalistic ennui that underpins her earlier statement "I should be doing something constructive instead of this". The start of

Part Two indicates that this fit of determination has not lasted long, for all she is doing in the office is doodling.

It will be Duncan, with his unpredictable compulsions, obsessions and fixations who enables her to start extracting a juster exchange between her totalized self and the products and prohibitions of the society through which she moves in the novel. His narcissism compels her to confront the reality of her own image rather than the societally sanctioned version she has accepted without question for so long. The potential for self-liberation he suggests is what empowers Marian to return to speaking in the first person in Part Three, and in the process to reject him and assert her own primacy as a locus of concern:

Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his. (EW, p. 278)

But as he reminds her, communication necessitates certain assumed roles, saying "we can't both be like that." Turns have to be taken, and though, as Marian remarks ruefully "Face it...you can't win", this spirit of resignation is very different to her earlier expressions of feeling.

And so, while some doubt must remain as to the extent to which Marian will be able to sustain her new spirit of freedom against the prescriptive societal constraints she has unquestioningly absorbed for so long, it is nonetheless true that the passage of her narrative delineates a journey which Margaret Atwood elsewhere outlines as being interwoven in the practise of fiction itself, writing that:

When you begin to write you're in love with the language, with the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing - if you follow it - will take you places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me. (SW, p. 15)

The outcome of this dialectical process may well result in what the French writer and critic Helene Cixous has described as a practice that is for women at once uncontrollable and absolutely fundamental. As she puts it:

This practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded, - which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.[18]

At the start of this chapter I noted the observation that the novel The Edible Woman ironically reconstructs some of the concerns of Alice in Wonderland, as is evinced by Fischer Smythe's lengthy peroration which ends:

"So anyway she makes a lot of attempts but she refuses to commit herself, you can't say that by the end of the book she has reached anything like maturity. She does much better though in Through the Looking Glass , where, as you'll remember..." (EW, p. 194)

Duncan interrupts him here, and the rest of the talk is lost in the margins of the page. The second of Lewis Carroll's Alice novels does end with his heroine becoming

[18]Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, New French Feminisms (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), pp. 245 - 264.

a "White Queen", and thus initiated into a new role that will take her outwith the bounds of fiction. But the concluding paragraphs of Through The Looking Glass bring to the surface that sense of sexual conflict which runs through the rest of the novel, and echoes Duncan's comments at the end of The Edible Woman as to who was attempting to control and destroy whom:

'Now, Kitty, let's consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question, my dear, and you should not go on licking your paw like that - as if Dinah hadn't washed you this morning! You see, Kitty, it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course - but then I was part of his dream, too! Was it the Red King, Kitty? You were his wife, my dear, so you ought to know - Oh, Kitty, do help to settle it! I'm sure your paw can wait!' But the provoking kitten only began on the other paw, and pretended it hadn't heard the question.

Which do you think it was?[19]

Both Atwood's and Carroll's novels end upon a note of indeterminacy, with the question of who is in power left unresolved. But where Carroll invites the reader into the work, to be complicitous in his games about the power of dreams, Margaret Atwood concludes her explorations into the problems of identity and consumption with Duncan polishing off Marian's cake:

He scraped the last chocolate curl up with his fork and pushed away the plate. "Thank you," he said, licking his lips. "It was delicious."(EW, p. 281)

With the cake consumed, the dream it represents dissolved, Marian is at liberty to get on with her life.

John Lauber remarks on how the novel inverts

[19]Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through The Looking Glass, (London: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 346. Subsequent references to this work (Carroll) appear in the text.

expectations in a manner strikingly akin to that of Lewis Carroll's work:

...through the wit and sheer unexpectedness of its striking yet relevant images, through the startling yet somehow logical reversals of intention and action by its characters, and through reversals of normal expectations as to how people should talk, feel, and behave. (Lauber, p. 31)

A poem in The Circle Game instructively refers to Through the Looking Glass. In 'An Attempted Solution For Chess Problems', two sisters are playing chess, and the younger sister's:

> ...failed solution
> has planted the straight rows
> of an armored wood patrolled by wooden
> kings and queens
> hunting the mechanical unicorn. (CG, p. 26)

Through the Looking Glass is itself based upon a chess problem, "White Pawn (Alice) to play, and win in eleven moves "(Carroll, p. 181) and Atwood's poem takes us directly to Alice's sixth move. For this "armored wood" is created at the start of Chapter VII of Through The Looking Glass, where:

The next moment soldiers came running through the wood, at first in twos and threes, then ten or twenty together, and at last in such crowds that they seemed to fill the whole forest. (Carroll, p. 284)

The spectacle these soldiers have appeared for is, as is half-suggested in Atwood's poem, the ritual fight for the crown between the Lion and the Unicorn. This is presided over by the White King, who asks Alice:

'Did you happen to meet any soldiers, my dear, as you came through the wood?'

'Yes, I did,' said Alice: 'several thousand, I should think.'
'Four thousand two hundred and seven, that's the exact number,' the King said, referring to his book.
(Carroll, pp. 284 - 285)

Atwood's white king similarly "moves / by memories and procedures", and it is he who enacts the boundaries of the poem's game,

> forcing her universe to his
> geographies: the choice imposes
> vestiges of black and white
> ruled squares on the green landscape (CG, p. 26)

a situation that parallels Marian's attempts to assert her own personal space in despite of Peter's image-fixing and is distinctly reminiscent of the chess-board world, "a great huge game of chess that's being played - all over the world" Alice experiences during her encounter with the Red Queen in Chapter Two of Carroll's novel:

There were a number of tiny little brooks running straight across it from side to side, and the ground between was divided up into squares by a number of little green hedges, that reached from brook to brook.
'I declare it's marked out just like a large chess-board!' Alice said at last. 'There ought to be some men moving about somewhere - and so there are!'
(Carroll, p. 213)

In both writers' worlds there are men carrying out manoeuvres to assert their performative control. But Atwood's poem ends earlier in the game, with no transformation, no accession to the regal role Carroll foresees for his female protagonist: instead the "costumes rustle / waiting to be put on"(CG, p. 26)

In Atwood's third novel Lady Oracle, Joan Foster's experiments with automatic writing, where she passes through her mirrors into another world, can be said to

function as a refractive gestalt of Alice's initial passage through the mirror into Looking Glass world. There are echoes on both levels in Lady Oracle of Carroll's procedure for Joan Foster's fictional heroine, in the Gothic romance she is dreaming up at the typewriter, also undergoes this experience, as:

> ...further into the mirror she went, and further, till she seemed to be walking on the other side of the glass, in a land of indistinct shadows. Ahead of her, voices murmured in the mist.[29]

Lewis Carroll's passage similarly leads us into the mist:

> 'Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through - ' She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.
> (Carroll, p. 195)

And since Joan Foster's heroine has just taken a drink from an "exotic flask", there is also arguably here a trace of the bottle labelled 'DRINK ME' that precipitates the adventures of Alice in Wonderland.

In his study of language, nonsense and desire, Philosophy through the Looking-Glass, Jean-Jacques Lecercle draws attention to various aspects of Lewis Carroll's novel, specifically those that expose the lines of resistance which divide speaker and language. In so doing he helps indicate relationships that are explored and also reoriented in Atwood's writings. Lecercle interweaves explication of the psycho-analysis

[29] Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977), p. 218.

of Jacques Lacan and the schizo-analysis of Gilles Deleuze with analysis of various literary texts, including Lewis Carroll, and Antonin Artaud's translations into French of Lewis Carroll. Antonin Artaud certainly takes his concept of the theatre of cruelty into the field of translative interpretation, as his neologisms and portmanteau expressions deteriorate into a rubble of nonsense which Artaud believed more accurately expressed the delirious power of nonsense which Carroll had unearthed, but been too cowardly to develop to their full.

Artaud proclaims that: "Jabberwocky is a bowdlerized plagiarism of a work which I wrote but which was suppressed so that I hardly know myself what was in it"[21]. 'Jabberwocky' is the poem written in the "Looking-glass book" which Alice has to hold up to the mirror in order to decipher, and Lecercle suggests that Artaud's obsessive examination of the free play of significance that is potentialized by the mirror of communication can be seen to demonstrate the creative and disintegrative impulses that oscillate between the method of language and the madness of nonsense.

Lecercle theorizes that there is a certain state of linguistic delirium which operates not through meaninglessness, or confusion between word and thought, but arises on account of the catastrophic consequences of excess of meaning, surplus of significance, the

[21]Jean-Jacques Lecercle, Philosophy through the Looking-Glass, (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 32. Subsequent references to this work (Lecercle) appear in the text.

supersaturation of texture. To this state he assigns the French word 'delire', for which he suggests no English equivalent can easily be found, because:

...to assign an English name to the concept would assume a conception of language on which the concept of delire casts doubt. In order to translate 'delire', I would have to have Humpty Dumpty's confidence in the speaking subject's mastery over language, I would have to be prepared to state that 'glory' means 'a nice knock-down argument', if I decide that it does. And Alice's objection to this, based on a conventional theory of naming ('glory' means what it does by convention, and nobody can alter this on his/her own) is inadequate. Delire, as an experience of possession, of loss of control by the subject, reverses the relation of mastery. As Humpty Dumpty says, the question is 'who is master?' In the case of delire the answer is: language. (Lecercle, p. 9)

In a letter written to a young girl, Maud Standen, Lewis Carroll does reveal something of the chasm between the uncertain sources in the mind of a word's vocalization, and the apparent authority with which its origins may be cited. Explaining his techniques for coining portmanteau words, an example of which in Atwood's writings would be the primordial conflation that is the last word of her poem 'Pre-Amphibian':

sunlightsteamingmercilessontheshoresofmorning
(CG, p. 77)

Carroll writes :

Then again, as to "burble" if you take the three verbs "bleat, murmur, and warble" then select the bits I have underlined, it certainly makes "burble" though I am afraid I can't distinctly remember having made it in that way. (Carroll, p. 175)

Discrete syllabic units coalesce in a way that gives them a life beyond the premeditated control of the utterer, and which articulate his or her deepest urges and

desires. Language thereby acquires an autonomous momentum, and generates its own self-reinforcing rhetoric.

Thus, in The Edible Woman, Marian discovers the decentering consequences of her utterances assuming a separate identity when she finds herself speaking in "a soft flannelly voice I barely recognised"(EW, p. 90). The words that come out of her mouth are not those she'd been expecting to speak, but because the words acquire conviction through their having been uttered, she realizes that "the funny thing was I really meant it." Establishing identity proves to be a traumatic experience for many of Atwood's characters, betrayed as they often are by the "shifts of structure" she notes in 'Eventual Proteus'(CG, p. 40), the random and destructive metamorphoses that deny the reassurance of semiotic stability.

Giving things their real names is a recurrent problem for the characters in Through the Looking Glass, too: there is always another layer to be peeled back. In Chapter VIII, titled 'It's my Own Invention' , the White Knight offers to sing a song to Alice:

> '...The name of the song is called "Haddock's Eyes."'
>
> 'Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?' Alice said, trying to feel interested.
>
> 'No, you don't understand,' the Knight said, looking a little vexed. 'That's what the name is called . The name really is "The Aged Aged Man. "'
>
> 'Then I ought to have said "That's what the song is called?"' Alice corrected herself.
>
> 'No, you oughtn't: that's quite another thing! The song is called "Ways and Means ": but that's only what it's called , you know!'
>
> 'Well, what is the song, then?' said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

'I was coming to that,' the Knight said. 'The song really is "A-sitting On A Gate ": and the tune's my own invention.' (Carroll, pp. 311 - 312)

Though Alice soon recognizes that it is not.

For there is a line of delimitation in the spiralling web of linguistic reference beyond which Carroll refuses to proceed with his dislocations, as Lecercle demonstrates. What Carroll is unable to "distinctly remember having made" is what, if expressed, would radically destabilise the linguistic house of cards he has constructed. Lecercle writes:

Carroll's language belongs to the surface, it abides by all the rules and conventions, it is highly grammatical and engages in games (e.g. the portmanteau words) which do not threaten, but on the contrary reinforce it. His form of delire is Nonsense with a capital N, a literary genre, a social activity, whose apparent madness and freedom from meaning is only meant to ward off the dangers of meaninglessness and so to promote communication. (Lecercle, p. 41)

As he remarks, Carroll relies on an "idealized language" to sustain the ostensible innocence of his vision. For Atwood, for any number of reasons, such a retreat is not possible. The language she uses, Canadian English, does not inherently possess the ideological assurance of Carroll's, not least on account of the weight of history. Humpty Dumpty, who does not fall off the wall and fragment in Carroll's narrative, remarks on learning that Alice has read about him in a book:

'Ah, well! They may write such things in a book,...That's what you call a History of England, that is...I'm one that has spoken to a King, I am." (Carroll, p. 270)

And later Alice herself says, with the two queens asleep in her lap:

'I don't think it ever happened before, that anyone had to take care of two Queens asleep at once. No, not in all the History of England - it couldn't, you know, because there never was more than one Queen at a time.'(Carroll, p. 328)

The constitutional certainties Carroll can rely upon to provide a bedrock of normalcy and hierarchy are not available to a writer at a later date working out of a country thrust mid-stream into the currents of imperial occidental history, whose growth into nationhood runs in parallel to the dissolution of the Mother Empire.

The Red Queen, responding to Alice's declaration that "a hill can't be a valley", expresses her faith in the rules governing the construction of language:

'You may call it "nonsense" if you like,' she said, 'but I've heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!'(Carroll, p. 213)

There is always a stabilizing point of reference. So when in response to Ainsley's accusation at the end of Part Two of The Edible Woman that Marian is rejecting her femininity through the image of herself she has half-baked, half-created, she forcefully replies "Nonsense...It's only a cake"(EW, p. 273) it becomes possible to see how in the temporal and ideological space that both relates and separates these two texts lies a history of the intersections between history and the individual. For Alice's destiny is far more predictable than Marian's, not least because Carroll constantly invokes his masculine powers of textualization in a way that Atwood's concern is to call radically into question.

