

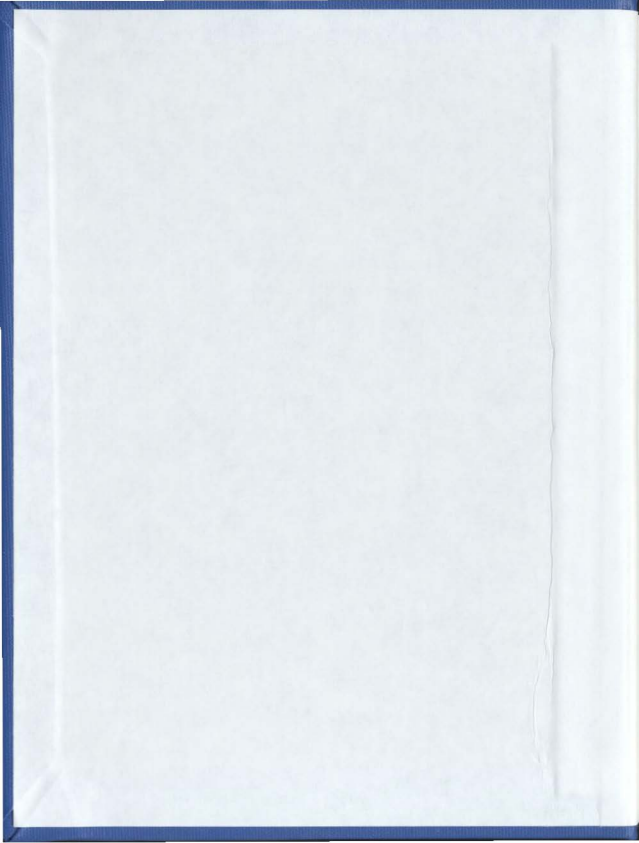
THE SOLITARY DANCER:  
ISOLATION AND AFFIRMATION  
IN THE POETRY OF MARGARET  
ATWOOD

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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CLAUDIA SUSAN PARKS









THE SOLITARY DANCER:  
ISOLATION AND AFFIRMATION  
IN  
THE POETRY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

by



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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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who can interpret  
the semaphore of our bending  
bodies, from a distance we could be dancing

(YAH, 9)

## ABSTRACT

The poetry of Margaret Atwood reflects an awareness of the isolation of the individual. This isolation is seen by the persona of Atwood's poems as the result of the subjectivity of perception, the turning inward onto the self of the data supplied by the senses, and of the conditioned and artificial responses which the individual makes to all external phenomena, whether of the natural world or of the behaviour of other people. These aspects of the theme of isolation are revealed through the persona's comments on other people, in particular her observations about the male figure who is her unseen companion in the poems and to whom many of the poems are addressed. However, fear, evasiveness, hostility and resignation also bear a causal relation to the isolation of the individual, and these aspects of the isolation theme are revealed by image patterns in the poems, and by the implied or suggested motives behind what the persona admits and what she will not admit.

Isolation also inheres in the individual's response to the past. To the adult persona, the past represents an exclusive and desirable order which is inaccessible in the present. In the poems which deal with

this aspect of isolation, the lack of continuity between past and present is revealed through the imagery as the result of a conscious acceptance of the logical order manifested by the modern world and a rejection of the non-formal element of reality or the non-manifest order of the world.

The continuing exploration of the nature of the self in Atwood's poetry reveals that the split between past and present is due to the divided nature of man, the split between the ordering conscious mind and the non-formal unconscious.

Atwood does not resolve the tensions inherent in man's divided nature but, through her persona, she does explore and give voice to the repressed or denied half of the individual. This acknowledgment of the instinctual, extra-logical side of man's nature provides the changing emphasis necessary in order to make a realistic and yet whole-hearted affirmation of the human condition. In the poems of affirmation, isolation is not disproved but is seen as singleness, an intrinsic condition of every individual life which does not exclude the possibility of communion.

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#### ABBREVIATION KEY

For the convenience of the reader, I have placed citations of Atwood's poems in parentheses immediately after the first quotations. Except for initial quotations, citations are not included unless they are necessary for clarity. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the following volumes, and the titles have been abbreviated according to this key:

CG The Circle Game. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1966.

AIC The Animals in That Country. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968.

SM The Journals of Susanna Moodie. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970.

PFU Procedures for Underground. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970.

PP Power Politics. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971.

YAH You are Happy. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Any untitled poem dealt with in this study is referred to by its first line placed in quotation marks.

## INTRODUCTION

This study of the poetry of Margaret Atwood does not, strictly speaking, follow the chronological order of the poems, and the progression within each chapter of this thesis does not correspond, even approximately, to the progression within any one of the six books of poetry. Each one of Margaret Atwood's books of poetry starts with a negative vision of some aspect of experience and progresses to a point of at least limited affirmation. Atwood's first book of poetry, The Circle Game, begins with "This is a Photograph of Me" (CG, 11), a poem which expresses the persona's sense of isolation from others, and ends with the poem "The Settlers" (CG, 79-80), in which a feeling of harmony with the natural world is expressed. Similarly, the second book, The Animals in That Country, begins with the poem "Provisions" (AIC, 1), which expresses the inadequacy and inappropriateness of man's response, and, in fact, his inability to relate, to the world of external nature, and ends with "Axiom" (AIC, 69), a poem in which the metaphor of a sea is used to express man's inner nature as an undiscovered or unknown quantity. In this poem, the gradual revelation of the man to the persona is represented by the metaphor of the settling of a country. Landscape is thus used in a positive

sense. There is in The Animals in That Country a progression in the use of the metaphor provided by landscape or country, a changing emphasis from landscape as a mirror of personal isolation to landscape as an image of the potential discovery of the self.

Power Politics as well begins negatively and ends positively. The untitled opening poem of this fifth volume (PP, 1) uses the utilitarian domestic object, the hook and eye, to form an image of the almost unbearable wound inflicted upon the persona's psyche by the male figure in their daily intimacies. In "He is last seen" (PP, 56), at the end of Power Politics, however, the persona sees her companion in a different light, as a person who, like herself, is embarking upon a journey of exploration, both of the self and of the possibility of fulfillment in the intimate relationship. Although he still brings to her "a death", it is "a new death", which takes the form of a commitment, and which is expressed in the image of a "glass paperweight" with "a man and woman, hands joined and running", inside. The poem reflects a change of emphasis from the poems at the beginning of Power Politics. The pain caused by the relationship at the beginning of the book is, as the title suggests, the result of the cruel manipulation of power by both the persona and her companion over each other. To risk commitment, however, is to make oneself vulnerable; and the pain which the persona envisions

for the future, in "He is last seen", is the pain of possible failure to find fulfillment with another, once a commitment has been made. Nevertheless, the persona, like her companion, is committed to the journey away from the morass of the role-player and his manipulations of power and toward "firm ground and safety". This in itself is a kind of affirmation.

The other three books of Margaret Atwood's poetry are similar to The Circle Game, The Animals in That Country and Power Politics in that they too reveal a process of changing vision, of the use of metaphor first to deny and finally to affirm. The concerns of the poet and, therefore, the metaphors she chooses differ from book to book, but the type of progression is similar in all the volumes. A chronological approach to the poetry, with a chapter devoted to the progression within each one of the six volumes, would necessitate not only a longer study than that which is attempted in this thesis, but also a certain amount of repetition, both of theme and in the development of Atwood's poetic vision, which this study will attempt to avoid. The poems have therefore been grouped according to theme and the use of recurring images and metaphors.

The four themes which are explored in this thesis have not been chosen arbitrarily, the criteria for selection being a frequent recurrence of the theme in each of the six

books of poetry. Furthermore, the theme of the poems in the first chapter leads logically into the theme of the poems in the second chapter, that of the poems in the second chapter into the third, and so on. What is attempted in this thesis is a kind of synthesis of the progression of Atwood's poetic vision as it is revealed through the major themes and images in any one of the volumes individually and in the sequence of volumes as a whole. Thus although the individual chapter does not preserve the chronological order of the poems, the thesis as a whole recreates this order.

Chapter I deals with the theme of isolation of the individual from all other individuals and, more specifically, with the isolation of the persona from the male figure to whom nearly all the poems are addressed. Isolation is expressed first through the metaphor of drowning, and then, as the persona becomes more aware of why she feels isolated, through the metaphor of the mirror's reflected reality which she sees as somehow having supplanted and erased the reality of her own inner being. In these poems the poet is continuously raising questions through the imagery about perception, about the nature of appearance and reality. The apparent lucidity of the verbal structure of the poem, with its surface of precisely deliberate statement, stands in direct contrast to the ambiguity of what is expressed, and therefore raises questions about the

nature of communication itself, its effectiveness, its inadequacies, and, not least of all, of the intent of the person who makes the communication. In the poems of isolation, the persona communicates her beliefs and ideas through direct statement, but it is the metaphor and the image in these poems, with their complex and dynamic associations, which reveal the persona to the reader. Once given form, metaphor and image attain a life independent of the persona's control; they reveal truths about the persona's experience which are at once more profound and more ambiguous than, and indeed which often even conflict with, the observations expressed directly by the persona without the use of metaphor. A close reading of the poems in this chapter, and in all the chapters for that matter, will reveal subtle differences in the use of similar images or metaphors which may not be apparent at first reading, and which reveal in turn different degrees of awareness of her dilemma on the part of the persona, and of her part in the creation of the dilemma, as well as different degrees of concern that something be done to change the situation.