Marian's problem, at root, lies in her inability to

disassociate her self from the image that is represented by this cake. Her expressive problems with language and being reflect her uncertainty as to her place in society. For whereas in Carroll's work, as Lecercle suggests, all destabilizing threats are ultimately assimilated, demonstrated to be no more than linguistic games, in Atwood's novel it is this very process which is subjected to scrutiny. Thus Marian remarks upon how even toilet paper, the end point in the human food chain has become an endlessly unrolling signifier of societal markings, with its "flowers and scrolls and polka dots...as though they wanted to pretend it was used for something quite different, like Christmas presents. There really wasn't a single human unpleasantness left that they had not managed to turn to their uses"(EW, p. 174).

As Lorraine Weir suggests, for Margaret Atwood these problems are bound up in the very nature of writing:

> ...the writing of places divides man from "his" world, creates ownership even as it imposes "order", ironically creates metaphysical "presence" even as it jettisons man from the ecosphere and - as though in compensation - sustains the delusion of human supremacy in a world designed for our consumption.
>
> In "border country" the deception becomes obvious.[22]

In Survival, Atwood describes literature as "not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind"[23]. Similarly, discussing the "topology" of Lacan's conception of the de-centered subject, Jean-Jacques Lecercle suggests that such problems of definitions are

[22]Lorraine Weir, 'Atwood in a Landscape', in Margaret Atwood: Language, Text And System, pp. 143 - 144.

[23]Margaret Atwood, Survival, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1972), pp. 18 -19. Subsequent references to this work (SVL) appear in the text. See also List of Abbreviations at front of thesis.

inherent in the system of communication being used:

> So the problem of frontiers is placed at the centre of the study of language: language is not defined as an instrument for saying all that can be said, but as a structure imposed on the subject and based on the fact that not everything can be said...The paradox of this account of language is that if language is defined negatively, if the problem of the frontiers becomes crucial, it also means that language will always try to utter what cannot be said, the subject will always be tempted to go beyond the frontier: in order to define a boundary one must at least attempt to cross it.(Lecercle, pp. 50 - 51)

In the next chapter it is the boundaries of the Canadian state and the intersecting relationships between author, text and society revolving within it which are examined with the aid of Atwood's most extensive piece of non-fiction, Survival.

Chapter Three: Survival and the colonial experience

Survival, Margaret Atwood's "Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature", was published in 1972. Encompassing a variety of topics, in it she proposes a set of generalized symbols to underpin the "system of beliefs" that provide an imaginative unity for a country, and enable its people "to co-operate for common ends"(SVL, p. 31), though as Ildiko de Papp Carrington for one has noted, "Atwood's 'mythopoetic structuralizing' was not her own invention"[1]. Many critics have observed Northrop Frye's influence upon the cast of Atwood's thought, and as Charles Steele has remarked "the same technique of confronting metaphorical structures with even larger metaphorical structures, that Atwood employs in constructing the Great Canadian Victim"[2] is also used by D.G. Jones in his study of themes and images in Canadian Literature, Butterfly on Rock, published in 1970. However, as Atwood herself says about Survival, "many of the ideas that inform it have been floating around...for a number of years" and she does not therefore claim it to be "particularly original"(SVL, p. 12).

Initially, she hypothesizes a tripartite set of images that function as unifying symbols for the United States, Britain (or England), and Canada. Thus to America she applies the symbol of the "frontier". This

[1] Ildiko de Papp Carrington, 'Margaret Atwood' in Canadian Writers and Their Works, Volume 9, edited by Robert Lecker, Jack David, & Ellen Quigley, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), p. 28.
[2] Charles Steele, 'A Map of Metaphor: The Poetic Vision of Canadian Criticism', Book Forum, 4, No. 1 (1978), p. 145.

concept was originally enunciated by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, and her use of it has distinct echoes of her treatment of U.S. history in The Handmaid's Tale. She comments that it is:

...a flexible idea that contains many elements dear to the American heart: it suggests a place that is new, where the old order can be discarded (as it was when America was instituted by a crop of disaffected Protestants, and later at the time of the Revolution); a line that is always expanding, taking in or "conquering" ever-fresh virgin territory (be it The West, the rest of the world, outer space, Poverty, or The Regions of the Mind); it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society. Most twentieth century American literature is about the gap between the promise and the actualiity, between the imagined ideal Golden West or City Upon a Hill, the model for all the world postulated by the Puritans, and the actual squalid materialism, dotty small town, nasty city, or redneck-filled outback. (SVL, pp. 31 - 32)

Robin Mathews, whose study Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution forms an illuminating counterpoint to Atwood's work, also considers the notion of the "frontier", and uses it to draw a distinct gap between American and Canadian approaches to the land. He writes:

Frederick Jackson Turner, the U.S. historian who wrote The Frontier in American History developed an apology for the first choice, 'to go native', as the primary U.S. choice. He wrote of the pioneer that, as he moved west in the U.S.A., he shed the definitions of European man, becoming more and more essentially the American. Finally 'he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.' The theory expressed by Turner is romantic in the highest degree, for it suggests that man at his most real is naturally violent. Moreover, it is a racist theory, for it perceives the Indian; and it takes no account of the white man's role in promoting this and other forms of violence as he took over the lands of the native peoples.[3]

[3]Robin Mathews, Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution, (Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1978), p. 33. Subsequent references to this work (CLSR) appear in the text. See also List of Abbreviations at front of thesis.

Both Mathews and Atwood view the American dream as appropriative and acquisitive, and regard it with reservation if not hostility. As she puts it: "Some Americans have even confused the actuality with the promise: in that case Heaven is a Hilton hotel with a coke machine in it"(SVL, p. 32).

She provides an analogy from Phineas Fletcher's seventeenth century poem The Purple Island to suggest that "The Island" may conveniently serve as a symbol for England, speaking of:

> ...the kind of island I mean: island-as-body, self-contained, a Body Politic, evolving organically, with a hierarchical structure in which the King is the Head, the statesman the hands, the peasants or farmers or workers the feet, and so on.(SVL, p. 32)

She suggests that Canada, as an outpost of this rigid hierarchy, must take up a lowly position in the pecking order. Although other Canadian writers have vociferously objected to Atwood's Canada-as-victim thesis, in Survival Atwood develops the premise that there is a direct relationhip between the status of a nation, and the role of its individual constituents. She writes:

> Let us suppose...that Canada as a whole is a victim, or an "oppressed minority" or "exploited". Let us suppose in short that Canada is a colony. A partial definition of a colony is that it is a place from which a profit is made, but not by the people who live there: the major profit from a colony is made in the centre of the empire.(SVL, pp. 35 - 36)

So for Canada she postulates the notion of "Survival, la Survivance"(SVL, p. 32) as its governing symbol. She explains what she means thus:

Like the Frontier and The Island, it is a multi-faceted and adaptable idea. For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of "hostile" elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive. But the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster, like a hurricane or a wreck, and many Canadian poems have this kind of survival as a theme; what you might call 'grim' survival as opposed to 'bare' survival. For French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival, hanging on as a people, retaining a religion and a language under an alien government. And in English Canada now while the Americans are taking over it is acquiring a similar meaning. (SVL, p. 32)

The idea of survival has certainly permeated subsequent Canadian thought, so that for example, George Woodcock states in The Century That Made Us:

The whole of our history has been based on the imaginative recognition of the possible even in the heart of improbability. The acceptance of challenges, and the refusal to be denied, are factors that made possible our unwieldy and unlikely country and have allowed it to survive.[4]

Robin Mathews also makes frequent play with the idea of survival, and uses it as part of a rhetorical schema that develops and modifies Atwood's suggested patterns in a distinctive manner. He suggests that the monopoly of knowledge an Empire acquires empowers it more effectively to dominate its possessions and "intellectually colonized" peripheries with ideologies and ideas exported from the centre. In consequence, "what an imperialist power holds is reality", and other values and perceptions are accordingly disparaged or marginalized.

The knowledge acquired through dialectical engagement with the Canadian community, "les deux nations

[4]George Woodcock, The Century That Made Us, (Toronto: Oxford University Press), p. 87. Subsequent references to this work (Woodcock) appear in the text.

" enforces a sense of alienation according to Mathews. For such national awareness brings the realization that the "centres of power" in Canada are unwilling and unable to make the decisive gestures that would "assure Canadian survival" and are "fundamental to the struggle for survival of Canada"(CLSR, p. 210). Furthermore, Mathews argues, those centres of learning which should be encouraging the positive dissemination of the ideals of the Canadian community are failing in their task and remain uncommitted, operating out of "a no-man's land." Discussing education and Canadian Literature, Atwood writes in a similar vein:

> Teaching it [Canadian Literature]...is a political act. If done badly it can make people even more bored with their country than they already are; if done well, it may suggest to them why they have been taught to be bored with their country, and whose interests that boredom serves.(SVL, p. 14)

Robin Mathews is explicit as to the nature of the threat posed to education and knowledge in Canada:

> A country which does not honour its own values will never see them honoured elsewhere in the world. Canadian knowledge in the educational system, therefore, presented by people with a long knowledge and experience of the Canadian community, is fundamental to Canadian survival. Americanization threatens survival at every level of Canadian life.(CLSR, p. 222)

For both Atwood and Mathews, then, "survival" is a word of some importance in the world that is Canada. Yet it is not absolutely clear at what point in the history of Canada Mathews believes these distinctly Canadian values come into being. He describes Canada as moving "from the status of a British colony growing towards autonomous self-rule into the status of an economic,

political, and cultural dependency of the U.S.A." (<u>CLSR</u>, p. 154), a definition that would seem to disempower and deny the proudly achieved collective image of individuality and community he argues for elsewhere. Indeed he seems to regard the state of Canadian nationhood as permanently under threat, claiming that:

> ...looking at the basis of imagination in this country, Canada is the product of national rivalries, is under constant threat from the most xenophobic nation-state in the West, and has had to struggle long to reach nationhood, a condition upon which Canadians keep a grasp that is perpetually precarious and neurotic. (<u>CLSR</u>, p. 139)

Discussing Susanna Moodie's life and works Mathews suggests that Canadian settlers of her era started entertaining "ideals of social democracy" that developed out of their own experience, and which functioned as modifiers of their colonial inheritance and as a rejection of the democratic possibilities formulated in the United States. But their ambitions were circumscribed by economic emasculation, their resources bled white by the Canada Company and the Hudson's Bay Company to reinforce the imperial centre's dominance. Margaret Atwood also comments in <u>Survival</u> on the causes and effects of the Canadian condition, writing:

> That's what colonies are for, to make money for the "mother country," and that's what - since the days of Rome and, more recently, of the Thirteen Colonies - they have always been for. Of course there are cultural side-effects which are often identified as "the colonial mentality"...but the root cause for them is economic. (<u>SVL</u>, p. 36)

Mathews anatomizes Canada's colonial history thus:

> Canada has a three-part history of colonialism, first as a French colony then as a British colony, and now as an economic colony of the U.S.A. Colonies are places that are done to rather than doing or doing to. As a result they are genuinely leaderless in matters of self-determination and sovereignty. The sense that pervades a colonial territory is a sense of helplessness, of uncertainty, and of complicity with the imperial power. That sense hampers and obscures definitions of identity. The people are under perpetual pressure to adopt the beliefs and ideology of the powerful country that manipulates them. For those who are aware and do not sell out, life in a colony is always a resistance movement. (CLSR, p. 1)

Resistance in Canada focusses on collective action and responsibility, the mobilization of communal forces to protect society from exploitation by external forces. A purely individualistic response is seen by Mathews as the operation of a fundamentally destructive ego that must be rejected. He writes:

> That person is...a self-seeker, a hedonist, an exploiter and a psychological or physical despot...The individualist is rejected in major English Canadian fiction because he or she is recognized as the fundamental type which, let loose in Canadian society, will break down the unity necessary for Canadian survival. (CLSR, p. 2)

This individualism Mathews perceives to be congruent with the menace of "Americanization", and he argues that its unchecked growth will inevitably lead to the disintegration of the Canadian community as it is presently constituted. Canadian society, for him, is one of responsibility and "organic interrelation", which has evolved through time and a "delicate, elegant, on-going dialectic between the community and the person" (CLSR, p. 222). He declares "It has been a hard-learned sense of necessary reality in order to assure the single major task of Canadian history: survival" (CLSR, p. 227). Such a sense of reality is grounded in a "reasonably perceived

sense of place" from which the individual self derives strength and understanding.

As George Woodcock makes clear, there is a history in Canada of collective community action which dates back to the earliest days of colonial settlement. He writes that:

Every settler found it convenient and necessary, particularly in a new and uncleared area, to fit into the network of mutual activity that were collectively known as bees. A bee was a gathering of neighbours called together to help a settler in some task difficult to perform alone. There were raising bees, to construct the walls and roofs of a house or a barn; logging bees to clear and burn fallen timber before a field could be cultivated; and among the women there were bees to husk corn, to prepare apples for drying, and to make quilts. (Woodcock, p. 38)

But such activity is not inherently or exclusively Canadian - as for instance the U.S. Amish community would witness. Mathew's vision of Canada appears to be an evocation of some federal and autochthonous Arcadia, or perhaps that should be Acadia, when he declares:

Canada finds itself created and sustained as an entity whose role is to reject the anarchist, individualist, free-enterprise dehumanism of the modern age, particularly that of the U.S.A. Federalism can be argued as an anti-individualist response to separatism, whether in fact it is that or not. (CLSR, p. 141)

Aspects of Canadian political life, such as the socio-economic populism of Social Credit developed by Clifford Douglas, do appear to run counter to this rather sweeping proposition.

Mathew's analysis of Survival demonstrates the problems with his approach. Although the survivalist rhetoric and broad thrust of their interpretation of Canadian literature and the colonial economy appear

similar, and indeed, Robin Mathews is one of a number thanked at the front of her work "for aid both spiritual and practical", Mathews views Atwood's writing, and Survival in particular, with a degree of antipathy, describing her as one of those "part-time, cocktail party protesters, writing occasional anti-imperialist poems with occasional insights into Canada's dependent condition" and he urges the case that her study is "fundamentally misguided"(CLSR, p. 156, p. 119).

Whilst acknowledging that her book represents an "attempt to establish our literature in relation to colonialism", Mathews' foremost objection is that Atwood's writing "becomes mired in a celebration of "the need to be a victim, a bizarre element of experience that has always fascinated Atwood"(CLSR, p. 119). Atwood makes one part of her position plain enough, declaring that:

> You can distinguish between the role of Victim (which probably leads you to seek victimization even when there's no call for it), and the objective experience that is making you a victim.(SVL, p. 38)

Mathews' denial of masochistic obsession even in the worst of circumstances seems itself "bizarre", and indeed the tone of Survival is predominantly one of darkly ironic reflection rather than celebration. Mathews' other main objection is that Atwood's selection of authors and examples is damagingly evaluative because it is "ideosyncratic"(CLSR, p. 119), a curious if perhaps unintentional neologism that blends reproach against both ideology and individual. He continues by saying that although Atwood claims in her first chapter to be "non-

evaluative":

> I reject these disclaimers, because what Atwood puts in, she obviously selects as valuable to put in, to quote, to analyse. What she leaves out (or barely mentions) is, for the reader, not there. Selection is a process of evaluation as the book makes very clear. (CLSR, p. 119)

This passage raises several questions, not least because it demonstrates the working out of one of Jacques Derrida's more salutary warnings:

> ...wherever and whenever I hear the words 'it's true', 'it's false', 'it's evident', 'evidently this or that' or 'in a fairly obvious way', I become suspicious. This is especially so when an adverb, apparently redundant, is used to reinforce the declaration. Like a warning light, it signals an uneasiness that demands to be followed up.[8]

At some point it is "obviously" the case that on one level Atwood will have assigned some particular value to a piece of text by the act of incorporating it within the space of her own writing. But Atwood's explanation of her organizing principles is a good deal fairer and more comprehensive than Mathews allows. Mathews' objection that what Atwood does not include or "barely mentions" is "for the reader, not there" rather misses the point that, as she puts it:

> Because this book is short it must leave out much writing which is important and good. (SVL, p. 11)

Despite these disclaimers, Mathews' strictures have continued to be circulated. Thus Ildiko de Papp Carrington comments that:

> Although not original in its method and frequently

[8] Jacques Derrida, 'Limited Inc abc', Glyph 2 (1977), p. 175.

criticized for the narrowness of its sampling, the selectivity of its noninductive approach, and the subjectivity of its emphasis upon victimization and survival as the central themes of Canadian literature, Survival had a great impact on the development of Canadian cultural nationalism, an impact deriving its power from Atwood's analysis of victimization as 'a structural feature of Canadian life.'
(Carrington, pp. 26 - 27)

The supposed narrowness of her textual sampling can be demonstrated to be something of a mirage. Mathews' book and Atwood's are of much the same length. In her text Atwood cites 128 Canadian writers, and 53 from elsewhere. In his, Mathews cites 135 Canadians and 35 non-Canadians. The areas of exclusion and disagreement between them on the Canadian front are marginal rather than fundamental, and Atwood herself explains a large proportion of these simply enough:

Most though not all of my examples are drawn from the twentieth century, and many from the last few decades. (SVL, p. 12)

The attention Mathews draws to Atwood's evaluative procedures apparently reflects the particular, and unadmitted, selectivity he brings to his own interpretation of her text.

His complaint is that "she selects a kind of literature that is negative", and in a discussion of her writing about the family lists various writers "most of whom, of course, Atwood hardly mentions" (CLSR, p. 127). Once again, the "of course" should caution us to examine Mathews' claims more closely. Robertson Davies is perhaps the most notable writer Atwood finds no room for. But Mathews' book scarcely does him more justice, for he is accorded just a couple of lines in a sentence whose

primary subject is two other authors. Similarly, in *Survival* Atwood discusses Gabrielle Roy quite extensively: her only mention in Mathews' book is in this list, a comment that applies also to Thomas Raddall and Laura Salverson.

In Chapter One I observed how Jean Mallinson's critical language turned imitatively in upon itself, and a similar point can be made about Robin Mathews' discursive procedures in this study. His strictures about Atwood's writing could more appropriately be applied to his own arguments:

> Where the statements cannot be put away completely, they demand major modification. Each idea presented in *Survival* is oversimplified, naggingly half-true. And that's bad for both teachers and learners of the Canadian literary tradition. (*CLSR*, p. 127)

If Mathews' complaints are considered by the mediating reader to be justified, it is then all the more reprehensible on Mathews' part that, aware of the dangers of the situation (if Canada's survival is under as much threat as he perceives it to be), he so singularly fails to supply the informational and interpretive remedy.

There are many aspects of the Canadian condition upon which Atwood and Mathews would appear to agree. Mathews speaks of "the Canadian phenomenon of double-rejection"(*CLSR*, p. 25), which chimes in with a remark by Atwood that:

> In a colony, both men and women are oppressed, the women doubly so, though the men feel emasculated by having their decision-making powers taken away from them. (*SW*, p. 362)

For both writers, the possession of authority and power are problematic issues. Mathews, however, has further objections to raise concerning Atwood's selection of writers on this score:

> Most of the writers Atwood uses are small "c" conservative moralists...[who]...often find as a solution to the death of a conservative ideal a psychological state which can only be described as liberal individualist anarchism.
>
> And liberal individualist anarchism has, finally, to accept U.S. terms of being. (CLSR, p. 122)

Mathews is perhaps over-emphatic in his repeated reliance on "finally" to make his points. His chapter on Atwood concludes:

> Many of our writers preach surrender to or collaboration with the imperial forces. Finally, alas, Margaret Atwood must be seen with that group. And finally, Survival must be seen as a book that prepares the consciousness to submerge in fatalistic surrender. (CLSR, p. 130)

Robin Mathews' theoretical strategy seems to follow the form of "double rejection" - Atwood's selection is equally damned for what she does and what she doesn't include. But it is Mathews' own rhetoric whose repetitions and evasions work to lull the reader into unquestioning acceptance of a collaborative ideology. His statements tend to be misleadingly unequivocal. He writes that Atwood:

> ...rejects two of the most consistently Canadian-centred poets of the tradition, Dorothy Livesay and Milton Acorn on the grounds that they make their place too much in "The World." (CLSR, p. 125)

But in the passage he refers to, this "rejection" turns out to be nothing so simple. Discussing these two writers and how they, together with Bill Bissett and

Dennis Lee, treat political victimization and group oppression and the possibilities of liberation Atwood says:

For Livesay and Acorn one's "own" place (in their poetry, at least) tends to be The World; for Bissett and Lee this place is emphatically Canada. Since the subject of this book is Canada I will concentrate on the two later poets, though anyone writing poems of social concern and action in this country must acknowledge a debt to the earlier ones. (SVL, pp. 242 - 243)

Once more, Mathews does not provide an analysis that would positively demonstrate his claims, but relies on sweeping gestures which occlude more than they reveal. Such as they are, Atwood's omissions and generalizations are explained by her within the course of her text more openly and revealingly than Mathews in the course of his text is prepared to subject his own procedures to scrutiny.

In her introductory chapter she establishes in some detail what her book will not be, before stating:

Then, you may ask, if my book does not survey, evaluate, provide histories or biographies or offer original and brilliant insights, what does it do? It attempts one simple thing. It outlines a number of key patterns which I hope will function like the field-markings in bird-books: they will help you distinguish this species from all others, Canadian literature from the other literatures with which it is often compared or confused. Each key pattern must occur often enough in Canadian literature as a whole to make it significant. These key patterns, taken together, constitute the shape of Canadian literature insofar as it is Canadian literature, and that shape is also a reflection of a national habit of mind. (SVL, p. 13)

One consequence of the absence of history or biography is an assertion of the power of fictionality within her book. Atwood remarks that she treats "the books as though they were by Canada, a fiction I hope you'll go

along with temporarily", for she declares she is more interested in the transmission of culture through these writings than in the relationship between a private individual and that culture.

<u>Survival</u> is not devoid of a perspective on the historical process, but for linear chronology is substituted a view back through the telescope of development. This is done on the grounds that:

> It's more helpful to start with a recognition of the situation you find yourself in, whatever it may be, and then look back to see how you got there. (<u>SVL</u>, p. 12)

Such an approach should, she suggests, help unravel the spiralling helix of the recurrent patterns. At the same time, however, by avowing the fictionality that exists within critical discourse, Atwood's writing aims to resist the observational detachment the analytical process can generate. She acknowledges that there will be inevitable omissions as a result of this approach, writing that:

> You won't find much here about the Confederation Poets or about early Canadian fur-trader journals. I don't deny the importance of these but I don't think they are the best way in. (<u>SVL</u>, p. 12)

Of the group labelled "Confederation Poets", she does deal at some length with Charles G.D. Roberts (one of the first three Canadians to be knighted), but in the context of his animal stories, for which he is nowadays more celebrated.

One reference to these poets advocates the practice she earlier declares she has intentionally avoided in

writing her own text:

> Part of the delight of reading Canadian poetry chronologically is watching the gradual emergence of a language appropriate to its objects. I'd say it first began to really happen in poets such as Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott. (SVL, p. 62)

Though Robin Mathews might not be the only one to object to a split infinitive as the sign of an appropriate language emerging, it is nonetheless true that Atwood recognizes and celebrates the pluralistic possibillities of reading in a way that, to the detriment of his own arguments, Mathews does not.

Atwood's analyses do not always proceed in a consistent manner, but as she emphasizes she is not attempting to impose a party line upon interpretation. Robin Mathews accuses her of misreading Roberts's stories as "idealist fantasies" which present "tragic failures", whereas in his view Roberts' "shows that life in the animal kingdom is a struggle, and that the pattern is dialectical" (CLSR, pp. 122 - 123). Atwood's interpretation is open to debate, but her views are more flexibly expressed than Mathews acknowledges. She writes:

> The amount of elegiac emotion expended over the furry corpses that litter the pages of Seton and Roberts suggest that "tragic" is the wrong word; "pathetic" would be a better one. Tragedy requires a flaw of some kind on the part of the hero, but pathos as a literary mode simply demands that an innocent victim suffer. (SVL, p. 75)

To contradict Atwood's supposed position, which Mathews believes is "that white men in Canada must be alienated from the land, must live in a relation to it which implies exploitation and conquest" (CLSR, p. 123), he

cites a quotation from Stephen Leacock praising the appeal of Canada's "great spaces". But Leacock takes uneasily to his role in Mathews' "Canadian tradition", both because and in despite of his voicing what George Woodcock describes as "the ironic detachment of the marginal personality... expressed constantly in mature Canadian fiction, from Sara Jeanette Duncan down to Robertson Davies and Mavis Gallant"(Woodcock, pp. 256 - 257). And, one might add, Atwood herself.

Woodcock's discussion of Stephen Leacock sets his beliefs well apart from those of the Confederation Poets, and also from Mathews' own brand of nationalistic "pride". He refers to Leacock's "lack (in comparison with contemporaries like Charles G.D. Roberts and Archibald Lampman) of a strong localized attachment to his country", and points out how:

> Influenced by Mark Twain as much as by Dickens, and always reluctant to admit the excellences of Haliburton, his Canadian forerunner, Leacock was much aware of being part of an American tradition...[and]...highly conscious of the importance of his American readers in providing his steady income.(Woodcock, p. 254)

Leacock, then, would have to be judged by Mathews' standards to have "sold out".

The objections that George Woodcock raises to Atwood's reading of Charles G.D. Roberts are, however, of greater substance. She maintains that:

> The world of Nature presented by...Roberts is one in which the animal is always a victim.(SVL, p. 75)

She suggests that these stories fit the broader pattern of the victor/victim thesis, as identification is made by

both Canadian writers and Canadian people between their own colonially oppressed and victimized positions and the wild animals they perceive are victims too. George Woodcock does not entirely accept this, writing that:

> What strikes one on actually reading the stories is that neither Roberts nor Seton consistently presents his animals as victims. Rather they are presented so as to arouse our admiration as much as our compassion. We admire their resourcefulness, their power of leadership, their skill at cicumventing the wiles of their principal enemy, man. The overt Darwinian message is clear: the fittest survive. But none escape eventual death, though the animal will often die with what the writers suggest is true dignity, as much hero as victim.(Woodcock, p. 258)

A reading of Charles G.D. Roberts' novel Red Fox*, however, would tend to indicate that its narrative pattern moves between both Atwood's "basic victim positions" and Woodcock's interpretation. It is certainly true that a graphically described succession of animal corpses does litter the book's pages. The novel opens with Red Fox's father paying 'The Price of His Life', killed by men as he struggles to save the lives of his mate and five newborn cubs. Red Fox distinguishes himself initially by killing a snake. A dozen ducks are slaughtered. His prospective mate delights him by killing a mouse, "a maimed snowbird", and a rabbit. They kill an owl and a mink. Several animals get killed in traps set by humans. Red Fox kills a porcupine by burrowing into the snow underneath it and attacking its unprotected belly. And so on.

But Red Fox himself does appear to prevail in the

*Charles G.D. Roberts, Red Fox, (London: Penguin Books, 1976; orig. publ. 1905). Subsequent references to this work (Mathews) appear in the text.

end, despite the several chases, captures, and humiliations he endures on the way, which include being stunk by a skunk, stung by bees, and peppered by shotgun pellets. The novel's climax sees him evading his human enemies through a survivalist's mixture of suspicion and guile: "In the too obvious path to freedom he suspected a snare", and he escapes into a new domain, an as yet unconquered frontier, "in a wilderness to his heart's desire, a rugged turbulence of hills and ravines where the pack and the scarlet hunters could not come"(Roberts, p. 192, p. 204).

Red Fox is a breed of Canadian animal story which defies both Atwood's and Woodcock's categorizations: it is one in which its hero is still standing at the end. But in truth Red Fox's achievement is not the 'Triumph' that Roberts' final chapter suggests it is. The end of the novel returns to its beginning, as Red Fox is, to use Duncan's phrase at the end of The Edible Woman "cast out into the world again"(EW, p. 279), finding himself once more in uncharted territory, older and wiser but still encircled by a hostile humanity. Perhaps the most telling moment of the novel occurs when Red Fox is released in front of the members of the Hunting Club, eliciting the following response from one of the watching men:

> 'I could find it in my heart to wish he might fool us altogether! cried a third. But this foolishly amiable sentiment aroused such a chorus of protest that he hastened to add: 'I mean, of course, that it would be a great thing for our strain of foxes, and therefore for the club, and therefore for sport in general, if this husky Kanuck could have a fair chance to disseminate his breed.'(Roberts, pp. 191 - 192)

And the same man opines after Red Fox's daring escape at the end of this chapter (titled 'Under Alien Skies') that "our breed of foxes may get improved, after all"(Roberts, p. 193). Beside the litany of slaughtered victims, such eugenicist sentiment exemplifies what Woodcock calls Roberts' "ranting chauvinism"(Woodcock, p. 111) and indirectly echoes Marian's comment on Ainsley's plans to become pregnant to a man with "decent heredity": "She reminded me more than I liked of a farmer discussing cattle-breeding"(EW, p. 42).