The frequent recurrence of poems in which the persona searches in her past for a key to the understanding of her feeling of isolation in the present suggests that she has reached a realization that something must be done, if not to lessen the sense of isolation, then at least to

discover when it became an unalterable fact of her life. Chapter II deals with these poems which explore a past harmony between the persona and the natural world, and in which this feeling of harmony is contrasted with her feeling of present isolation. The contrast results in the creation in the poems of a sense of loss. In the poems which are examined in Chapter I it is the persona's refusal to realize the implications of the imagery, and her ability to avoid confronting the central issue even as she is apparently making honest admissions, which result in the creation of the feeling of isolation. In Chapter II, on the other hand, it is the persona's genuine bewilderment which results in the creation of a sense of loss. Again, as in Chapter I, it is through metaphor and image, rather than the persona's direct statement, that the extent of her isolation from the past's organic harmony is fully realized. It is also in the poems examined in Chapter II that we see the beginning of the idea of man as a dual creature, one half order-creating, the other having an ability (perhaps now lost) to embrace and identify with the natural order.

Chapter III examines the poems which explore this duality within man. The duality is seen as a kind of split between man's unspoken and intuitive feeling that the world cannot be made to conform to strict rules or patterns, and his conscious need in spite of this to assert his ascendancy over the natural world by making it conform to his own

conception of order. Two kinds of poems are examined in this chapter. The first is different from the dramatic monologues of Chapters I and II. Poems of this first kind are illustrations of the opposition of the natural order and the order man creates. There is no indication that the state of affairs being explored in these poems belongs to the persona's personal experience; rather, the poems are presented in the voice of a detached observer. Isolation from the landscape is thus seen as generic rather than particular; it is a condition which must be overcome by every individual, and it must be dealt with first within the self. In the poems of the second kind the persona attempts to explore and understand the nature of her isolation from the external world by journeying into the self. These poems are among the most dynamic of all of Atwood's poetry. The exploration which occurs within them, and the organic vitality of the metaphors and images through which this exploration occurs, open the way for the poetry of affirmation in Chapter IV.

The poems examined in Chapter IV are marked, not so much by a change in the choice of metaphor and image, as by a changing emphasis. The full implications of earlier image patterns become apparent to the persona as a direct result of the process of exploration which occurs in the poems examined in the first three chapters, and of the slowly developing awareness which accompanies this process. It is



a process which begins with detachment and ends with involvement. It is a gradual movement from invulnerability to vulnerability, from passive resignation to a positive willingness to accept responsibility, from isolation to affirmation.

Of the treatment of the poems in this thesis, one thing remains to be said. This thesis is concerned with exploring not only the communication of themes in the poetry, but also the manner in which these themes are communicated. It is concerned not only with the content of the poem, but also with the poetic process, and with the process of a developing, inclusive vision. It is for this reason that a close reading of the poems is attempted, for what the persona says is not more important than how she says it, or than what she does not say. Only by constant reference to what has preceded and what follows any given word, line or image can the multiple meanings and associations of the poem as a whole be realized. Patterns of images and metaphors will therefore be examined closely.

It is the image which gives life and complexity to the persona. This is not confessional poetry, at least not in the sense that the poet is baring her own soul to the reader. It is, rather, the creation of a fictional character, a *dramatis persona*, who, through her observations about herself, her relationships with others, her love-hate relationship with the male figure, and the environment in

which she lives, reveals something of what it is like to be "both human and alive" (PP, 30). Through the universality of the metaphor and the image, this poetry becomes, not confessional or subjective in character, but a highly articulate statement of the human condition. Finally, the choice of the metaphor and the image which will raise the persona's observations above mere subjective statements about her own experience is not adventitious; it is, rather, evidence of an intuitive or deliberate artistry, or perhaps both, which belongs not to the persona but to the poet. It is this artistry, this interrelationship between theme and image, which will be explored in this thesis.

## CHAPTER I

### THE ISOLATED SELF

You rest on the bed  
watching me watching  
you, we will never know  
each other any better  
  
than we do now (PP, 14)

Isolation which results from the failure of perception to pierce the mask of appearances and so to discover the true inner reality of the individual is a recurring theme in the poetry of Margaret Atwood. In the poems to be examined in this chapter, the persona implies again and again that her feeling of isolation is created by the failure of the male figure to see beyond her appearance to her true nature. In "This is a Photograph of Me" (CG, 11), for example, she offers to the "you" figure the photograph, which of necessity captures only an appearance, as a metaphor for her feeling of isolation. In this poem she implies that her companion's failure to "see" her is causally connected to her isolation. The fact, however, that the persona offers to her companion a photograph in which she is "drowned" and "under the surface" of the lake, in which, therefore, she does not recognizably appear, raises questions about whether in fact she really wants to

be seen, or if instead she merely wants the male figure to appreciate the fact that she is isolated from him, that he knows nothing about her private inner being. Because the poems examined in this first chapter are all, except for "A Dialogue" and "This year I intended children", dramatic first-person statements addressed to an unseen male figure, what the persona says cannot be taken simply at face value. Her implied judgments of her companion must be weighed against what the imagery reveals about the persona herself, about what she is concealing, what she is unwilling or unable to confront.

"This is a Photograph of Me" is the first in a group of poems to be examined in this chapter which also includes the two poems not addressed to the male figure but having in common the motif of the drowned figure as a symbol of the persona's isolation. These two poems cast more light on the nature and extent of the persona's isolation. In the first, "A Dialogue" (PFU, 12-13), the feeling of isolation is linked somehow to the past. In the second, "This year I intended children" (PP, 41), the persona's feeling of isolation is connected to her revulsion toward the earth's natural cycle and, more particularly, toward birth, growth and proliferating natural life. The metaphors and images in these poems reveal aspects of the persona's personality which are not readily apparent in the poems addressed to the male figure.

In the second group of poems examined in this chapter, the mirror is the central metaphor for the expression of the persona's feeling of isolation. In "My face, my other faces" (YAH, 56), "The Circle Game" (CG, 35-44) and "Tricks with Mirrors" (YAH, 24-27), the persona places the responsibility for her isolation upon her companion more explicitly than she does in "This is a Photograph of Me". Again in these poems, however, particularly in the latter two, the persona's tone, the incidents in her relationship with the male figure which she chooses to relate, and (in "The Circle Game") the imagery through which she recreates the outside world of the children, reveal to what extent the persona is implicated in the creation and perpetuation of her feeling of isolation.

"Frame" (PFU, 21), the last poem to be examined in this chapter, reveals a changing or developing awareness within the persona. In this poem, although the persona does not know how she has become isolated, she does acknowledge that this feeling is linked to her own view of the world and of the past, and is not something she can blame on someone else. This chapter will explore, then, not only the extent of the persona's isolation from others as she perceives it, but also the manner in which she perceives herself and the world, and records these observations. It will explore the relation between isolation and perception.

The opening poem of the first collection, "This is a Photograph of Me" (CG, 11), is representative of the poems of total isolation. The title is really the first line of the poem; it serves the dual function of introducing the poem and of drawing the reader immediately, without preamble, into the poem. The prosaic title, unrepeated in the body of the poem, is characteristic of Atwood's habit, in her best poems, of not wasting words. It immediately establishes the tone of the poem. It suggests the presence of two people, one speaking, the other listening. It suggests communication, both in speech and in gesture. As the poem begins, the persona is talking to an unseen companion; she is showing him an over-exposed or unfocused photograph of herself:

It was taken some time ago.  
 At first it seems to be  
 a smeared  
 print: blurred lines and grey flecks  
 blended with the paper[.]

The reader is a kind of third party, allowed to observe an apparently ordinary scene between two people who seem to know each other well. The title and the opening lines give no hint of the surprise which is to follow. The speaker is simply showing the person with her an old photograph, perhaps from the family album, an action of no particular significance.

The tone in these lines is set up by the matter of fact way in which the persona begins her monologue, by the lack of formality, the lack of any prefatory remarks to explain or emphasize, and by the implied familiarity between the persona and the person to whom she is speaking. There is nothing out of the ordinary about this beginning, nothing to suggest that the persona feels isolated.

The beginning of the photograph's strange ambiguity is already being created, however. The photograph "seems" blurred; perhaps for this reason the persona must begin by saying that it is indeed a photograph of herself. At any rate, it is at first unrecognizable as such, either because "[i]t was taken some time ago" or because it "seems to be / a smeared print". The use of the word "seems" suggests that perhaps the "smeared" quality does not derive from the photographer's lack of skill, but is instead a quality that resides in the vague subject of the print itself. The use of this word is the first indication of indefiniteness, of the growing sense of the unreliance of perception, which develops as the poem proceeds. With each succeeding note of vagueness, the sense of the photograph as a real image of a person diminishes. The reader is led further into a realm of abstraction and away from the tableau of speaker and listener.

The use of the word "seems" suggests too that the vagueness of the photograph may also be caused by the viewer's failure to focus on it correctly, and this suggests in turn that the isolation which this poem so vividly presents can perhaps be traced to the fact that man learns a description of the world, that he can see things only in the way that he has been conditioned to see them. For this reason, the persona must provide the viewer with analogies from his world of familiar things for the indefinable objects which appear in the unfamiliar world of the photograph.