One of the prime movers in the rebellions against the oligarchic Family Compact in 1837 and 1838 was William Lyon Mackenzie, whose rather Thatcherite call for "cheap economical Government" Robin Mathews cites with apparent approval (CLSR, p. 36). Reprisals taken against these rebels were harsh, as Woodcock notes:

> Twelve...were executed and fifty-eight transported to Australia...[&]...this harshness resulted in an upsurge of sympathy for the victims. It is said that the transportees were more greatly mourned than the hanged men. Not for the last time in history, death was thought to be less alarming than Australia. (Woodcock, p. 67)

Canada, with its Dominion status, clearly regarded itself as far from the least empowered part of the British Empire, and there is thus a significant hierarchy even to the abject status of colonial victims.

In the previous chapter I noted Stephen Leacock's reaction to Australia, written a century after these transportations, when he refers to Australia's absence of history with an almost wistful envy. Margaret Atwood visited Australia for a writer's conference in 1978, and

in a magazine article she wrote about the occasion, 'Atwood among the Ozzies', collected in Second Words she deals seriously and not-so-seriously with several aspects of the relationship between colony and history. On a flight across Australia to Adelaide she confesses ignorance of the country's geology and wonders "Who did what to the land, when?". But she discovers in her quest to pictorialize this history and map the exploitation of the land that "Australians seem to know more about Canada than we know about them" and that, furthermore, this is because of their having had "the Commonwealth drilled into them". Canada's position in the imperial hierarchy and physical location lay it closer to at least one imperial centre. Thus she notes:

> Several astonishing questions posed by the Australians:
> - Don't I think it's fortunate Canada is right beside the United States, and can benefit from the continual tension of having to define itself?
> - How exciting to have the French. It must give such variety and richness to the culture. (I can see their point. Australia does tend to be rather uniform.)
> - Aren't Canadians tickled pink that they've produced a critic of world stature such as Northrop Frye?...It's strange to find oneself viewed as the possessor of a coveted cultural property. (SW, p. 304)

At times one can't help but conclude that the "continual tension" of being beside the United States has made Canada, as Ross declaims of Scotland in Macbeth, "almost afraid to know itself"[7]. The further it retreats from the continentalism Stephen Leacock acknowledges, the more problematic it becomes:

> I am a Canadian, but for the lack of any other word to indicate collectively those who live between the Rio

[7]William Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act IV, Scene iii, l. 165.

Grande and the North Pole I have to use 'American'. If the Canadians and the Eskimos and the Flathead Indians are not American, then what are they?[8]

Reading papers and literary magazines leads Atwood to conclude that "the aboriginals are even more outnumbered in Australia than the Indians in Canada, and they've made much less headway", a statement that should be offset against her remark in the Appendix to the list of writers at the end of Chapter Four of Survival:

All the books in this chapter are by white people. What the Indians themselves think is another story, and one that is just beginning to be written. (SVL, p. 106)

Although Australia has no French separatists, she does note: "In West Australia, there's a movement to break away and form a separate country. Not everything is foreign" (SW, p. 297).

She has come to Australia to prepare to give a short talk "about Influence and Independence, with emphasis on Survival", and describing an Australian film she's seen does so in terms that echo the "continual tension" of national self-definition, watching the film watch itself through a Hollywood frame:

It's shot slowly, with considerable attention to detail. (Like many Canadian films, it seems to be saying, "Look at this, you don't see this much in the movies," or: "This may look like a frontier Western town, but please note that it's an Australian frontier Western town"). (SW, p. 301)

Such uncertainty suggests to her other common Canadian and Australian neuroses about identity:

Wherever I was, and whatever I was looking at, there was always some Australian around to tell me that this wasn't

[8] George Woodcock, p. 254. No source given.

the real Australia - I had to go to Perth, or Melbourne, or Sydney, or somewhere else. Which reminded me of Canada. Margaret Whitlam...had the last word to say on the real Australian syndrome. "We're all real here," she growled, "and we're all bastards." Which also reminded me of Canada. (SW, p. 303)

At the conference she's attending she summarizes a paper by Fay Zwicky from Western Australia and uses it to suggest a rather wry (and emasculating) vein of Canadian mythopoeia:

She begins by referring to D.H. Lawrence's 'Kangaroo', in which he said that Australians had great dead empty hearts, like the continent, despite their outward boisterous amiability. She then wonders when Australia is going to write 'Moby Dick', laments its provincialism, asks when it's going to stop nosing around for its identity and get down to it, and affirms its potential. This is all painfully familiar. Canada is lucky D. H. Lawrence never wrote a book called 'Beaver'. If he had, he'd doubtless have commented on that rodent's fabled habit of biting off its own testicles, thus defining us forever. (SW, pp. 302 - 303)

The Australians react forcefully to the speech, and Margaret Atwood admits she finds it "pleasant" to sit back and "watch other people worrying an identity crisis, for a change." Indeed, she goes so far as to declare herself feeling "euphoric about being Canadian".

Such emotion however does not survive long. On her last night she sees an "indescribable" work of Polish theatre, which causes her to "come out cursing fate that I wasn't born a Pole" (SW, p. 304). And though she's too polite to say so, the manoeuvrings she observes in the Australian literary world must have seemed familiar. She's told by one writer that "They cut tall poppies here", and her description of the literary arena concludes:

Wheels within wheels, literary operators, tiny

animosities, crab-like jostlings for position; cultural politics played out with veiled compliments and sneers; groups, anti-groups, loners. Paranoia thriving like suburban roses. (SW, p. 299)

Atwood herself is left with a feeling of guilt at the end of her visit, uncertain of how what knowledge she's acquired indicates how much she still has to learn about Australia. She writes:

I left with a list of names, a certain amount of guilt (why didn't I know more?), and a feeling of having seen a surface which I'd barely scratched. (SW, p. 305)

A diligent reader's response to the proliferating history of a country and its terrain.

What in the end is significant and striking about Survival is not, as Mathews argues, what it omits, but the variety of items it incorporates. Twenty-eight pages are devoted to what Atwood calls 'Resources': addresses for magazines and publishers, records and the labels they're on, and more outlandish pieces of information like "The Toronto Folklore Centre at 284 Avenue Road, Toronto 190, sells and repairs musical instruments" (SVL, p. 264). The pattern of Canadian literature is, as indeed it should be, remarkably pluralistic and inclusive. And that perhaps is a reflection, at least within the frame of reference of Atwood's book, of a certain radical difference between the unifying symbols she proposes for England, the United States, and that for Canada. For "The Frontier" and "The Island" exist as a different kind of geography to that of "Survival". The former pair may be depicted as places, whereas the latter represents an activity or state of mind that would occur within such a space. In a way then it may be

argued that "Survival" is a state that occurs on account of the chronic superimposition of "The Frontier" upon "The Island", and comes into being as a consequence of the collision (in the continent of America) of two contrary impulses, the one centrifugal, the other centripetal. The Frygian "garrison mentality" is a syncretic reaction to the illimitable wilderness Canada's initial imperial colonizers encountered. There are two questions posed by Margaret Atwood at the end of her study:

> Have we survived?
> If so, what happens _after_ Survival?(_SVL_, p. 246)

The answer to these could be that because of the inherently provisional nature of the notion of "Survival", the relationship between self and other it postulates must perpetually return both reader and writer to the marginal boundaries of being, where the cartographic intersection between "The Frontier" and "The Island" occurs. And so as the (Australian) writers of _The Empire Writes Back_ suggest:

> Imperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupations and power. In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the 'centre' pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the 'margin' turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy. The impetus towards decentring and pluralism has always been present in the history of European thought and has reached its latest development in post-structuralism. But the situation of marginalized societies and cultures enabled them to come to this position much earlier and

more directly. These notions are implicit in post-colonial texts from the imperial period to the present day.[9]

As they also point out, the United States experience can be seen as a formative model for post-colonial literature, notwithstanding that nation's subsequent hegemonic impetus, and in the following chapter I examine Margaret Atwood's treatment of New England colonial history as well as more recent developments within the framework of her novel The Handmaid's Tale.

[9]Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 12.

Chapter Four: History and The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood's novel published in 1985, is prefaced by three quotations, and my initial intention is to investigate the parameters they suggest, and how these delineate the subsequent thematic patterning of the novel. The first quotation, taken from thirtieth chapter of the book of Genesis, consists of three verses:

> And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.
>
> And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?
>
> And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.[1]

The second quotation is taken from Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal:

> But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal... (HT, p. 7)

The third is a Sufi proverb:

> In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones. (HT, p. 7)

These three statements describe the outline of a triangular relationship, within which further triangles may be discerned. The Biblical family of Rachel, Jacob,

[1]Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 7. Subsequent references to this book (HT) appear in the text. See also List of Abbreviations at front of thesis.

and Bilhah finds its equivalent within the novel in Serena Joy, her husband the Commander, and Offred, the Handmaid whose real name is never disclosed.

Jonathan Swift's quotation, taken as it is from a book that advocates eating babies as a solution to the troubles of Ireland at a time of too many people and not enough food, gives full fictional rein to the play of market forces between supply and demand. It's a reminder of the intricate links between history, economics, and individual human needs, but it also gives some indication of the complex manipulation of authorial tone and voice that is common to both of these dark satires. Swift's use of the word "success" has a particular significance here, for it is a word whose ambiguities Margaret Atwood is also inclined to tease and tease out, though in this novel to rather different effect than Robin Mathews' critical asseveration that she can only define it in terms of "U.S. money and power-seeking" (CLSR, p. 123). The Sufi proverb, with its implications of the consumer as masochist, is perhaps most readily interpreted as a peculiarly lapidary version of the saying "caveat emptor", that is, "let the buyer beware".

Before these prefatory quotations, however, is the dedication, which in The Handmaid's Tale is dedicated to two people, Mary Webster and Perry Miller. Margaret Atwood frequently keeps her dedications to simple anonymities like "For J.", so the importance of this act of naming should not be overlooked. In a talk given by her in New England called 'Witches', she has this to say about Mary Webster:

> I did feel...that it was appropriate to talk of witches here in New England, for obvious reasons, but also because this is the land of my ancestors, and one of my ancestors was a witch. Her name was Mary Webster, she lived in Connecticut, and she was hanged for "causing an old man to become extremely valetudinarious". Luckily, they had not yet invented the drop: in those days they just sort of strung you up. When they cut Mary Webster down the next day, she was, to everyone's surprise, not dead. Because of the law of double jeopardy, under which you could not be executed twice for the same offence, Mary Webster went free. I expect that if everyone thought she had occult powers before the hanging, they were even more convinced of it afterwards. She is my favourite ancestor, more dear to my heart even than the privateers and the massacred French Protestants, and if there's one thing I hope I've inherited from her, it's her neck. (SW, pp. 330 - 331)

What is interesting about this story is that, like many a family legend, different sources convey different versions of what happened. Other information about Mary Webster renders her life from perspectives that represent alternatives to Atwood's version of history, but are no less grim.

The quotation referred to by Margaret Atwood in this speech is taken from Cotton Mather's Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions. There is evidence to suggest that Atwood would have encountered Cotton Mather's writings during her period of study and residence at Harvard during the early sixties. One point may be immediately corrected: Mather locates the story in the town of Hadley, which is in Massachusetts, not Connecticut.

> Among those judgements of God, which are a great Deep, I suppose few are more unfathomable than this, That pious and holy men suffer sometimes by the force of horrid Witchcrafts, and hellish Witches are permitted to break through the Hedge which our Heavenly Father has made about them that seek Him. I suppose the Instances of this direful thing are Seldom, but that they are not

Never we can produce very dismal Testimony. One, and that no less Recent than Awful, I shall now offer: and the Reader of it will thereby learn, I hope, to work out his own Salvation with Fear and Trembling.

Sect. 1. Mr. Phillip Smith, aged about Fifty years, a Son of eminently vertuous Parents, a Deacon of the Church at Hadley, a Member of our General Court, an Associate in their County Court, a Select-man for the affairs of the Town, a Lieutenant in the Troop, and, which crowns all, a man for Devotion and Gravity, and all that was Honest, exceeding exemplary; Such a man in the Winter of the Year 1684 was murdered with an hideous Witchcraft, which filled all those parts with a just astonishment. This was the manner of the Murder.

Sect. 11. He was concerned about relieving the Indigencies of a wretched woman in the Town; who being dissatisfied at some of his just cares about her, expressed her self unto him in such a manner, that he declared himself apprehensive of receiving mischief at her hands; he said, he doubted she would attempt his Hurt.

Sect. 111. About the beginning of January he began to be very Valetudinarious, labouring under those that seemed Ischiadick pains. As his Illness increased on him, so his Goodness increased in him;...Such Assurance had he of the Divine Love unto him, that in Raptures he would cry out, "Lord, stay thy hand, it is enough, it is more than thy frail servant can bear!" But in the midst of these things he uttered still an hard suspicion, That the ill woman who had threatned him, had made impressions on him.

...

Sect. V11. In his distresses he exclaimed very much upon the Woman afore-mentioned, naming her, and some others, and saying, "Do you not see them; There, There, There they stand."

...

Sect. 1X. Some that were about him, being almost at their wits end, by beholding the greatness and the strangeness of his Calamities, did three or four times in one Night, go and give Disturbance to the Woman that we have spoken of: all the while they were doing of it, the good man was at ease, and slept as a weary man; and these were all the times they perceived him to take any sleep at all.

...

Sect. XV. Mr. Smith dyes. The Jury that viewed the Corpse found a swelling on one Breast, Which rendered it like a Womans. His Privities were wounded or burned. On his back, besides bruises, there were several pricks, or holes, as if done with Awls or Pins.