As the viewer is led into the abstract reality of the photograph, its deceiving "lines and grey flecks", the sense of a second person's presence, indeed, of the presence of either speaker or listener, is diminished. What remains is the photograph itself, its expanding reality, and the speaker's disembodied voice. The photograph is not what is appears; instead of the person who should appear in the photograph there is "a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree / (balsam or spruce)" emerging. What is presented is not the familiar "real" world, although the photograph is compared to familiar objects, but a world of fluctuating lines and patterns. The disturbing lines are "like" a branch, possibly a section of a tree as familiar as the "balsam or spruce". The sense of indefiniteness and insubstantiality in the photograph derives partly from the



contrast between the persona's matter of fact tone and the elusive nature of her subject, and partly from the use of the subjunctive mood in the lines which follow: thus she speaks of "a small frame house" "halfway up / what ought to be a gentle slope". Again, the "small frame house" is a connection to the world of familiar objects and predictable events, but the comparison is deprived of its power to reassure, to create a world which the viewer can unquestioningly accept, by the unsettling feeling that things are not as they appear. This feeling goes back to the initial statement of the title "[t]his is a [p]hotograph of [m]e", a statement which is undermined by the description which follows it.

Having established that the absolute nature of the reality depicted by the photograph cannot be determined, the speaker now appears to be content with the relative reality created by the comparison of the abstract "lines and ... flecks" to a landscape. Thus she says, without the tentativeness of the preceding lines, "[i]n the background there is a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills". The reader is drawn into a world deprived of signposts; appearance is offered as reality. The familiar tree, slope and house are analogies for another reality which, because it is untranslatable, becomes vaguely threatening. The sense of ominousness is further increased by the emotionless tone which the speaker uses.

The last part of the poem, the parenthetical section, seems to be offered almost as an afterthought. The tone is even more detached, as if the speaker, having said, after all, that "[t]his is a [p]hotograph of [m]e", wishes to point out where she appears among the "lines and ... flecks", and then have done. The tone is one of complete indifference to the effect of her words. This, more than anything that she actually says, forces the reader to backtrack, to see where, in his complacency, he managed to miss the clue which would explain this puzzling photograph, this disquieting lack of emotion in the persona's tone. Each time, however, he is brought up sharply against the incontrovertible, and yet impossible, statement of fact:

(The photograph was taken  
The day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center  
of the picture, just under the surface. . . .

The prosaic explanation of why it is difficult to see where the persona actually is, in the photograph, in terms of the phenomenon of water's refraction of light, only serves to increase the reader's sense of disorientation:

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[.]

The persona says, "but if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me", but what the reader sees is a startling metaphor of total isolation.

At the beginning of the poem, the persona appears to be attempting to break down our patterns of perceiving, and in so doing, she leads us into the abstract world represented in the photograph. She undercuts our faith in appearances by suggesting that perception is distorted by interpretation. We are constantly translating one thing into another, making the strange familiar through comparison; hence our readiness to read what is "like a branch" simply as a branch, and "what ought to be a gentle slope" as a slope, accompanied by the comfortingly utilitarian "small frame house". What Atwood does is to make these familiar things, by tone and suggestion, strange in themselves.

The tone of this poem is completely objective. Its very objectivity, its factualness, even while it is obviously metaphorical and not literal truth, defies the reader to interpret subjectively. It is precisely because we subjectify experience, turning everything inward upon the self, that we are isolated from each other. Metaphor, by its very nature, cannot be translated.

As a distancing technique, the use of the photograph works because it allows the poet to objectify the experience of personal isolation. As a medium for conveying the persona's isolation, the photograph works because it presents

the speaker as twice removed from ordinary reality, first of all because it is a picture, and secondly because it is a picture of the speaker in which she does not even recognizably appear. Her isolation occurs in time as well as space; it is an old photograph ("taken some time ago") which was taken after her death ("the day after I drowned"). The persona is isolated because she cannot be perceived. Although she stands in the present time of the poem, speaking about photographs, she has no actual physical presence. She is as much a part of the time-space dimension of the photograph as she is of now and here. Therefore when she says in the last line of the poem that "if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me", she is not affirming any positive human ability for empathic perception of another human being. She is merely stating, bluntly, and with the detachment which comes with the realization or belief that she cannot alter this state of affairs, that what we shall perceive, imperfectly, vaguely, is a distorted and abstracted figure of isolation.

The force of the poem comes from the contrast between the world of commonplace things, photographs and ordinary conversation, and the restricted two-dimensional reality represented by the "lines and ... flecks" of the photograph. As the latter reality expands to envelop the whole of the poem, a strange thing happens. The ordinary world becomes flat and colourless and the metaphorical world

of lake and hill becomes the only reality. We are immersed in it. At the end of the poem, the persona has been completely supplanted by the drowned figure of herself locked in the restricted world of the photograph. Isolation has become her only reality.

The use of the photograph allows the poet to imply certain things about our perception of the landscape as well as of other human beings. It freezes the landscape into a moment of immobility. If it seems odd to think of the landscape, or the natural world, as being in a state of constant motion, one should look at the poem "Camera" (CG, 45-46) in which nature, as well as the speaker, refuses to be held static for the frozen instant of the photograph. Interestingly, in that poem, as in "This is a Photograph of Me", there is a kind of identification of the persona with the landscape in which she appears. The speaker advises the "[c]amera man" to look closely at the photograph "before it dissolves completely" and she, "travelling towards the horizon / at almost the speed of light", disappears with it. In "This is a Photograph of Me", studying the photograph only makes the landscape become more abstract, a pattern of "lines and grey flecks". Just as the persona can be perceived only as a figure of isolation ("drowned"), so the landscape becomes the idea of a landscape, reduced to diagram. The idea that the landscape is distorted by our subjective interpretation of it is an important concept in

Atwood's poetry. In "This is a Photograph of Me", because landscape and human being are equally distorted in our perceiving of them, there is an absence of tension between them. I think it is for this reason that Atwood's exploration of personal isolation often finds expression in imagery of the natural landscape.

This seems to be the case in the poem "A Dialogue" (PFU, 12-13), where again the persona's isolation is presented in terms of a landscape. The title promises communication, but there is no real communication between the persona and her sister in this poem; there is only the similarity of their experiences of isolation. "My sister and I share the same / place of recurring dreams", the poem begins. The dream-place functions in the same way the photograph-place does in "This is a Photograph of Me", as a means of distancing the poet from her subject matter. Also like the photograph, the dream-place presents a restricted reality made up of "(the lake, the island, the glacier - / smoothed rock, the bay / with low ground, spruce and cedar)". The parentheses serve to define the limits of this dream-space, parcelling it neatly for examination, and thereby setting up a contrast between it and the undefined actual space of the poem's dynamic present. By doing this the poet also distorts and limits the landscape of the dream in much the same way that the landscape of the photograph ("This is a Photograph of Me") is distorted by

its reduction to two dimensions. The listing of landmarks, too, ("lake", "island", "glacier - / smoothed rock", "bay", "spruce and cedar") creates the kind of schematic quality of a diagram. What the speaker gives us is not the essence of the landscape but its parts. The flow of the narrative is hardly interrupted by the perfunctory establishing of the place of dreams, as the persona continues, "though because we were born in different years / we seldom see each other". A difference in ages which at first is all that seems to be implied by their being "born in different years" hardly seems an adequate reason, by itself, for "seldom [seeing] each other", unless the speaker is referring to an inherent difference in perception of the world and of experience which can only be increased by a difference of years and, therefore, of environment (because it is constantly changing). In this case, "see" should be read as the empathic perception of the other as a like human being. Since the persona and her sister must in fact see each other in order to sit "at the kitchen table" discussing their similar dreams, I think that the poet does mean "see" in this special sense of objective perception, free of the inward curl of the interested self. The indented section of the poem supports this view, since it illustrates how, though they "share the same / place of recurring dreams", and though their paths cross, the "place" is not really the same for both, and, seeing each other, they also fail to

see each other.

The dream world of the indented section is at the thematic center of the poem. The metaphorical reality which it creates reaches out to supersede the actual space of the rest of the poem. Like the photograph-world of "This is a Photograph of Me", it expands and draws us into itself until the scene of the dialogue (that is, the "kitchen table" scene) becomes by contrast flat and colourless.

The naming of the composite parts of the landscape does not succeed in capturing its essence; the translation of it into image does. The image itself is the reality of the landscape; the image, and therefore the reality, is different for each of them. For the sister

it is a swamp  
at night, she is trying to get away,  
her feet won't move, she is afraid  
of the things that live under the water[.]

The place which they must at one time have shared in actuality, perhaps when they were children, has become for the sister an image of fear. The darkness and the fear of the unknown are perhaps a carry-over from childhood of a fear of the dark, which the sister may have externalized at some point by projection onto the familiar landscape. At any rate, the sister is still trapped in the past, trying to escape some irrational fear, irrational because the cause



of it is never formulated into words.

For the persona, the "place of recurring dreams" is "clear day / so bright the green pierces", an image which is even more sinister because at first it does not seem to be threatening at all. In the symbolism of these dreams, the sister avoids facing what she fears by converting it into something which exists, hidden, in the natural world. The persona, on the other hand, rationalizes and externalizes whatever it is that once threatened: "in the distance I hear a motor, a chain - / saw, the invaders are coming nearer". The techniques of avoidance, non-confrontation, which the dreams suggest are symptomatic of some fear or loss which occurred in the past, which began, for whatever reason, when the shared environment was the lonely landscape presented at the beginning of the poem. The fact that the dreams are so different suggests that not even the landscape was shared. What is shared now is, anyway, no longer the landscape, but the persistent feeling of isolation which the "recurring dreams" express in terms of the landscape. Cut off by time from the original landscape, the sisters are cut off from understanding or perceiving each other by the intrinsic difference between them which their different dreams suggest. The remainder of the indented section, in which the dreams merge with reality, and they themselves come together without touching, further establishes this sense of isolation:

I passed her at evening, she was running,  
 her arms stretched out  
 in front of her; I called but couldn't  
 wake her[.]

The sister becomes a kind of sleep-walker between the two worlds, oblivious to all but the terror of her metaphorical dream and the desperate need to escape it. Ironically, the persona, who can observe the total isolation of her sister, doesn't notice her own immersion in the dark waters of the dream:

She watched me sinking  
 among the reeds and lily-pads;  
 I was smiling, I didn't notice  
 as the dark lake slipped over my head.

As these images suggest, each sister appears in the other's dream, but there is no way of reaching each other. The sister appears to the persona as a sleep-walker, the persona to her sister as a drowned figure. Both dreams suggest the isolation of one from the other, but they also suggest each sister's isolation from herself. The persona, who saw the landscape in terms of "clear day / so bright the green pierces", cannot recognize her own isolation. Unlike her sister, the persona does not confront the dream-landscape at all, does not make any overt connection between her "clear day" and her sister's dream of her "sinking / among the reeds and lily-pads". Drowning is still the metaphor for the persona's isolation, but unlike the speaker

in "This is a Photograph of Me", the persona does not consciously "notice" ("smiling") that it has occurred.

The causal relation between the dreams and the final image of the poem is only suggested. Although the sisters talk about their dreams "in calm voices" in the sane daylight world of the kitchen, there is nothing they can communicate. The ordinary reality which their "calm voices" and the "kitchen table" attempt to establish is a defense to keep the import of their dreams hidden. It doesn't work; the effects manifest themselves anyway:

she is examining  
her bitten hands, finger  
by finger, I draw with a pencil,  
covering the page with triangles  
and grey geometrical flowers.

For the sister, the dream has the immediate psychological effect of nervousness, a feeling of disharmony within herself which the bitten fingernails attest to. The speaker externalizes her unrecognized feeling of isolation by the delineation of her own constricted reality, its "grey geometrical flowers" conveying a vague sense of loss. The picture which emerges in this poem is of two people who share no common ground, who cannot perceive why or how they have become isolated and somehow diminished and cannot, therefore, reach each other. Between the dreams, between the worlds of "bitten hands" and "grey geometrical flowers",

there can be no bridge. It is the image, finally, which realizes the isolation. One feels that in the actual landscape of the past, vital and dynamic if also too ominously real, or in the recurring-dream landscape, is contained at least the possibility of confrontation, of recognition of what it is to be human and intrinsically alone; but in the artificial world of the kitchen, only the effects of this isolation are there to be seen. The isolation remains unspoken, unfronted. Because in "A Dialogue" personal isolation is reduced to a sterile image of "grey geometrical flowers", it is a more terrible and more complete kind of isolation than we saw in "This is a Photograph of Me", in which the persona, although isolated, still saw herself as part of the flux of the natural world. It is an isolation which does not recognize itself.

A different treatment of the drowning motif is given in the poem "This year I intended children" (PP, 41). As the Introduction to this thesis notes, each of Atwood's books of poetry begins with a negative vision of some aspect of experience and progresses through an examination of the self, its relationship to others, and of the landscape, to a new position of affirmation. In "This is a Photograph of Me" and "A Dialogue", although the speaker affirmed nothing, she at least recorded, implicitly or explicitly, the power of the natural world to influence human life, at the same time finding in its complexity and inaccessibility

a metaphor for her own isolation. "This year I intended children" occurs at a point in Power Politics when the speaker, having examined other alternatives, turns back to the natural world in the hope of re-discovering her own connection to it.

The poem begins with just such a statement of hope, worded in the form of a positive intention:

This year I intended children  
a space where I could raise  
foxes and strawberries, finally  
be reconciled to fur seeds & burrows[.]

The choice of "foxes" and "strawberries" suggests a conscious need to reaffirm the instinctual life of animals and the generative principle in nature itself, to discover, through the "intended children", her place in the cycle of procreation, her own physicality. There are tensions inherent in the wording and tone of the lines, however, suggesting as they do that the proposed action is the result of a formal plan ("I intended children") and is not something which will happen easily or naturally ("finally / be reconciled"). These things which the persona must reconcile to her nature are listed with no punctuation, except for the sign "&", as if the persona wants to pass over them as quickly as possible, as if, therefore, she feels an aversion for them in spite of her intention. They also suggest a kind of preoccupation with the physical processes

of nature. In this sense, the lines echo the poem on the facing page (PP, 40), in which the speaker's revulsion for the natural cycle is evident in her images of spring: "Spring again, can I stand it / shooting its needles into / the earth, my head".

The opening lines of "This year I intended children" express a tension between order and control ("I intended children"; "a space where I could raise / foxes and strawberries") on the one hand, and the proliferating life suggested by "fur seeds & burrows". It is not surprising that although the speaker has made an apparently positive statement of intention, the action she chooses consciously is rejected. The germ of the rejection is implicit in the tension of the opening lines. The rejection when it comes is given in the water symbolism of the unconscious mind:

but the entrails of dead cards  
are against me, foretell  
it will be water, the

element that shaped  
me, that I shape by  
being in[.]

The "entrails of dead cards" suggests what remains of an old prophecy, exhumed by the speaker's unconscious mind to protect against the threat of "fur seeds & burrows". The cards as instruments of prophecy derive power from both life ("entrails") and death ("dead" cards). They

become a kind of talisman or charm to work against the regenerative life force. Although there is the sense in these lines that the persona evokes the "entrails of dead cards", and that they have no intrinsic power to determine her future, there is also the sense that she believes it will be her fate to remain isolated from the natural cycle, that she is not, in fact, meant to fulfill the intention expressed in the first four lines of the poem. The lines express not only the prophecy but also the persona's implied acceptance of the prophecy.

Water, as "the / element that shaped / me", suggests the source of life, the element which contains either the potential or already existing forms of all life, and as such it also suggests that the persona sees herself as belonging to the natural cycle. However, this is immediately followed by water as the element "that I shape by / being in". This inversion at least partially negates the positive associations of water as "the / element that shaped / me" by suggesting instead immersion in water and the accompanying associations of dissolution or metaphorical death. The image as a whole embraces the paradoxical nature of water as a symbol of the non-formal world of potentialities, of the potential for life and also for death. The persona sees her future as being determined by "water". If she fulfills her intention to

have children and raise "foxes and strawberries", or, rather, if she attempts to fulfill this intention, she will be either reconciled to the natural cycle, shaped "by water" as every living thing is, or else destroyed by it, drowned by "being / in" the element of dissolution and death. The persona does not make any choice in this poem except to delay choosing. Water, because it contains only potentialities, remains pure in the sense that it is still free from the presence of burgeoning life, which, as the opening images suggest, the persona finds so oppressive. It is the sense of potential, of neither fulfillment nor destruction, which the persona wishes to retain: "It is the blue / cup, I fill it". This simple action is both a delaying tactic, to postpone her descent into water, or into the regenerative cycle, and also an attempt to contain and, therefore, to limit the primordial power of the "element that shaped / me, that I shape by / being in". The image serves the purpose of a temporary stay against the chaotic and insistent final images of the poem. Of all things, the persona wants most to retain control. Even in her plan to have children, there is this suggestion of control, of order. In the final images of "This year I intended children", the persona is neither reconciled to the natural cycle, nor destroyed by it:

it is the pond again  
where the children, looking from  
the side of the boat, see their mother



upside down, lifesize, hair streaming  
 over the slashed throat  
 and words fertilize each other  
 in the cold and with bulging eyes[.]

This glimpse into the future, when her intended children have already been born, is called into being by the associative power of the "blue / cup". The similar grammatical structure of the two images ("It is the blue / cup"; "it is the pond again") suggests that one leads directly into the other by the process of association, as if the persona, looking into the "blue / cup", suddenly sees "water" as it will determine her future. Her future children she sees as not having been instrumental in achieving a reconciliation with the natural cycle. Neither, however, will she be destroyed by procreation. She does not experience a dissolution of her separate self by an immersion in the life-giving and life-destroying element; rather, her separateness is strengthened, and her power to speak her separateness ("words fertilize each other") is also strengthened. Her willed intention to achieve reconciliation does not succeed, but it does result in a refusal to be destroyed, a refusal to yield, which expresses, more than either poem examined so far, the persona's belief in her inevitable isolation from the natural world, and her difference from other people.