...

Upon the whole, it appeared unquestionable that Witchcraft had brought a period unto the life of so good a man.[2]

[2]Cotton Mather, Memorable Providences... in George Lincoln Burr ed., Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1914), pp. 131 - 134.

There are so many provocative assumptions in this passage about Mary Webster that it's hard to know where to start on an analysis of what to Cotton Mather "appeared unquestionable". There is throughout a clear split between the sexes, and the treatment accorded them. Man is filled with notable virtues - piety, holiness, devotion, gravity, honesty, which are reinforced by suffering: "As his Illness increased on him, so his Goodness increased in him" being a key phrase here. Woman is associated with all that is ill, wretched, and indigent. Indeed, the male illness is explicitly associated with feminization, and with a concomitant sense of sexual threat: one of his breasts swells up so that it is "rendered like a Womans", and his "Privities" are then found to be "wounded or burned". The powers attributed to this woman are "horrid" and "hellish", whereas the supposedly victimized man is an "exemplary" paragon of virtue, whose list of qualities and qualifications is as extensive as that of Offred's master in Atwood's novel.

It should also be pointed out that it's hardly surprising the only time Mr. Phillip Smith should be able to get some sleep is when his concerned friends and neighbours have left him more-or-less alone and gone to give "Disturbance" to somebody else. The "ill woman" referred to here is assuredly Mary Webster: the only bone of contention lies in the date given by Cotton Mather, as other sources of evidence indicate he must be out by a year or two. For in the exhaustive 17th century legal

compilation Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, it can be read that on the 22nd of May 1683 Mary Webster was "sent downe upon suspition of witchcraft & Comitted to prison in order to hir tryall"[3]. This subsequently took place before the Court of Assistants in Boston on the 4th of September that year, when:

> Mary Webster wife to Wm Webster of Hley having binn presented for suspition of witchcraft by a Grand Jury in Boston 22th of may last & left to further tryall was now called and brought to the barr and was Indicted by the name of mary Webster wife to Wm Webster for that shee not having the feare of God before hir eyes & being Instigated by the divil had entred into covenant & had familliarity wth him in the shape of a warreneage & had hir Imps sucking hir & teats or marks found in hir secret parts as in & by severall testimonjes may Appeare Contrary to the peace of our Soveraigne Lord the king his Crowne & dignity the lawes of God & this jurisdiction to wch Indictment making no exception & evidences in the case were read Comitted to the Jury and are on file the Jury brought in hir virdict they found hir not guilty =[4]

Once again, sexual organs are considered as instruments of witchcraft: a "warreneage", however, is that more traditional prop, the black cat.

There are further pieces of information that fill out this story. According to Samuel Drake in his Annals of Witchcraft[5], Mary Webster was a swineherd, or "hog-reeve". And in a history of the town of Hadley which Carol F. Karlsen cites in her book The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, the following unfortunate events occurred after the trial:

[3] Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630 - 1692, (Boston, 1901, reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1973), p. 229.
[4] Records of the Court..., p. 233.
[5] Samuel G. Drake, Annals of Witchcraft in New England and Elsewhere in the United States, (New York: W.E. Woodward, 1869), p. 117.

The acquittal of impoverished Mary Webster of Hadley in 1683 aroused an even more vindictive response from several young men of the Massachusetts town. After she returned from the Boston jail, they "dragged her out of the house...hung her up until she was near dead, let her down, rolled her sometime in the snow, and at last buried her in it, and there left her." Apparently, the community considered these reprisals justified ... there is no evidence of any action taken against Mary Webster's attackers.*

It would seem that Mary Webster indeed survived her hanging, but not, alas, for very long. It is notable, however, that the end of this version, apparently unknown to Margaret Atwood, should echo the account of the dispensation of mob justice in the section of the novel called 'Salvaging' (a hint of Cotton Mather's "Salvation" there, perhaps), where a man presumed guilty of the rape of a fertile woman is handed over to the otherwise powerless Handmaids to be torn apart by them in a form of licensed reprisal, of ritualised victimization.

If the story of Mary Webster reveals a sorry side of early American history, it soon becomes clear that Perry Miller, the novel's other dedicatee, refocuses and deepens our interest in the conduct of this society, and how it relates to the futuristic world of The Handmaid's Tale. In her lecture on 'Canadian-American Relations', delivered in the United States, Margaret Atwood talks about some of the critical reaction when Survival was published:

Canadian critics felt it owed much to the noxious influence of Northrop Frye, under whom I'd studied up there, but they overlooked the noxious influence of Perry

*Carol F. Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), p. 30.

Miller, under whom I studied down here. (SW, p. 385)

She goes on to remark that the book represents the point where "the revolutionary seed planted at Harvard many years before burst into full flower" (SW, p. 385), this seed being the notion Perry Miller helped instill in her that the study of any written material, whether it be diaries (such as those of Cotton Mather) or other occasional and ephemeral writings, was a necessary component in the attempt to recover the initial nature of the United States' historical project.

She realized, as she says, that she could ask the same question about the mindset of both these neighbouring societies:

> If old American laundry lists were of interest at Harvard, why should not old Canadian laundry lists be of interest in Toronto, where they so blatantly weren't? (SW, p. 383)

It is clear that her period of study with Perry Miller will have enlightened her as to the more grotesque aspects of the religious imagination in New England under its "founding fathers", and that this information resurfaces in the ideological hierarchy propounded and examined in a novel written over twenty years later. Her stay at Harvard coincided with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, an occurrence which cannot but have helped sharpen her perceptions of American society and politics. Of this period she comments:

> Wondering whether the human condition was about to become rapidly obsolete, it was possible to look back through three hundred years of boring documents and see the road that had led us to this nasty impasse. The founding fathers had wanted their society to be a theocratic

utopia, a city upon a hill, to be a model and a shining example to all nations. The split between the dream and the reality is an old one and it has not gone away. (SW, p. 383)

What we see at work in The Handmaid's Tale is a reversal of the process she outlines here. For if the dream of the utopia is to transform reality into a "shining example", then the speculative but historically rooted mythmaking in which Atwood engages involves the contrary, of feeding back these ideals into the working model of society that is New England of the late seventeenth century, in order to demonstrate how the idealized vision is sustained and distorted by its transformation into life. The information of the novel is not used to reformulate an utopian scheme, but fed back into the world from which it has been selected, with the result that entropic deterioration is reinforced, the city on the hill turns into slums, and utopia becomes dystopic.

Through Perry Miller, Margaret Atwood will have become acquainted with one kind of historical 'modus operandi', and further light will be shed on her treatment of history and narrative through an examination of what constituted his methods and approach. Writing about him in their collection of essays Puritan New England, Alden T. Vaughan and Francis J. Bremer declare:

Miller's explanations of early New England thought are not easy reading; he recognized the complexity of seventeenth-century religious ideology and respected its intellectual integrity. He attempted to reconstruct the New England mind, therefore, without reducing it to simplistic formulas or facile explanations...What we know of the Puritan mind still depends heavily on Miller's analysis, augmented here and there by more recent

scholarship.[7]

And indeed, one of the most impressive aspects of Atwood's novel is the way in which it reconstitutes this ideological complexity and resists simple oppositions. That The Handmaid's Tale should have won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction is not inappropriate, for the hard-edged, technological genre literature of which Arthur C. Clarke is a prime representative, does demand solid scientific determinations rather than escapist fantasizing.

Cotton Mather provides us with one starting point for a more detailed consideration of the mechanics of early American society, and how these echo through the real and imaginary histories of past, present, and future. It is Mather who invests Biblical phraseology with a striking resonance when during the course of a piece produced in memory of a deceased "Gentlewoman", he makes mention of the women of New England as:

> Those Handmaids of the Lord, who tho' they ly very much Conceal'd from the World, and may be called The Hidden Ones, yet have no little share in the Beauty and the Defence of the Land.[8]

Mather here employs a typically patriarchal sleight-of-hand, emphasising woman's importance at the same time as he advocates their self-effacement and effective subordination. Puritan religious thought is suffused with such rhetorical tactics, and is frequently so prolix

[7]Alden T. Vaughan & Francis J. Bremer, Puritan New England, edited by same, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 43.
[8]Cotton Mather, El-Shaddai, A Brief Essay Produced by the Death of That Virtuous Gentlewoman, Mrs. Katharin Willard, (Boston, 1725), p. 31.

and tortuous in its expressions of the revelation of divine mystery that even such a lucid exponent of it as Perry Miller remarked, using an image reminiscent of Atwood's treatment of museums and their exhibits in _Life Before Man_ and several of her poems, that:

> The historian of the New England Puritans frequently has occasion to lament the many dry bones of metaphysics and abstruse theology which he is compelled to turn up in the effort to resurrect a semblance of that extinct species; his construction is bound all too often to resemble one of those grinning skeletons of antediluvian monsters, imperfectly wired together and stored in some museum of paleontology, making altogether too exorbitant a demand upon the imagination of the spectator to carry the conviction that the creature ever lived and breathed and moved.[9]

In both past and future history, women are denied access to writing through the machinery of repressive, male-dominated forces. One sign of how society is transformed over time as a result of developments in technology and communication can be shown in the way that whereas the original settlers of New England could only leave written messages to signify their presence, in the novel the text is a transcription (by historians from a future that appears to have been reclaimed by the original colonizers of the American landmass) of the original voice of its protagonist, recorded onto cassette tape for the posterity she hopes will be there to listen.

One difference between fiction and history appears absolute. In the novel, it is the lack of 'femmes fertiles', women with functioning ovaries amongst the ruling classes, which turns women who are capable of

[9]Perry Miller, _The Puritans_, edited by Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1938), p. 281.

reproduction into a commodity controlled and exchanged by the society's figures of repression and authority. But the birth-rate of colonial New England was very high, although matched by a correspondingly high rate of infant mortality, and remained so until large scale urbanisation brought on by the industrial revolution caused it to start to fall.

However, the experiences of childbirth depicted in both historical sources and the fictional text do display one aspect of the interaction between history and technology, between the dream and the reality of possible versions of society. For it seems that the laws of supply and demand have always played a role in reproduction. Thus Catherine M. Scholten in her book Childbearing in American Society: 1650 - 1850 notes that wet-nursing was common at this time, and that as a consequence:

> Breast-milk, judges one historian of colonial paediatrics, was the most frequently advertised commodity in American newspapers.[10]

In a book called A Search For Power: The 'Weaker Sex' in Seventeenth-Century New England, Lyle Koehler writes that:

> Of course, childbirth was associated with age-old, biblically ordained risks and difficulties. John Oliver's 'Present for Teeming Women', the standard pregnancy guide in England and America, directed women to prepare diligently before their delivery for their own possible death. If they did not do so, Oliver warned, God would deliver them "in anger not in favour", making

[10] Catherine M. Scholten, Childbearing in American Society: 1650 - 1850, (New York: New York University Press, 1985), p. 62.

death even more probable. Mather considered severe delivery pains a divine sign that a woman needed to cleanse her soul.[11]

In the footnote to this last sentence we are referred to a verse from Genesis 3. 16 which Margaret Atwood employs in one passage of her novel:

Once they drugged women, induced labour, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anaesthetics, even. Aunt Elizabeth said it was better for the baby, but also: I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. (HT, p. 124)

A very American case of "no pain, no gain".

The issue becomes one of what forces are to control technology, and in the furtherance of whose interests this technology is being operated. Aunt Elizabeth would undoubtedly object to doctors performing caesarian births to suit their timetables rather than out of any medical imperative, yet her assumption that the mother's discomfort is unrelated to that of the baby's, whose interests are paramount, is an attitude that leads to paradox. For if fertile women are in such short supply, it would seem only prudent to ensure that they are not rendered unfit to give birth again and not deliberately minimize the medical attention afforded them. But this is perhaps another instance of the paradoxical double-binds into which women are compelled.

There are significant similarities between the procedures of childbirth in Atwood's fiction and what is known from the available historical documentation. Here

[11]Lyle Koehler, A Search for Power, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 34. Subsequent references to this work (Koehler) appear in the text.

is Atwood's description of the entourage of attendant women during labour:

There's a crowd of them, everyone in this district is supposed to be here. There must be twenty-five, thirty. (_HT_, p. 127)

This practice is one for which Laurel Thatcher Ulrich provides historical confirmation:

Labor and delivery were central events not only for the mother and baby but for the community of women. Depositions in an Essex County case of 1657 reported a dozen women present at a Gloucester birth...But Sarah Smith, the wife of the first minister of Portland, Maine may have set the record for neighbourly participation in birth. According to family tradition, all of the married women living in the tiny settlement of Falmouth Neck in June of 1731 were present when she gave birth to her second son.[12]

With so many people gathered under one roof, refreshments naturally come to play a part. In the novel we are shown the Commander's Wives downstairs drinking freely while Warren's "expectant" wife hovers about with an uneasy smile, and upstairs the Handmaids are offered grape juice and food. Scenes similar to this were enacted in New England in the seventeenth century:

For many women, the first stage of labor probably took on something of the character of a party. One of the mother's responsibilities was to provide refreshment for her attendants. The very names _groaning beer_ and _groaning cakes_ suggest that at least some of this food was consumed during labor itself. (Ulrich, p. 128)

Both sets of expectant women are encouraged to walk round as much as possible during these early stages, and so assisted by their attendants. As the labour proceeds,

[12] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, _Good Wives_, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 126. Subsequent references to this work (Ulrich) appear in the text.

Atwood describes a "Birthing Stool", designed like a double-seated throne, with one seat raised above and behind the other, within which the Commander's wife:

> ...sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: her skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair. (HT, p. 135)

This is echoed in the procedures of Puritan New England, where:

> A mother might give birth held in another woman's lap or leaning against her attendants as she squatted on the low, open-seated "midwife's stool". (Ulrich, p. 128)

The safe delivery of the infant is, of course, not the end of the story in either society. In The Handmaid's Tale, the world has been so contaminated by man-made pollutants that the narrative voice must pose the question:

> What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet?...To go through all that and give birth to a shredder: it wasn't a fine thought. (HT, p. 122)

This passage can be set alongside an unpleasantly detailed description of a stillbirth made by John Winthrop (the man who uttered the famous phrase as referred to above by Margaret Atwood, - "for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us"). The baby was born to one Mary Dyer:

> It was a woman child, stillborn, about two months before the just time, having life a few hours before; it

came hiplings till she turned it; it had a face, but no head, and the ears stood upon the shoulders and were like an ape's; it had no forehead, but over the eyes four horns, hard and sharp; two of them were above one inch long, the other two shorter; the eyes standing out, and the mouth also; the nose hooked upward; all over the breast and back full of sharp pricks and scales, like a thornback; the navel and all the belly, with the distinction of the sex, were where the back should be, and the back and hips before, where the belly should have been; behind, between the shoulders, it had two mouths, and in each of them a piece of red flesh sticking out; it had arms and legs as other children; but, instead of toes, it had on each foot three claws, like a young fowl, with sharp talons.[13]

Reading this with the aid of Perry Miller, we can learn more both about Mary Dyer and the attitudes that underlie John Winthrop's obsessive examination of a dead baby. For it is clear from his study of the framework of the Calvinist universe through which Winthrop, Cotton Mather, and their other ideological compatriots moved that they believed "such monstrosities were signs of divine counsel"[14].

Mary Dyer has her own brief but sadly illuminating history. It seems she first came to prominence when she appeared in the province amongst a company of Quakers, and during the Antinomian Controversy of 1637 (Antinomianism being a "heretical" view which, in brief, denies the binding force of moral law upon those who have entered into the Covenant of Grace), voluntarily stood up to declare her support for Anne Hutchinson, who had become the leading speaker for this group. At about the same time, Anne Hutchinson also had the misfortune to be delivered of a deformed stillbirth. When John Winthrop

[13] John Winthrop in David E. Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 89 - 90.
[14] Perry Miller, The New England Mind, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939, repr. 1965), p. 124.

heard about it, he ordered the body to be dug up so that he could see the "monstrous" infant corpse for himself. His friend, Thomas Weld, who wrote the introduction to Winthrop's account of this period, and was subsequently appointed to be the Colony's representative agent in London, was moved to utter the opinion:

For looke as she had vented mishapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monsters.[19]

Ann Kibbey, an author who has made a study of the rhetorical patterns of Puritan sermonry, gives particular attention to Cotton Mather's grandfather John Cotton, a man distinguished by his turncoat, having originally supported Anne Hutchinson then repudiated her, warning his congregation in Boston to pay no attention to her on the grounds that "she is but a woman". Kibbey offers the following analysis of the iconographic, patriarchal presumptions that shape such attitudes towards women who refuse to acquiesce, be silent:

The physical shape [of the corpse] was the clear and incontrovertible proof of how "monstrous" were the ideas of this female heretic. In the Puritan imagination these births were the enactment of an image expressing the threat of antinomianism, the material shape of heresy. The sense of a complete collapse of the difference between literal and figurative meaning lies in the apparent unawareness of either Winthrop or Weld that their fantasies were fantasies...By associating childbirth with antinomianism so closely, Winthrop and Weld emphasized their association of the female gender with antinomianism, implying that Puritan women were potentially a threat to the social and natural order simply because they were women. (Kibbey, p. 113)

[19]Thomas Weld, quoted in Ann Kibbey, The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 112. Subsequent references to this work (Kibbey) appear in the text.

The argument seems persuasive, but the assumption that Winthrop and Weld's descriptions are merely fantasies and not based on some kind of realistic observation, does not seem to me sustainable. Twentieth-century medical practice has certainly gone a long way to reduce the incidence of non-viable and deformed foetuses coming to full term, but in earlier times, matters were very different.

Thus Simon Schama, in his study of Dutch culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, The Embarrassment of Riches, a book dealing with another predominantly Calvinist society, examines in some detail the journal kept by one Catharina Schrader, a midwife in the town of Dokkum, in Friesland, that extends over fifty years from 1693 to 1745. As he remarks:

> Like all such precious pieces of evidence, it stands as an island in an ocean of documentary silence...and its peculiar combination of account book and confessional journal...gives it the stamp of absolute credibility.[16]

From this we learn that although the percentage of stillbirths in her practice was lower than elsewhere in Europe, rarely rising above fifteen percent of deliveries, birth deformities were far from uncommon, and though a far more compassionate (and knowledgeable) individual than Winthrop or Weld, her observations and comments reflect attitudes not dissimilar to theirs. And so:

[16]Simon Schama, The Embarrassment of Riches, (London: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 525.

In November 1708, for example, at Oostzum, a farm laborer's wife had a posterior breech where the feet were born with difficulty but the head became firmly lodged at the cervix and could not be born. When the dead child was inspected, she wrote, "it has a pig's head, with no nose...very wretched. One hand had three fingers with one nail; the other the fingers had also grown into a single nail. The feet were the most terrible of all. O Lord, preserve us from such happenings." What made this awful event even worse was the gossip of the villagers who on seeing the "monster" said that the mother had had so many pigs about her when she was pregnant that when she was at table one of them got up her skirts. Schrader was appalled by these kinds of "follies" (zotterijen) but never surprised...In the summer of 1709 the daughter of the gatekeeper of the Three Pipes Inn whom the midwife called "a disreputable young woman" was delivered of a child with deformed hands and feet and shrivelled arms. Mercifully the child died within three weeks, but Vrouw Schrader wrote that "The Lord punished her because she had herself sworn that she would not be a mother until she knew better."[17]

Divine punishment can he held as the rationale for any misfortune, and the more subjugated its victim, the more instances of its operation can be addended to reinforce the subjugation.

There is no doubt that John Winthrop did have very fixed opinions on the role of women within a theocratic utopia, informing Anne Hutchinson during her trial that:

We do not mean to discourse with those of your sex...We are your judges, and not you ours, and we must compel you to it.(Kibbey, p. 116)

This enjoining of silence and enforcing of powerlessness upon women is repeated and developed in The Handmaid's Tale, when one of the Commanders declaims the service of the Prayvaganza:

"Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection." Here he looks us over. "All," he repeats.
"But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

[17] The Embarrassment of Riches, pp. 534 - 535.

"For Adam was first formed, then Eve.

"And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

"Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety."

Saved by childbearing, I think. What did we suppose would save us, in the time before?(HT, p. 233)

For any woman who is capable of becoming pregnant, there are few ways of evading the enmeshing machinations of this society where those in power determine its structure through a reading of religion that is at once obsessive in its perceived purity, yet also conveniently devised to reinforce their own dominant control at every point.

One woman who makes such an attempt, rejecting compulsory silence and imposed salvation, and tries to break out of the constricting circle is Moira, a friend of the narrator's from university days. She escapes from the Centre where they they are held and re-educated and hides out with friendly Quakers (still on the margins of New England society) on the escape stations of the "Underground Femaleroad", a phrase chosen to echo another history of American enslavement, as well as that of the French resistance.

She is caught, and, judged to be unassimilable, is consigned to a club called "Jezebel's", effectively a brothel run for the benefit of those in charge of the Republic of Gilead, where everything that is forbidden to the general public is available for consumption, from cigarettes to lesbianism. The name of this institution is echoed in a description that John Winthrop hangs on Anne Hutchinson, saying that she is nothing but an "American Jesabel"(Kibbey, p. 107).

The respective fates of these two New England women Hutchinson and Dyer are, needless to say, grisly. Mary Dyer, in a variant of Margaret Atwood's account of her ancestor Mary Webster's hanging, was sentenced to death, and led to the gallows only to be reprieved at the last moment. Banished, she eventually returned from exile in 1660, to be hanged on June 1st of that year. Anne Hutchinson was banished to Long Island, at that time outwith British jurisdiction, and there, in an event which Thomas Weld saw as further conclusive evidence of God's hand at work in the world, she and her children were burned to death by Indians in 1643.

Such, then, was the nature of Winthrop's "city upon a hill" at work. His phrase is itself split between the idea of utopia and ancient reality, for in Archaeology and Old Testament Study can be read that:

In North Gilead and Bashan artificial city hills (tulul) make their appearance...accretions of foundation ruins of a series of cities built on top of each other [to] pile up in practically unbroken succession throughout the centuries and thus form the tulul.[19]

Here we witness the encirclement through time of history and fiction, of layers of events piled up on top each other, that are solid and graven as stone yet also transparent as pools or reflective as mirrors, so that which seems most distant may in fact be closest to our own moment of experience.

Like the 'tulul', The Handmaid's Tale lies on the surface of a host of texts. The question is how, bearing

[19] D. Winton Thomas, Archaeology and Old Testament Study, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 451.

in mind this information, as well as the injunction from Ann Kibbey that "the Puritan idea of prayer was autobiographical narrative"(Kibbey, p. 12) can we best trace their shifting patterns within Atwood's book? The label most commonly attached by critics and reviewers to The Handmaid's Tale is that of the "futurist dystopia", but it does the novel less than justice. What Atwood does do is enact the deterioration of this age-old utopian vision under certain specific circumstances that reflect more contemporary dilemmas.

In a review of Marge Piercy's novel Woman on the Edge of Time, Margaret Atwood says that "utopias intrigue me"(SW, p. 274) citing a variety of 19th century books, Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward, W.H. Hudson's A Crystal Age, and William Morris's News from Nowhere. Morris is clearly a significant, though not unquestioned, influence upon Atwood's own beliefs and writings, for as she comments in an interview "I say jokingly I'm a William Morrisite, but Morris is impossible"[19]. If we were to trace Atwood's novel's utopian lineage in greater depth, it would necessarily include 1984 as well as Yevgeny Zamyatin's We, and less celebrated novels such as Ignatius Donnelly's Caesar's Column and Jack London's The Iron Heel, or indeed one of London's later works The Scarlet Plague where a man known only as 'The Chauffeur' (for that, like Nick in The Handmaid's Tale, used to be his job) is the ruthless dictator of an America that has been savagely depopulated by the plague of the title.

[19] Linda Sandler, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood'. The Malahat Review, No. 41 (Jan. 1977), p. 27.

Although Atwood's book is in no sense to be construed as a riposte to the more idealized vision of Marge Piercy's novel, there are aspects to her review of that book which indicate various elements underpinning her own project. She finds much to praise in the novel, but remarks:

> However, several issues are dodged. The utopians refuse to fill Connie in on history, so we never find out much about how it all happened. They're engaged in a war with an enemy, but we don't learn much about this, either. And they tell Connie they are not 'the' future, but only a possible future, and that they need her help in the present to avoid 'winking out'. (I wish this didn't sound so much like the resuscitation of Tinker Bell in Peter Pan). At one point Connie stumbles into another future - presumably what will happen if we don't all put our shoulders to the wheel - in which women are termitelike objects, and the air is so polluted you can't see the sky. (SW, p. 276)

This passage makes it clear that Atwood's view of utopias (and their converse) is based on an appreciation of the necessity of history in their construction, and on an awareness that moral prescription is an unsatisfactory fictional device. The historical circumstances surrounding the origins and development of the Republic of Gilead are not extensively dealt with in her novel, but their very fragmentary nature is a reflection of the narrator's own oblivious attitude to what has been going on around her, as well as the suppression of information practised by those in authority in her society. It thus represents a purposeful absence rather than a case of authorial omission.

The structure and intent of Woman on the Edge of Time is, so Atwood implies, didactic and formulaic. She writes:

The real hero is the future society; the reader is intended to comparison-shop in company with the time-traveller, questioning the invariably polite inhabitants and grumbling over disconcerting details. The moral intent of such fables is to point out to us that our own undesirable conditions are not necessary: if things can be imagined differently, they can be done differently. (SW, p. 274)

What is revealed in a reading of The Handmaid's Tale, however, is that the undesirability of the human condition cannot so easily be ameliorated, and that many differently imagined ideals, both religious and economic, end in a broadly similar result: the continuance of suppression. The dystopian novel could be said to portray a society that is relatively different from our own, whereas the world of the utopia depends for its effect upon a more radical split, the absence of a connecting history that would indicate how dream may be transformed into reality.

In her review, Margaret Atwood expresses reservations about the programmatic scheme of revelations which Piercy adopts, referring to:

...the inevitable long-winded conversations in which traveller and tour guide...plod through the day-to-day workings of their societies. What about sewage disposal? birth control? ecology? education? The world of the future depicted here is closest in spirit perhaps to Morris's. It's a village economy, with each village preserving the ethnic flavour of some worthy present-day minority: American Indian, American Black, European Jewish (suburban WASP is not represented). It is, however, racially mixed, sexually equal, and ecologically balanced. Women have "given up" childbirth in order that men won't regret having given up power, and children are educated more or less communally, with a modified apprentice system...

Reading utopias is addictive...Writing utopias is addictive too, and Piercy expends a good deal of energy trying to get every last detail in, to get it right, and to make rather too sure we get the point.
(SW, pp. 274 - 275)

Margaret Atwood's stance is more sceptical, more aware of the insufficiency of such solutions, though without ever reaching the point of denying the importance of their being raised. But the portrait of a society she develops in her novel, where the ideal is of the individual, so to speak, being freely coerced into slavery is one in which the choices of readerly interpretation are left as open as possible.

The Handmaid's Tale opens: "We slept in what had once been the gymnasium"(HT, p. 13). These are words spoken by a voice whose real name we are never to find out, for the one by which she is commonly referred to in the book, Offred, is not her own, but merely denotes her attachment as a handmaid to the Commander, Fred Waterford. The narrator's falling asleep is one of the most traditional framing devices for utopian or fantastical fiction, but here it is used not to convey the reader from one familiar place to another very different, but to establish with a particular immediacy a location that combines simultaneously familiarity and difference.

The gymnasium is a place containing the possibilities of both play and repression, where the ordered freedom of games, and the Handmaid's dreams of freedom are insinuated and demarcated by the lines inscribed on the floor, and by the rows of beds arranged in their prescribed order by the overseeing Aunts. The atmosphere conjured up is one of recreation suddenly frozen, cut off by the orders of those in authority, the people who would be in the positions of privilege above

the dormitory in that space where the spectators used to stand. Offred's voice, it soon becomes clear, is not that of one accustomed to giving orders, but of one who has rather become conditioned to whispering her individuality in almost complete silence and of learning to watch the other mouths of these other women compelled to inhabit the gymnasium move their lips in a way that will speak their names yet make no sound. The uninhibited physical contact of a sport such as basketball has been replaced by a round of partial touches whose only goal is to recollect their lost, deprived humanity.