The "children" which the persona sees in her future float safely above their potential births or deaths. Children are not the only result of an immersion in the life force, however; the persona's glimpse of her continuing isolation is accompanied by a new self-knowledge, a knowledge of another direction for her own energies. The final lines of the poem are an image of the vision this kind of self-knowledge confers: "and words fertilize each other / in the cold and with bulging eyes". There is the sense that the speaker sinks below the life-generating upper layers of warm water into a colder, darker region, where the energy which might have joined her, through "children", "foxes" or "strawberries", to the dynamic natural cycle, is transformed instead into a purely intellectual energy which grows out of the newly-gained vision. The result could be art.

The poem can be seen as a series of interrelated images which establish the speaker's sense of isolation from the natural cycle, and, therefore, from a part of her own nature. The poem is different from "This is a Photograph of Me" or "A Dialogue", in that isolation, if not seen as desirable, is at least seen as an inevitable and even necessary condition of the persona's life. It is her awareness of the fact that she is unreconciled to the natural cycle which the persona uses positively to "shape" the element she is in, to establish an order in which

"children" (and the whole cycle of growth and regeneration) are secondary to another energy or force. The persona can also be seen, therefore, as a figure of the poet, with the power to transmute experience into art. The final image is of both isolation and creativity. It grows out of the tensions and undercurrents of the poem, and has the effect of a revelation.

In these three poems we have seen varying degrees of isolation and recognition of isolation. In "This is a Photograph of Me" the persona's total recognition of her isolation is expressed through an identifying of herself with the natural inaccessibility of the photograph's two-dimensional landscape. In "A Dialogue", the persona does not recognize that isolation is the problem, but the effects of her failure to communicate with others and to escape the pull of her dream of the past manifest themselves anyway, in the image of "grey geometrical flowers". In "This year I intended children", the persona's isolation is suggested by the imagery from the very beginning. In this poem, the persona recognizes her isolation from nature's procreant energy, and, in fact, sees that the potential for this energy within herself can open an access to another kind of creative force, the colder power of art. The last poem is the most positive of the three in the sense that it demonstrates how a special vision can be born of an awareness of one's isolation.

The next poem, "My face, my other faces" (YAH, 56), differs from the first three poems examined in this chapter. It is not tentative; it does not slowly explore the condition of the persona's isolation but illustrates instead the detached vision she has gained by recognizing and accepting the existence of this condition. In "My face, my other faces", the persona presents herself as the appearance or mask which another would perceive in looking at her:

My face, my other faces  
 stretching over it like  
 rubber, like flowers opening  
 and closing, like rubber,  
 like liquid steel,  
 like steel. Face of steel.

What the persona presents to the world is not the unchanging reality of her being, but an appearance, the "other faces" which hide what she is or conceives herself to be, and which are formed by the viewer's subjective interpretation of what he perceives. What the viewer "sees" is a mask ("like rubber") which hides the speaker's essential reality. At first, seeing beyond appearance exists as a possibility in the image of "flowers opening / and closing", but the kind of self-oblivious concentration required in observing something as delicate and tentative as a "flower opening" makes it a rather remote and fleeting possibility. Before it can be accomplished, the mask returns and obscures. The

remaining images suggest that moments of possible true perception occur less frequently as the viewer's familiarity with the false mask-face gradually establishes it as the only face he can see: "like rubber, / like liquid steel, / like steel. Face of steel". The persona realizes that when this happens she has disappeared. What the viewer sees is not the persona, but his idea of her, the description of her outward appearance which conditioning and familiarity have established as her only reality. This description is subjective, a mirror of himself: "Look at me and see your reflection".

In "My face, my other faces", the persona is aware of her complete isolation from another human being. In the last line, she states very explicitly that the prime cause of this isolation is the failure of perception to pierce the mask of outward appearance. The poem is more negative than "This is a Photograph of Me"; in that poem, the persona suggests that another person may at least be able to perceive that she is isolated even if he cannot see her true nature as an individual ("if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me"). He will see, at least, an abstract figure of isolation. In "My face, my other faces", on the other hand, the "[f]ace of steel" is an image not only of the reflected subjectivity of the viewer, but of the expressionless mask which the persona presents to be seen. It is as if the persona,

realizing the subjective nature of perception, and the way in which a person may fail to perceive the inner nature of another, actively seeks to increase (or strengthen) her feeling of isolation by giving nothing away, whether through word or gesture or smile. She suppresses anything which might reveal her individual nature, her personality, by presenting to the world and to the viewer a rigidly expressionless façade. Therefore, although on the surface the poem places the responsibility for the persona's isolation on the viewer and his failure to "see" her, the imagery implicates the persona herself. If she can understand the cause of the situation, she should also be able to do something about it. She does less than nothing; she perpetuates the situation.

The "you" figure to whom the last line of "My face, my other faces" is addressed appears throughout Atwood's poetry. He is constantly seen by the persona as falsely interpreting her; he is constantly being interpreted by her. How she sees him, and how she assumes he sees her, provide a continuous ironic comment on the nature of perception and communication, its subjectivity, its failures, its lapses, and on the sense that (often) nothing can be shared.

The artificiality which this non-communication introduces into an intimate relationship between two people will be examined in the next poem, "The Circle Game" (CG, 35-44).

The first section of "The Circle Game" is almost a complete poem in itself. Within it, the moving circle which the children form creates a self-contained, self-generating world of ritual significance which is oddly out of reach of the persona and her companion. It is something the persona can observe, can even describe accurately, but which she cannot decipher. At first what the speaker observes and describes appears to be a simple children's game, similar to Ring around the Roses:

The children on the lawn  
 joined hand to hand  
 go round and round  
  
 each arm going into  
 the next arm, around  
 full circle  
 until it comes  
 back into each of the single  
 bodies again[.]

For children, dancing in a circle and singing seemingly meaningless rhymes is perfectly natural behaviour. The songs they sing usually mean something, but repetition and the tendency of children to chant and to retain the rhythm at the expense of the meaning, often distorting individual words to the extent that they are unintelligible, create the effect of ritual. Observed from a distance, an ordinary game can take on the suggestion for an adult of an arcane and significant rite. The manner in which the persona describes the "Circle" game suggests that, in this case, this is so. The details she observes hint at a

veiled significance. The repetition of similarly constructed phrases, "hand to hand", "round and round", approximates the circular movement of the game; the emphasis on the circle as a whole, as something complete in itself even though composed of "single / bodies", invests it with the circle's traditional symbolic meaning of multiplicity returning to unity.

The total concentration of the children in the process in which they are involved reinforces the sense of the circle as something complete in itself:

They are singing, but  
not to each other:  
their feet move  
almost in time to the singing

We can see  
the concentration on  
their faces, their eyes  
fixed on the empty  
moving spaces just in  
front of them.

For the persona, the circular movement seems to suggest a total self-obliviousness, a suspension of identity directed to the fulfillment of the ritual itself. With each added detail, the sense of the revolving circle as a game is diminished, to be replaced by the predominant sense of the persona's exclusion from a ritual. The children's concentration and abstraction ("their eyes / fixed on the empty / moving spaces just in / front of them") in effect excludes the observer; it also transforms the children into



dancers, participants in the continuous ritual of the dance itself.

I think it is the persona's dissatisfaction with what she observes, with the children's unselfconscious total involvement, and the sense of selfperpetuating motion and wholeness which the circle suggests, which make her look for some reason for the dance. It is as if, because the significance of the circular dance eludes her, the persona must prove to herself that it is pointless anyway. Thus she concludes first of all that the children aren't doing it because it is fun: "We might mistake this / tranced moving for joy / but there is no joy in it".

In the final lines of the section, the persona and her companion stand "arm in arm", in effect forming their own circle, observing the puzzling intentness of the children as the circle continues to revolve. Now the children are oblivious not only of themselves but of their surroundings as well: "(the grass / underfoot ignored, the trees / circling the lawn / ignored, the lake ignored)". The speaker cannot make any sense of it, and she concludes:

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

For the persona, this is negative, a pointless activity. What she fails to realize, perhaps because she senses that the circle she and her companion form is pointless, is that the whole point of the moving circle is the inclusive-exclusive ritual of circular motion itself. Because it is inaccessible to her, its self-generating fulfillment of itself is meaningless. For the children, its being is its meaning. The "ignored" landscape is not really ignored, but included in the cyclical, self-renewing symbol of the circle.

What the section suggests is the identification which children fortuitously make, and sometimes express intuitively through symbolic games, between themselves and the cyclical nature of the seasons, the land, or life itself. It is the persona who, through her description, invests the circle with meaning; for the children, it remains a game. The persona senses the power of the circle as a symbol; it is also she who tries to negate it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In another poem, "Dancing Practice" (PFU, 77-79), the persona sees the moving circle as a symbol of the cycles of time and change and also of permanence, of multiplicity returning to unity. It is similar to this first section of "The Circle Game" and yet, because the persona does not feel excluded from the ritual, it is also different, more expansive and definitely positive in tone. The concluding part of "Dancing Practice" illustrates that the circular dance has the same lasting symbolic significance for the persona in both poems, the difference being her feeling of

The sense of the children's ritual inclusion in the natural cycle ("each / one of them the whole / rhythm" [PFU, 77-79]) is denied the speaker in "The Circle Game". Her "circle" is the physical linking of arms, nothing more. The meaninglessness of the circle formed by the persona and her companion is the link between sections i and ii of the poem. Section ii explores the pointlessness of their being together at all, and contrasts with the organic harmony of the circle formed by the children.