There remains too the smell of girls from former times that Offred remembers "faintly like an afterimage", but the image she presents us with is that of which has already come after and eradicated these historical traces. This is the world she now finds herself living in, where barracks cots have replaced mini-skirts, and there are men called "Angels" who are required to guard these women without ever being permitted to touch them, where before they would have acted very differently. In the book she says of her lover, the "Guardian" and chauffeur, Nick:

> I want to see what can be seen, of him, take him in, memorize him, save him up so I can live on the image, later: the lines of his body, the texture of his flesh, the glisten of sweat on his pelt, his long sardonic unrevealing face. (<u>HT</u>, p. 281)

This description returns us to the imaginative territory of Atwood's first novel, <u>The Edible Woman</u>, where the similarly ambiguous Duncan is described by Marian

MacAlpin, the heroine of that novel, as having a face "like the muzzle of an animal, curious, and only slightly friendly"(_EW_, p. 254). Like Duncan, Nick promises some kind of redemptive freedom, yet like many of Atwood's men he carries a threat of nihilistic destruction, and the picture Offred has of him remains a collage of surfaces, with whatever may lurk beneath remaining unrevealed.

Another element that echoes Atwood's earlier novel is in the profession that the Commander followed before turning to religion and the exercise of power, working in "market research", that is, in the same sort of company as Marian regards herself as being fortunate to be employed by. But whereas Marian discovers through her employment the extent to which she is controlled by her surrounding environment, the Commander has used his knowledge of the most effective ways of manipulating individual desires and aspirations in order to formulate a society that assigns its members roles within its functioning whose significance is not productive, but supervisory.

These positions are given titles that belie their spurious importance, but indicate their usefulness as agents of suppression, "Eyes" & "Guardians" & "Angels" all being employed to check up on each other, in much the same way as in Puritan New England the "Select-Men" were directed by the Deputies of each town to observe carefully the doings of each family, rewarding and encouraging those whose diligence and obedience made them pillars of the community, and disciplining those who fail to bring their behaviour up to scratch. The "Aunts" of

the novel are thus given a title that appears to be reassuringly familiar, yet in fact can be shown to be an inheritance of centuries of domination and oppresssion. We can read this much in one of the few diaries written by a woman that has survived from the seventeenth century in New England, written by a young girl called Hetty Shepard. On her fifteenth birthday she was faced with censure on account of wearing a:

> ...fresh kirtle and wimple, though it be not the Lord's Day...my Aunt Lydia coming in did chide me and say that to pay attention to a birthday was putting myself with the world's people. (Koehler, p. 59)

This kirtle was a dress, and the wimple a head-covering not dissimilar to that the Handmaids are compelled to wear in the novel.

Hetty's Aunt believes not only in restraining her youthful urges, but in also making her imagine that her own thoughts and wishes are generally inferior, and deserving of subordination to others in her society, so that as Lyle Koehler recounts:

> In February 1677, Hetty considered it unjust that her uncle had been voted into the first (most prestigious) seat in the meeting-house, but her aunt only into the third seat. After she expressed that concern to her aunt, the latter "bade me consider the judgement of the Elders and the tithing-man as above mine own". And so Hetty did. Hetty Shepard's brief diary indicates that the women in her extended family helped create feeling s of guilt over her desire for some merriment, a pretty dress, and independent thought. She took to heart the words of her female elders.(Koehler, p. 60)

In a similar way, the "Aunts" of the novel dominate and try to determine the psychological development of the Handmaids in their charge. Aunt Lydia relies on slick aphorisms to convince Offred of the desirable necessity

of what she is undergoing:

Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or.(HT, p. 18)

She organizes their instruction at the Centre, and does her best to instill in them an understanding of their new freedom, of that which has come to them through rejecting the excessive plurality of consumerism, its profligate undecidability. For in this new world, the supplementary nature of both/and has been deleted, and that anarchic individualism embodied in the "freedom to" make choices one of many things that has been erased. Aunt Lydia's remark "We were a society dying...of too much choice"(HT, p. 35) is the operative quotation in this context, for the choice facing Offred now is an absolute freedom from choice, and in her powerless position she has little room to manoeuvre.

The Handmaids experience a reeducation that mirrors, historically, the way in which their Puritan forebears were brought up, so that just as they find themselves being renamed as the personal possession's of their Commander's in an equivalent way the daughters of New England were given names that, as Koehler puts it:

...providentially reminded them of their feminine destiny: Silence, Fear, Patience, Prudence, Mindwell, Comfort, Hopestill, and Be Fruitful.(Koehler, p. 29)

Their upbringing was marked by plenty of "freedoms from", being taught to avoid the blandishments of vanity brought on by combs, mirrors and fancy clothes, and encouraged to read no lust-inducing material, only the Bible. As we

have seen earlier, sexual relationships were anatomised in similarly proscriptive terms, so that:

> Although some English writers did so, Puritans never discussed sexual activity as a means of communication, as an important bond between two personalities. Instead, they described sexual relations as a matter of the male "using" the female's body (as if she were independent of it). (Koehler, p. 75)

This use of the female's body by the male is reminiscent of Offred's own position in the Commander's household, solely there to perform this one function. She is possessed of a role that is vital, but depersonalised and quite interchangeable, as the fate that is to befall the original Ofglen demonstrates. Koehler concludes this analysis by writing:

> Such a view of the sex act entailed depersonalization of the female, both in the description of the act and in the consideration of its effects. In...illicit intercourse "he" remained "he", although of somewhat more unsavoury and corrupted character, while "she" continued to be defined with reference to her body, as one who had allowed her "self" to be defiled. In fact, New Haven Puritans censured one woman who had failed to resist a man's sexual overtures not simply by saying that she had committed "a sad offence", but by typing her as "a sad object". (Koehler, p. 75)

The argument seems to be that only through utter suppression of what you think you want can you find "freedom" and learn to live with yourself. Your circumstances cannot be helped, only your attitude to them. Through ignorance to bliss is their motto: hence, in The Handmaid's Tale, the freedoms inherent in liberated sexuality and empowered literacy are shown to be entwined dangers. This is indicated when, after a long period of prohibition, Offred is allowed by the Commander during one of their secret assignations to hold

a writing instrument, an object now of quasi-phallic worship. She expresses her feelings thus:

> The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Centre motto, warning us away from such objects. (HT, p. 196)

Aunt Lydia is fully aware that a little power is a dangerous thing, and that for the purposes of Gileadean society, it is better for the Handmaids to be utterly bereft, and further, for them to be convinced that this deprivation is in itself a privilege and an honour, to be relieved of every choice or control or knowledge or the means of self-expression.

The appeal of this freedom is not one that Offred underestimates, for she comes to recognize that the position in which she finds herself is one with which she has been, to a substantial extent, complicit. She chose, ostensibly on account of the happiness of her family, to live through the years prior to the establishment of the Republic of Gilead paying no heed to the warning signs manifesting themselves around her world, overlooking these implicit threats of disruption and radical change in the pursuit of an idealized, uncommitted normalcy, describing the newspaper stories that she read as being like "bad dreams dreamed by others", and attempting to excuse her uninvolvement by claiming a marginalization that is spiritually, though not necessarily materially, accurate:

> We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom.

We lived in the gaps between the stories.
(HT, pp. 66 - 67)

Her family's botched escape from the encroaching Fundamentalist reality, which leads to her losing all her loved ones, pet, child, and husband, irrevocably disrupts her attempt to remain unnoticed. Subsequently she starts to learn to live with what she terms her "reduced circumstances", and with her name excised from her vocabulary, she is forced to resort to constituting her identity through reflexive word-games, variations on those few unlawful games of Scrabble she plays with the Commander. In these other exercises of her mental gymnasium, she dissolves language into disconnected gestures, ritual observations from her position of submission:

I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.
These are the litanies I use, to compose myself.
(HT, p. 120)

Yet Offred is surely mistaken in supposing that these facts are unrelated, for this would seem to imply that her own experiences are as equally unrelated, and that all that has happened to her has been outwith her control. Order, she still believes, can only be externally imposed, not derived from the self's autonomous patterns of individuation. Freedom to create a language of your own is part of this process, as much as freedom from imposed propaganda. Perhaps the only hint of optimism Atwood vouchsafes us in this novel is that, in the epilogic future of the year 2195 in the

state of 'Nunavut', – the name now given to autonomous parts of Canada's North West Territory – games with language are still being played, as is made by clear by the tenor of Professor Pieixoto's opening remarks, when he says:

I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word "enjoy" in two distinct senso, precluding, of course, the obsolete third. (Laughter.)(*HT*, p. 312)

I do not suppose, however, that Atwood believes the sophisticated banter of academic discourse will suffice to save civilization.

For Offred, anyway, that cannot be the case. Because she has now been labelled in such a way as attaches her to someone else's belongings, and has been denied a name in her own right, she becomes especially preoccupied with these signifying exchanges of language and meaning, obsessed with apparently discoordinated details. In an attempt to compensate for the loss of her own name, she resorts to stealing small items from the Commander's house, desiring thereby through this means of subversive recompense to transform her dispossessed body into a language that is sensually constitutive and of significance to others.

She records her story onto a collection of blank and pre-recorded tapes in the hope that from within this society which crushes opposition through prescription and paradox she can send a message to an audience who will never be in direct contact with her. She says:

> I'll pretend you can hear me.
> But it's no good, because I know you can't.
> (<u>HT</u>, p. 50)

Yet she persists in the building of this bridge across an abyss of unknowable history, fashioning her own story out of this form of prayer, partly because she knows of no-one else to whom she can talk freely.

The other conversations she has are restricted, either by the paranoia of mutual suspicion, as when she first talks with Ofglen, or by the limits of acquaintance and the difference between their respective roles, as occurs when she finds herself on occasion talking with the postmenopausal Rita and Cora in the Commander's kitchen:

> We would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it. We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries; gently we would complain, our voices soft and minor-key and mournful as pigeons in the eaves troughs. I know what you mean, we'd say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people: I hear where you're coming from, as if the voice itself were a traveller, arriving from a different place, which it would be, which it is.
>
> How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts.
> (<u>HT</u>, pp. 20 - 21)

Theirs is a conversation in which pain and being a woman are intimately linked, and there is a sense too, in the way their bodies are seen as being like "unruly children" that hints at the way the Gileadean methods of control can never be total, for any moment of wilful play will undermine its repressive schemes.

But Offred herself feels compelled to avoid

confronting the sometimes messy reality of her own body, choosing to refuse to gaze on it in the bath, saying:

I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely. (HT, p. 73)

This aversion is symptomatic of her reluctance to consider the world of contradictory significances trapped within her imprisoned body. She finds herself repulsed by the thought of complete acquiescence in the decentering fragmentation that empties her of any separate purpose and meaning, caught up as she is in a role of perpetual solipsistic victimization. On the other hand she is unwilling to accept that there is a regenerative force in language that could help reconstitute her sundered identity, and enable her to live a life more closely in accord with that self-estimation she has been forcibly deprived of.

This would involve, in a new interpretation of another phrase of Aunt Lydia's, truly naming herself as her own "worthy vessel", and refusing to continue with the pretence that her self's circumstances can be indefinitely reduced. For she has lost so much already that this seems to her an impossible project, and she finds it easier instead to protect herself with that helpless fatalism enjoined on her at the centre with regard to her long vanished other, the daughter taken away from her:

Eight, she must be now. I've filled in the time I lost, I know how much there's been. They were right, it's easier to think of her as dead. I don't have to hope then, or make a wasted effort. Why bash your head, said Aunt Lydia, against a wall? Sometimes she had a graphic way of putting things. (HT, p. 74)

Any display of open emotion is considered "wasted effort" in such a dry and minimal society.

There is in fact an established historical basis for this practice of removing children from their mothers on no grounds other than ideological rectitude. As Lyle Koehler records:

> Town selectmen periodically checked upon families to make sure children were tught religious principles at home. If, in the selectmen's judgement, a child was not receiving proper religious training, said child might be taken away from his or her parents and placed with a more holy family. (Koehler, p. 14)

If both these societies, the historical and the fictional, share certain significant features as to their familial structuring and hierarchical organisation, it is now possible to examine more closely these resemblances, introduced by the prefatory quotation from the Book of Genesis into the novel, and pursue the vision of the family within a broader outline of society that these colonial Americans had.

A statement like this, made by James Fitch:

> Such as families are, such at last the Church and Commonwealth must be. (Koehler, p. 22)

indicates that the two were perceived to be inextricably entwined in Puritan thought. Two documents of the period, one by John Eliot of Roxbury, a man best known as an apostle to the Indian tribes, the other by John Winthrop, may serve to indicate the uncompromising tendencies of their beliefs. Thus, John Eliot's book <u>The Christian Commonwealth</u> is not inaccurately characterised

by V.L. Parrington as being "naked" in its advocacy of a pure theocracy of governance. He continues:

> From his Scriptural premises Eliot deduced a system of government that is altogether remarkable...Since the law has been declared once for all, perfect and final, there is no need for a legislative branch of government; and since Christ is sole ruler and king, there is no place for a profane head of the state; it remains only for the Christian theorist to provide a competent magisterial system to hear causes and adjudicate differences. Society is concerned wholly with duties and not at all with rights; government, therefore, begins and ends with the magistrate. In order to secure a suitable magistracy, Eliot proposed to divide society into groups of tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands, each of which should choose its rulers, who in turn should choose their representatives to the higher councils; and so there was evolved an ascending series of magistrates until the supreme council of the nation was reached, the decisions of which should be final.
>
> "The duties of all the rulers of the civil part of the Kingdom of Christ, are as followeth...to govern the people in the orderly and seasonable practice of all the Commanders of God, in actions liable to Political observations whether of piety and love to God, or of justice and love to man with peace."
>
> ...It was the logical culmination of all theocratic programs. The idea of social unity, of relentless conformity, according to which the rebel is a social outcast to be silenced at any cost, dominates this godly Utopia as mercilessly as it dominated the policy of the land. In setting up King Jesus for King Charles, there was to be no easing of the yoke upon rebellious spirits; and in binding society upon the letter of the Scripture, there was to be no consideration for the aspirations of the unregenerate. It is not pleasant to consider what the Saints would have made of New England if their will had prevailed.[20]

Although Eliot's proposals received a mixed reception upon their publication, with the General Court in Boston pronouncing his book to be "justly offensive", and ordering it to be "totally suppressed"[21], such a forceful response indicates the attraction these ideas must have held for a goodly part of the community, whose

[20]V.L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, Volume 1, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1927), pp. 83 - 84.
[21]Main Currents in American Thought, p. 81.

mania for religious purity would have led them to welcome the bizarre logic of his book. And a reading of The Handmaid's Tale certainly leaves the reader with an increased appreciation of the accuracy of Parrington's last sentence.

Nor could John Winthrop's expressed notions of how best to run society be said to display any more humane tendencies. In his essay 'Errand into the Wilderness', Perry Miller gives a reading of John Winthrop's A Modell of Christian Charity, a particularly ironically named volume, and one which expresses his vision of the ideal society. Miller writes:

> There was no doubt whatsoever as to what Winthrop meant by a due form of ecclesiastical government: he meant the pure Biblical polity set forth in full detail by the New Testament, that method which later generations, in the days of increasing confusion, would settle down to calling Congregational, but which for Winthrop was no denominational peculiarity but the very essence of organized Christianity. What a due form of civil government meant, therefore, became crystal clear: a political regime, possessing power, which would consider its main function to be the setting up, the protecting and preserving of this form of polity. This due form would have, at the very beginning of its list of responsibilities, the duty of suppressing heresy, of subduing or somehow getting rid of dissenters - of being, in short, deliberately, vigorously, and consistently intolerant...What it set out to do was the sufficient reason for its setting out.[22]

Miller's analysis of the suppression of heresy in Winthrop's vision for the "city upon a hill" is given added pungency inasmuch as he was to express it while the witch hunts instigated by Senator Joe McCarthy were at their height. Quoting Winthrop, he continues:

[22]Perry Miller, 'Errand into the Wilderness', in 'The William and Mary Quarterly', for The Associates of the John Carter Brown Library, Williamsburg, (January 1953), p. 5.

"We must be knitt together in this worke as one man, we must entertaine each other in brotherly affection ... always having before our eyes our commission and community in the worke, our community as members of the same body."

This was to say, were the great purpose kept steadily in mind, if all gazed only at it and strove only for it, then social solidarity (within a scheme of fixed and unalterable class distinctions) would be an automatic consequence. A society despatched upon an errand that is its own reward would want no other rewards: it could go forth to possess a land without ever becoming possessed by it; social gradations would remain eternally what God had originally appointed; there would be no internal contention among groups or interests, and though there would be hard work for everybody, prosperity would be bestowed not as a consequence of labor but as a sign of approval upon the mission itself. For once in the history of humanity (with all its sins), there would be a society so dedicated to a holy cause that success would prove innocent and triumph not raise up sinful pride or arrogant dissension.[23]

This picture of a society where the "errand" of the society proves to be its own full and sufficient reward is reminiscent of the role allotted Offred in the novel, whereby her function as a provider of children is determined by the nature of the Republic of Gilead (as laid down by men like her "Commander") to be her be-all and end-all, outside of which she has no life, and where a safe birth, like Winthrop's "prosperity", is seen as being not a consequence of her labour but rather an achievement that belongs to the rest of society, a self-bestowed sign of divine approval from which she is excluded.

For the dilemma that confronts Offred with increasing urgency is that, whilst her purpose in this society is simply to bear children, a purpose for which her body must needs be entirely subjugated, her name

[23]'Errand into the Wilderness', p. 6.

taken away, and her spirit broken through the incessant propagandising of the Centre, her body cannot be both totally controlled by others and totally disassociated from her essential persona, and it thus remains one of these "unruly children" that it is impossible so completely to control. Not even the Commander can ensure that she fulfils her function.

It is Aunt Lydia who oversees her initiation into this world of being resigned to powerlessness, always providing some insistent, authoritarian aphorism to remind Offred of her duty, reminding her of this freedom from freedom that she has achieved in Gilead, inspiring in her the belief that she is merely a vessel, or "The Hold of a ship. Hollow"(HT, p. 91), as Offred puts it. Her personality is emptied out of her in order that she may be the more worthy a receptacle for the Commander's holy seed that is intended to perpetuate his lineage. Hers is literally a "date rape", for intercourse is to be forced on her on that date when she will be most fertile.

The ceremony is one that is an obligation for all the household, whether they wish to be there or no. It is scowlingly resented by Rita, for one, as Offred can well appreciate, saying:

It's my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body's, if there is a difference. Even the Commander is subject to its whims.(HT, p. 91)

That her body remains so unbiddable, despite the restrictions within which her conscious self is confined is, perhaps, the first indication she has that she is not utterly subjected to her society. She considers that she

is trapped like the quark, a sub-atomic particle, in her own "ideal prison", and she wonders how her body and its skeleton must appear to an electron, reflecting as she and Ofglen follow their appointed "daily track" that:

A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze. (_HT_, p. 174)

The maze Offred is in is constructed from other people's ideals, and is so designed to make escape from it apparently conceivable. Thus it is appropriate that the moment of liberation which occurs when Ofglen and Offred finally make eye-contact and feel empowered to share their individual revolts against the system that contains them should occur at what has been designated as the central spiritual focus of their world. They are standing in front of the reflective mirrors that are the "shatterproof" windows which expose the workings of the "Soul Scroll" shop, where the machines that manufacture prayers recycle and perpetually reprint the same old words, replicating images of their maze every minute of the day.

It is a process which prints them out as a form of superimposed "autobiographical narrative" and then takes them back into "the realm of the unsaid" (_HT_, p. 176), the world of prayer. And so this moment when the two previously suspicious and uncommunicative would-be rebels finally open their hearts and minds to each other is necessarily centred upon the impossibility of achieving faith through such mechanistic communication:

At last Ofglen speaks. "Do you think God listens," she says, "to these machines? She is whispering: our

habit at the centre.

In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it's treason.

I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently, to show her I won't tolerate this kind of talk in my presence. Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one.

I steel myself. "No," I say.

She lets out her breath, in a long sigh of relief. We have crossed the invisible line together. "Neither do I," she says.

"Though I suppose it's faith, of a kind," I say. "Like Tibetan prayer wheels."

"What are those?" she asks.

"I only read about them," I say. "They were moved around by the wind. They're all gone now."
(HT, pp. 176 - 177)

Their "habit" of whispering is a necessary cloak to conceal their true feelings from the authorities, and it is not until she has at least partially made good her escape along the "Underground Femaleroad" that she is free enough to express her own life onto the cassettes that are preserved for posterity to transcribe. It is these which demonstrate her restored commitment to the possibility of meaningful communication, across the gap of time and space that separates every individual, one from the other.

For the Republic of Gilead is a place where even prayers are pre-packaged, and the powers that be maintain an easy liaison between religion and economics: the preachers on television still look like businessmen, and as I've already mentioned, Offred's Commander previously worked in market research. Indeed, the first sign of what is to follow that Offred really pays attention to is when her economic independence is sabotaged through her credit card being declared invalid on the computer.

Despite the restrictions and ration coupons that are

introduced, fragments of the past remain in circulation. Many of these are of an illicit nature, however, like the 1970's edition of 'Vogue' magazine that the Commander tempts Offred with as a bribe for them to continue meeting in private. This appears to her replete with images of her childhood, of a period that was filled, not only with her memories of her mother burning pornography, but with an illimitable play of the possible choices of self-definition. These she remembers as being ephemeral, "infinitely discardable", but nonetheless filled with a certain magical promise:

> They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point.
> (HT, p. 165)

This magazine, trivial and of limited value if taken just at face value, manages in this radically different environment to that for which it was first intended to revive and resuscitate Offred's imagination in a more fundamental way than the Commander could have ever intended. And it displays for the reader aspects of the triadic matrix of past, present and future which Margaret Atwood interweaves in the fragmented chronology of the novel's narrative structure.

The writer & critic W.H. New gives an interesting account of the directly contemporary elements he deciphers in the body of the text, commenting that:

> This dystopian novel speculates about present-day trends: the verbal controls that commercial advertising exerts over roles and expectations, the legal controls that society claims over women's lives and bodies, the active will to assert power, the passive wish for

anonymity that leads many people to surrender authority to institutions, the existence of economic structures more powerful than legislative ones, the resurgence of influential fundamentalist groups that impose preconceived boundaries around the design of truth. These, too, are circle games in the Atwood lexicon. Nothing that happens in the novel is without some basis in current practice in the 1980's. What happens, however, involves a wilful reorganisation of society to deny women any rights at all...

The roles of Aunts and Wives - members of the corporate structure, therefore part of the problem for other women - show how a 'nice' language can be made to reshape truth for political purposes: a language can be corrupted, and can corrupt, and people will not complain. 'Angels', 'Eyes', 'Guardians': these persons no longer watch over, they now spy out. They purge society of resistant elements, they manipulate judgement (the wives, not incidentally, all bear names derived from household products currently advertised on television), they rely for their own position on sanctioned violence and fear. 'Alternative codes' (and here Atwood is questioning the rigidity of certain brands of revolutionary rhetoric as well as that of the status quo) all run the danger of reconstructing society and leaving freedom, individuality, choice and imagination - leaving people, in other words - out of account. The problem is that, even though words hypothesize truths, people recurrently react to them morally, prefering to read them not as a dialectical arrangement but as an absolute fix on reality. The novel not only raises this issue, it also enacts it formally. Ostensibly the diary notes of 'Offred', a rebel handmaid, the whole narrative is thrown into uncertainty by a final frame: one in which twenty-first-century historians gather (in the Arctic) to 'reconstruct' or interpret the past. Art and history are themselves framing systems, the frame itself a code. By framing the central narrative as a mise en scene, the author calls attention to absences, that which is not said, or not yet said, as well as to the controls that the frame exerts over perspective. By fracturing the frame, however, she at the same time resists current systems of enclosure and categorisation.[24]

There are some points in this which are open to question: the frame is actually of the twenty-second-century, and it does not seem entirely credible that all the Commander's wives can bear names that are associated just with advertised products (Serena Joy? Bambi Mae?

[24]W.H. New, 'A History of Canadian Literature', (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 294 - 295.

Thelma?). Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that this futurist frame is fractured in a manner similar to the central narrative, for it is itself the transcription, or reconstruction, of a speech; though one, admittedly, that has been made under rather more orthodox circumstances. New, however, rightly emphasizes the "circle games" that are revealed by examining Margaret Atwood's linguistic patterns in the novel, and this also may be taken to include her juxtaposition of the disparate scraps of two suppressed lives, one fictional, the other rooted in the shifting lines of history, in order to trace the patterns of repression that link colony and city, a world of fiction and the word of faith.

In her interview with Linda Sandler, Margaret Atwood makes a comparison between the American and Canadian systems of governance, saying:

> America is a tragic country because it has great democratic ideals and rigid social machinery....Our constitution promises "peace, order and good government" - and that's quite different from "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".[23]

It is reasonably clear which version of society Atwood finds preferable but one senses too that in her reference to the United States as "tragic", because of this subordination of individual freedom within a framework that is "rigid" and represses that very freedom it might be supposed to promote, can be perceived a significant reflection of what she absorbed from her studies with Perry Miller through his elucidation of these founding

[23] 'Interview with Margaret Atwood', p. 27.

fathers' ideological baggage and religious machinery.

Conclusion: From the Wilderness to the World

In this thesis I have attempted to trace a coherent and developing pattern through Margaret Atwood's writings that indicates how her social concerns and literary techniques have modulated and been refined through time and experience. It has been a selective rather than an exhaustive critique, but the works I have chosen to concentrate upon, spanning three decades from the early sixties to the mid-eighties, do indicate the fundamental consistency of her expressive vision.

Thus the structuring and language of The Circle Game is, at least technically, not dissimilar to her later verse, although of course in a work like 'Notes Toward A Poem That Can Never Be Written', the ideological content represents a far higher degree of political complexity and informed awareness of the cruelty of the world. But, as the general thrust of my thesis suggests, this is true of her work in all communicative media, from her fiction to her articles for magazines and newspapers, although as Linda Hutcheon has rightly noted, this is not to say that Atwood's poetic strategies are identical to the "more complex and more specifically narrative technique" she employs in her novels.[1]

The intense symbolic organization of The Edible Woman is in a sense then more directly poetic than the narrational layering of The Handmaid's Tale. Yet many of

[1]Linda Hutcheon, 'From Poetic to Narrative Structures: The Novels of Margaret Atwood', in Atwood: Language, Text, and System, p. 18.

their thematic impulses can be demonstrated to be coterminous - the uncertain relationship between self and language, and the power of social hierarchies to determine an individual's destiny, and the delicate interplay between cognizance of this state and complicity in its perpetuation. And so Survival can be seen as being particularly central to an understanding of Atwood's literary oeuvre, because it is, as she suggests, a book which transcends its ostensible sphere of interest, and becomes "a cross between a personal statement, which most books are, and a political manifesto, which most books also are, if only by default"(SVL, p. 13).

What is unusual and exciting about Margaret Atwood's writing is the way in which these elements coalesce and recombine so that her works are both formally very referential, in the way in which they recirculate and rearticulate literary ideas and practises ("the noxious influence of Northrop Frye"(SW, p. 385)), but remain imaginatively and intellectually open-ended, with their potentiation of significance unrestricted. Thus her answer in Survival to the question "What do writers write about?" incorporates both these elements, asserting simultaneously the influence of generic tradition and the absoluteness of authorial freedom, as well as insinuating geographical concern and a certain implicit sexual subversion:

> The Character Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man looks at the flyleaf of his geography book and finds a list he has written there:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe

That's a fairly inclusive list of everything it is possible for a human being to write about and therefore to read about. It begins with the personal, continues through the social or cultural or national and ends with "The Universe", the Universal (SVL, p. 15).

In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate the ramifications of the question Margaret Atwood here raises, and the answer she gives, concerning the scope of what a writer may write about, as well as indicating something of the range of critical and historical approaches which such particularity, and such universality, engenders.

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