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isolation from the circle in "The Circle Game", in contrast to her feeling that the circle is all-inclusive in "Dancing Practice":

But the dance itself, the way  
it should have been, goes  
on in a different  
time (because  
    I say it)

where precise as  
crystals the new feet  
of the dancers move  
across a green lawn at evening

the music now  
sounding from everywhere

or is it a beach, the sun rising

Their faces turning, their changed hands  
meeting and letting go, the circle  
forming, breaking, each  
one of them the whole  
rhythm (snow on the tree  
branches)

    transformed  
    for this moment / always

(because I say)

the sea the shore[.]

The opening image of the second section contrasts with the precise pattern of the circle in section i:

Being with you  
here, in this room

is like groping through a mirror  
whose glass has melted  
to the consistency  
of gelatin[.]

The mirror reflects whatever passes in front of it, and, therefore, as a symbol cannot suggest unchanging reality. It is a symbol of limited reality, both temporally (what is reflected now) and, because it reflects only one limited area, also spatially. The mirror cannot even be said to suggest objective (if limited) reality; as the reflecting "[f]ace of steel" in "My face, my other faces" suggests, the mirror reproduces the subjective distortions of perception.

In these opening lines of section ii, the mirror is not actual, but a simile which the persona uses to suggest her attempts to overcome the distortions inherent in perceiving. Even the distortions are not clear, definable, because the "mirror" has become like opaque jelly, and perceiving has been reduced to blind groping. Her companion is formless to her, defined only by the context in which he appears, the limits of the walls of the room.

The following lines recall the last line of "My face, my other faces" ("Look at me and see your reflection"):

You refuse to be  
(and I)  
an exact reflection, yet  
will not walk from the glass,  
be separate.

The persona seems to be suggesting that her companion will not let her see him as she wants to, subjectively, seeing in him what she is conditioned to expect (in the same way that she said the viewer would see her in "My face, my other faces"). In the statement of his refusal to "walk from the glass, / be separate", however, the persona implies that neither will he let her see him as he truly is. He isolates himself from her. The parenthetical phrase indicates that the persona behaves in the same way. This is different from "My face, my other faces". In that poem, the persona hid behind her isolation mask (her "[f]ace of steel"); now she will not allow her companion even the illusion ("an exact reflection") of her familiarity.

There is also the suggestion in the lines that the sense of self-identity of either the persona or her companion is so meagre, so incomplete, that both of them need the prop of mirror-image (even though a formless or indefinable image) to achieve any sense of fullness of being. This is in direct contrast to the sense of fullness or inclusiveness in section i, where the children, though

self-oblivious, retained their separate identities ("single / bodies") within the larger pattern of the whole circle.

Here, within the image of the mirror, the persona realizes that there is not enough of either of them to exist independently, to "walk from the glass, / be separate". For this reason, she begins her description of the actual room with

Anyway, it is right  
that they have put  
so many mirrors here  
(chipped, hung crooked)[.]

In the "many mirrors" one assumes they at least can see themselves and each other from several angles at once, which might give the illusion of wholeness, of a fuller existence. At the same time, the presence of "many mirrors" must necessarily fragment their views of each other and, by doing so, suggests, not the formlessness of being implicit in the image of groping blindly through an opaque jelly-like substance, but a kind of inner fragmentation of being, as if each has been split into many pieces which will not fit back together.

The impermanence and fragmentation of mirror-images is paralleled by the transitory nature of the interim in the room. The "wardrobe" is "empty"; persona and companion do not live permanently in the room, then.

It is a temporary refuge, a place of limited privacy. Other people are there, temporarily, in other, similar rooms: "There are people in the next room / arguing, opening and closing drawers / (the walls are thin)". This increases the sense of the lack of unity, of any unchanging center, and further contrasts the room's arbitrary boundaries with the dynamic circumference of the circle in section i.

No meaning, no reason for being there, informs the presence of the couple in the room. Because of this, a feeling of waiting for something to happen which will give focus to their presence there pervades the last part of the second section. The speaker's companion is abstracted, though not with the abstraction of total concentration of the children in section i; rather, as though he is waiting for something to reveal itself, some meaning intrinsic to their being there:

You look past me, listening  
to them, perhaps, or  
watching  
your own reflection somewhere  
behind my head,  
over my shoulder[.]

Nothing happens. The last lines with their wider spacing and the use of parentheses establish the mood of interminable waiting and of the tension created by small distractions:

There is someone in the next room  
There is always

(your face  
remote, listening)

someone in the next room.

What is created in the second section is the existential nature of the room and of the random and meaningless occurrence within it of the persona and her companion. The inability to discover any meaning in their being in the room, or in their being together, is a symptom of the persona's isolation from her companion. The image of the mirror suggests her isolation; the tone, of waiting without knowing why, or what they are waiting for, confirms it.

Section iii begins as if section ii did not exist; its beginning, with the word "[h]owever", carries on from the end of section i. This has the effect of making the second section seem to float free, in a kind of vacuum which is like the vacuum revealed within it. The design which sectioning in this way creates is not fully apparent yet. What we see by this third section, however, is that the alternating sections not only introduce tensions and contrasts but also approximate the introspection of the persona as she thinks first of the external world of the children, then of the inner fragmentation of her own world, and then returns again (in thought or memory) to the children's world, seeking in the child's ability to reconcile his imaginative being with external reality some explanation



of what is lacking in her own experience. Therefore, although the speaker has dismissed the circle game as pointless, she cannot let it go at that:

in all their games  
there seems  
to be some reason

however  
abstract they  
at first appear[.]

This is a reference to the circle game which to the persona seemed abstruse partly because of the children's abstracted manner of performing it. In this section, the persona makes the same initial mistake of assuming that a preoccupied manner signifies indifference or inattention to what is happening:

When we read them legends  
in the evening  
of monstrous battles, and secret  
betrayals in the forest  
and brutal deaths,

they scarcely listened;  
one yawned and fidgeted; another  
chewed the wooden handle  
of a hammer;  
the youngest one examined  
a slight cut on his toe,

and we wondered how  
they could remain  
completely without fear  
or even interest  
as the final sword slid through  
the dying hero.

The way in which the persona responds and her evaluation of the way in which the children respond illustrate a basic difference between them. The persona's response is intellectual. It is evident from her manner of description that she conceptualizes the experience of the story. For the children, however, the story possesses a reality to which they respond instinctually or fundamentally, rather than intellectually or conceptually. They don't exhibit momentary "fear / or even interest" and then dismiss the story as the persona does, but instead they incorporate it into their world, where reality does not exclude the imaginative realm, where ritual (the moving circle) and symbol are real. Thus, "[t]he next night", when the persona has forgotten the incident of the story, she finds

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[.]

For a moment the persona understands that the children absorb the story, that they see the danger as real: "a last attempt / ... to make / maybe, a refuge human / and secure". However, the compulsion to conceptualize everything, the danger, for example, as "whatever walks along / (sword hearted) / these night beaches", does nothing but

detract from the reader's immediate understanding of what the children had been doing. It only widens the gulf between the child's mentality and that of the persona. At the end of this section, the persona seems to understand the children's actions, but it doesn't make their world any more accessible to her. Isolation takes the form of an inability to make the kind of total imaginative response to the world that the children make. The imaginative realm and the real world remain separate within the persona. The story belongs to the former; reality, however, is in the fact that the "lake-enclosed island" will be "eroded by the water / in an hour".

Section iv returns to the present tense and the continuing stasis of the room. The opening line, "[r]eturning to the room", establishes at least a surface continuity with the events of section iii, but the real connection is to section ii. The difficulty of perceiving her companion, which, as the symbol of the mirror suggests, may be partly due to the persona's inability to separate him from his several appearances, seems in the interval of time which has elapsed to have been partly overcome, so that the persona now sees him more clearly:

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[.]

What she sees is that her companion is not willing to admit her reality. We discover in this section that the man does talk, after all, and that he is aware of the persona to the extent that they do touch. Although the mirror is not explicitly mentioned in the lines that follow, it continues to function in the sense that the barrier of subjective perception still stands between the persona and her companion. The male figure continues to see the persona in terms of himself, and not as a separate unique individual:

I watch you  
watching my face  
indifferently  
yet with the same taut curiosity  
with which you might regard  
a suddenly discovered part  
of your own body:  
a wart perhaps[.]

From the formlessness of section ii, the persona has, in this fourth section, brought her companion into focus. The difficulty of first-person narration is that there is no means of establishing a perspective on what the persona says. In these lines, the persona says that her companion watches her with a mixture of indifference and curiosity, and, in the image of the "suddenly discovered" "wart", also aversion or distaste. She says that he sees

her, in effect, as an extension of himself ("Your own body"). There is, however, no reason to think that the male figure's perception of the persona is any more subjective than her perception of him. The lines create the sense of an exchange of blank looks which communicate nothing, and also of an underlying antagonism, as if each is waiting for the other to make a wrong (or revealing) move. They convey a sense of the isolation of one from the other, which neither is willing to try to lessen.

The story of the map which follows allows the reader to discover a few objective truths about the male figure which make the persona's estimate of him seem more reliable. The persona relates his preference for schematic representations of reality ("maps") rather than reality itself. The activity of tracing maps is not creative or indicative of a desire to broaden his conception of the world: "(not making but) moving / a pen or a forefinger / over the courses of the rivers, / the different colours / that mark the rise of mountains". Rather, it is an attempt to reduce reality to a diagram, to a size which can be handled, which can be dismissed, finally, without being confronted: "a memorizer / of names (to hold / these places / in their proper places)". The parentheses seem to indicate the connections which the persona supplies in the story her companion has told her; in

effect, she is reading between the lines.

The last lines of the section continue the analogy of her companion as a tracer of maps:

So now you trace me  
like a country's boundary  
or a strange new wrinkle in  
your own wellknown skin

and I am fixed, stuck  
down on the outspread map  
of this room, of your mind's continent[.]

Again, the persona is interpreting. She sees her companion's behaviour as an attempt to define and contain the reality of her separate being by becoming familiar with her physical self only, her body or appearance which forms the "boundary" of her inner being. As the image changes slightly, the persona sees her companion as again perceiving her subjectively, seeing her as an extension of himself ("your own wellknown skin"). The persona feels that she is being intentionally reduced to her companion's distorted idea of her ("stuck / down on the outspread map / of this room, of your mind's continent"), that the reality of her existence is confined to the way he sees her: "transfixed / by your eyes' / cold blue thumbtacks". This line denies the possibility of personal intercommunication. The persona feels that the male figure will not recognize her as a human being, and therefore will not have to deal with her as such. This way of perceiving she sees is a

refusal to admit her existence and a substitution of the mirror-image through which her companion sees everything in terms of himself.

The parenthetical section establishes the sense of the non-reality of the room, herself, everything which composes the shared world of the persona and her companion. Through the male figure's refusal to admit her reality, the persona feels that she is "here and yet not here, like / the wardrobe and the mirrors".

The clarification of the persona's perception from section ii does not, in this section, make communication any more possible. It reveals only the persona's complete isolation from her companion. Even if she is interpreting him incorrectly, even if he is not refusing to admit "[she] is here", communication still remains impossible. The fact that the persona believes he is attempting to deny her individuality is as effective a means of perpetuating the isolation as any other.

Section v is a return to the outside and the realm of the children. Again it contrasts the child's sensibility with the adult's, and again this contrast is implied through the persona's observations of the children and her manner of describing. At the beginning she merely states without comment:

The children like the block  
of grey stone that was once a fort  
but now is a museum:

especially  
they like the guns  
and the armour brought from  
other times and countries[.]

The children see with the imagination:

and when they go home  
their drawings will be full  
for some days, of swords  
archaic sunburst maces  
broken spears  
and vivid red explosions.

The speaker, on the other hand, sees things simply as they  
are:

we walk outside along  
the earthworks, noting  
how they are crumbling  
under the unceasing  
attacks of feet and flower roots[.]

She sees more than the children, but also less; that is,  
she knows (intellectually) how they see and what they will  
do, but she does not see things in their way. In her  
description of the children's drawings, the persona captures  
(perhaps unknowingly) their instinctive sensing of the  
continuity of time, of the dynamic, still vital nature of  
the past. She herself and her companion (present as the  
other half of the "we") see in the cycle of time only the  
negative aspects of dissolution and decay. Therefore the



weapons and the fort which inspire such an immediate response in the children are seen by the persona only in terms of their obsolescence:

The weapons  
that were once outside  
sharpening themselves on war  
are now indoors  
there, in the fortress,  
fragile  
in glass cases[.]

The persona sees the weapons as out of context, diminished somehow ("fragile") by being preserved when they are no longer useful.

The image of the "glass cases" leads directly into the meditative last part of the section:

Why is it  
(I'm thinking  
of the careful moulding  
round the stonework archways)  
that in this time, such  
elaborate defenses keep  
things that are no longer  
(much)  
worth defending[.]

The point of view these lines reveal is utilitarian, and contrasts with the child's sensibility which does not demand a reason for the existence of things (as in section i, where the reason for the circle game is simply the moving circle itself). The parenthetical section provides the immediate surface reason for the persona's question but, because of

the general wording of the rest of these lines, and because the question is rhetorical, there is the suggestion that she may also be thinking of the "elaborate defenses" she and her companion have erected to preserve the outward semblance of normality in their hollow relationship.

The fact that it is a diseased relationship, with all naturalness and vitality gone out of it, may also be one reason for the persona's noticing primarily the signs of crumbling decay in the landscape surrounding the fort. At any rate, the images of decay and of defenses that preserve nothing useful, as well as the irreconcilable distance between the couple and the children, provide the base for the final examination of the relationship which occurs in the sixth and seventh sections of the poem.

Section vi, like the other even-numbered sections, creates the artificial world which exists within the room and which, as we have seen, exerts an influence over the speaker's response to the outside world, the whole natural domain which the child appropriates as his own. The room is not mentioned in section vi, but as a symbol of constricted existence it continues to influence the speaker.

The section opens with the persona commenting on the game her companion is playing: "[a]nd you play the safe game / the orphan game / / the ragged winter game / that says, I am alone". The use of the adjectives

"orphan" and "ragged winter" indicates that it is essentially a static game, one which consists mainly of striking a pose; as the description continues, we see this even more plainly:

the game of the waif who stands  
at every picture window,

shivering, pinched nose pressed  
against the glass, the snow  
collecting on his neck,  
watching the happy families[.]

Although she knows it is a false pose, the creation of an artificial pathos which she recognizes is really "a game of envy", the persona nevertheless is a willing accessory; she supplies another detail to the pose: "(hungry: I know you want me / to play it also)". The "game" has echoes of the Little Match Girl story, except that the speaker's companion suffers no real loneliness or hunger. He is not really ragged or cold or an orphan. In this sense of non-involvement, of the game as a posture demanding pity and giving nothing, lies the meaning of the reference to the game as "safe". The use of this word "safe" sticks out for another reason. It and the various parts of the section that are in parentheses indicate a perceptiveness of her companion on the part of the persona which goes behind his posturing. If indeed the male figure is a self-centred manipulator, a wearer of masks and a role-player, and the persona is aware of this,

this in turn raises a fundamental question about the consistency of "The Circle Game" as a whole. Why does the persona allow herself to be manipulated, ignored, stripped of her native dignity as a human being? Why does she blame her companion for the isolation which she allows to continue? The answers to these questions are not even implied in the poem. There is, however, the suggestion, in this poem as in "My face, my other faces", that the persona, for whatever reason, finds a perverse pleasure in her isolation. In this section of "The Circle Game", she uses her isolation, or the power of vision which it conveys, to expose her companion's behaviour (if only to herself) for what it is: immature, self-indulgent, and self-centred. Isolation makes the persona feel superior, but she hides this feeling of superiority behind a mask of humility and resignation.

In the remainder of section vi, the persona continues to describe her companion's "game of envy". So far, the game has served primarily as an illustration of the male figure's facility at playing a part. However, it also contrasts with the sense of active participation and involvement which we saw in the circle game (section i), and with the children's dynamic response to the story's imaginative realm (section iii) and to the artifacts of the past (section v). The remainder of section vi further contrasts with the games the children play. The male figure's

game is not played in the spirit of fun, but of misanthropic spleen ("[y]et he despises them: they are so / victorian Christmas-card") and unpleasant arrogance ("[h]e's glad / to be left / out by himself / in the cold"). The reason for the male figure's feeling of smug superiority is his belief in the artificiality of the domestic scene in front of which he poses:

the cheap paper shows  
 under the pigments of  
 their cheerful fire -  
 places and satin -  
 ribboned suburban laughter  
 and they have their own forms  
 of parlour  
 games: father and mother  
 playing father and mother[.]

Under the selective eye of the persona, her companion's true nature becomes apparent. Her implied judgments of him are believable because they develop from the objective description of his performance of the pantomime. Thus we can accept that the male figure pretends to be cold and poor and lonely while in reality he is envious and sneeringly aloof. He becomes real through the distancing and revealing context of the game. In a sense, however, the persona becomes so involved in exposing her companion that she also reveals something of her own nature. For one thing, she is not blindly groping for some indication of what her companion is really like; she knows, or believes she knows, what he is really like.

When she tells him this, however, he says "(with a smile fake / as a tinsel icicle): / / [y]ou do it too". The persona's response to this comment is not very enlightening. It is as if, realizing that she has inadvertently given too much away about her own nature through her scathing comments, she must make some kind of retreat, which she does. She retreats into deliberate ambiguity:

Which in some ways  
is a lie, but also I suppose  
is right, as usual:

although I tend to pose  
in other seasons  
outside other windows.

The male figure accuses the persona of also being a posturer, a wearer of masks, a fact which suggests he is not quite as unperceptive as the persona has been implying. He is right too; the persona does wear a mask, one of false humility and resignation ("[w]hich ... / is right, as usual"). In the last three lines the persona uses a metaphor from her companion's "game" to suggest, not her similarity to him, but her difference. The persona places herself on a different plane, a different level of awareness, from her companion, and in her tone, and the ambiguity of the metaphor, there is the sense that her very separateness or isolation imparts a kind of superiority.

There are, as I have mentioned, certain inconsistencies in the persona's self-characterization in the even-numbered sections of "The Circle Game". In the odd-numbered sections, the persona's feeling of isolation is revealed (through the images with which she creates the outside world of the children) without her consciously knowing it. In section i, the unconscious feeling of exclusion from the circular dance is communicated by the imagery. In section iii, the persona's exclusion from the realm of imagination is communicated by the implied difference between her way of perceiving and the child's way of perceiving. Similarly, her inability to see any continuity between past and present, and, therefore, the sense of being adrift which experience in the present creates for her, is indicated in section v by the contrast between her response to the fort and the children's response. In each case, the persona does not state that she feels a sense of isolation, but the sense of her isolation is communicated just the same. In the even-numbered sections, on the other hand, the persona directly (although metaphorically) states that she is isolated. She admits this at the beginning of section ii, in the use of the metaphor of the mirror. In section iv, the persona states her helplessness to alter her situation. She blames her companion for the fact that her real nature is not

apparent to him. In section vi, the persona again is fully aware of her isolation; it has become, in fact, her strength. The inconsistencies arise in the contrast between conscious awareness of isolation, and, in fact, of a great deal more than isolation, in the even-numbered sections, and, in the odd-numbered sections, a hesitancy and tentativeness in making firm conclusions which suggest unawareness. These inconsistencies are partly resolved in the climactic final section of the poem.

Section vii brings the separate threads of the narrative together within the room, where their final significance for the persona is revealed. "Summer again", the speaker begins, but there is no sense of the passing of seasons in the poem, only the sense of an interminable length of time spent waiting for the mirrors to reveal some truth. Now, in section vii, the "mirrors of this room", as a symbol of the essentially passive distortion of reality, recede, and the sense of the persona's companion as an active manipulator of the world within the room increases.

The scene which he creates and controls appears first within the mirrors, and is thus identifiable as a kind of non-reality: "in the mirrors of this room / the children wheel, singing / the same song". In the next lines, however, it moves out of the mirror and into the



room, so that now the room itself becomes the limited world of the mirrors made actual. Outside, by being brought inside, and represented by man-made objects, is divested of its relation to the seasons and the whole of the natural world:

This casual bed  
scruffy as dry turf,  
the counterpane  
rumpled with small burrows, is  
their grassy lawn

and these scuffed walls  
contain their circling trees,  
that low clogged sink  
their lake[.]

The children's moving circle is likewise divested of its vitality and its symbolic relation to the natural cycle. It becomes, under the clever manipulation of the persona's companion, a non-dynamic posture, an artificial tableau of simulated realism, like the "ragged winter game" of section vi:

(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)[.]

In this parenthetical section, we see the care with which the male figure maintains his carefully constructed world. In the second parenthetical section, within the first, we

see that the persona is aware, as she is in section vi, of what he is doing. Once again he is seen as ordering reality in order to contain it and limit its power:

You make them  
turn and turn, according to  
the closed rules of your games,  
but there is no joy in it[.]

The last line is a deliberate echo of the observation made about the children's circle in section i, and we remember how the speaker's exclusion from the circle makes her invest it with a negative significance which it does not deserve. Now her observation has more truth. In the context of the "closed rules" of her companions "games", the circle does ironically become a symbol of limitation, of constricted (and therefore joyless) existence.

The following lines continue the analogy between the children's circle and the "circle" of the couple's relationship; they have the effect of reducing the circular dance to the meaningless pattern exhibited by the relationship: "we lie / arm in arm, neither / joined nor separate ... / our lips moving / almost in time to their singing". The image echo suggests that, even in section i, the persona is unconsciously seeing the circle in terms of the pattern of the relationship.

The other deliberate image echoes, which make up the remainder of the poem, also suggest that all along the

persona has been interpreting the world according to her perception of herself and her situation. The following parenthetical section is a complicated reference to, or echo of, at least two earlier parts of the poem: "(your observations change me / to a spineless woman in / a cage of bones, obsolete fort / pulled inside out)".

"[Y]our observations" is a probable reference to the male figure's statement in section vi that the speaker has her own pose or façade (defense) to present to the world ("[y]ou do it too") in order to keep reality at a safe distance. This is the only explicit observation made by the male figure in the poem. "[S]pineless woman" suggests the resignation with which the persona accepts his observations about her, not bothering to correct the parts that are not quite true. "[O]bsolete fort / pulled inside out" is a reference to the constructing of defences for things "no longer / ... worth defending", in section v. If any single effect is created by the lines, it is the sense of the persona's inability to change what she recognizes is not worth preserving. In fact, the lines provide a possible key to the persona's inconsistencies. She is capable of acid comment on her companion's behaviour, but somehow her comments have none of the effect upon him which his glance or gesture or comment has upon her. In spite of her isolation, which the persona recognizes, there

is an implied feeling that each somehow needs the other. Both section ii and section vii refer to the interdependence of the two, the fact that they are "neither / joined nor separate". Although the relationship does not seem to be based on mutual love, there is the sense that each contributes something necessary to the existence of the other, perhaps the definition which the roles they play give to their lives, perhaps the reflected image of the self which each perceives in looking at the other. The outward structure of the relationship defines the persona's isolation, but it also provides a sense of order in her life (even though it is a meaningless order) which she has come to depend on. The self is, therefore, propped up by an external supporting structure ("a cage of bones"), rather than by an inherent ability or strength to "be separate" (section ii).

The persona knows that to continue unresistingly in the enforced pattern of the relationship is self-destructive, but she does not seem able to externalize the threat to herself, and so deal with it: "(of course there is always / danger but where / would you locate it)". The "danger" is within herself, in the things she does which perpetuate her isolation. That the cage which restrains her is intangible is suggested in the following lines in which the circle becomes a "round cage of glass"

spun "from the warm air":

the children spin  
a round cage of glass  
from the warm air  
with their thread-thin  
insect voices[.]

In the lines immediately preceding the final climactic passage, the persona at last admits her part in the defenses which have isolated her from her companion:

and ... we lie  
here, caught  
in the monotony of wandering  
from room to room, shifting  
the place of our defences[.]

In the use of the pronoun "we", the persona implicates herself as well as her companion. The façades, the posturings, the games ("our defences") with which they stave off reality and, therefore, the necessity of participating in the real world, she finally sees as a trap in which they are "caught". From this point, the poem builds to its climactic finish. Rhetorical and urgent, its rhythms approximate what happens within the lines. In the swift chronicling of actions, in the use of harsh verbs, "break", "erase", "crack", there is a kind of desperation:

I want to break  
these bones, your prisoning rhythms  
    (winter,  
    summer)  
all the glass cases,

erase all maps,  
 crack the protecting  
 eggshell of your turning  
 singing children[.]

It is clear from these lines that the persona really does want to "walk from the glass, / be separate" (Section ii). The last image sums up all the things she would now make happen. The circle has become a symbol only of limitation and isolation, and the final statement is, therefore, an expression of the desire for positive action: " I want the circle / broken".

In the use of the adjective "your" ("your prisoning rhythms", "your turning / singing children"), however, there is still the suggestion that the persona places most of the blame for their diseased relationship on her companion, even though we have seen that she herself, by passively allowing the situation, is equally responsible. I think this at least partly negates the value of the final statement. One wonders if the persona will in fact "break" the circle, or break out of the circle, or if she will continue, in spite of moments of half-observed self-recognition, to present herself as acted upon, a martyred but aloof figure of isolation.

"The Circle Game" is a complex poem, made more difficult by the subjectivity introduced through the use of a first-person narrator, as well as by the ambiguous

relationship between images and between sections which the reader assumes he is supposed to connect, by virtue of the fact that all of the central images are drawn together in the last section. The poem is, in this sense of repeated images and repeated variations of design, very tightly structured, and yet there is no sense of any final resolution at the end of the poem. The progression or development of awareness from the beginning of the poem is not in the awareness of isolation; the persona knows she is isolated in section ii. It takes places, rather, in the persona's awareness of her own responsibility for this condition. Knowledge of her responsibility should allow the persona to take a decisive step, to break the circle. It does not. She "wants" things changed, but there is no reason to believe she will try to make this change occur.

No matter how aware the persona becomes of her own responsibility for her feeling of isolation, her awareness will serve only to create an ironic contrast between the way things should be and the way they really are, until she also becomes aware of herself as a person capable of positive action, of breaking the circle. In none of the poems examined so far has the persona possessed this awareness. Until she does, she will remain isolated.

"Tricks with Mirrors" (YAH, 24-27) is similar to "The Circle Game", but much more limited in scope. It tries to include much less than "The Circle Game" and, for this reason, is perhaps technically more successful, although it lacks the earlier poem's suggestion of an enormous vitality which lies just beyond the persona's reach.

The circle and the mirror are the two central symbols of "The Circle Game". Both are symbols of a circumscribed existence. The circle, which is external to the persona, becomes an image of all the artificial boundaries which confine or isolate her from without. The mirror or mask, on the other hand, because it suggests static posturing and, therefore, self-distortion, as well as a fragmented version of reality, can never be externalized by the persona until she fully recognizes its existence, its power. It remains, therefore, even if the circle is "broken". In "Tricks with Mirrors", the persona acknowledges the existence of the mirror as a self-constructed façade through which her own reality is distorted. Because the poem does not postulate the existence of an external order which stifles or confines the persona's need to understand which we felt in the odd-numbered sections of "The Circle Game" (in which the persona



seeks in the children's world a glimpse of some truth which will explain her own experience). In "Tricks with Mirrors", the mirror alone is the isolating force.

At the end of the analysis of "The Circle Game", it was suggested that an awareness of the contrast between what is and what should be results in irony. "Tricks with Mirrors" begins in just such ironic self-knowledge. We shall see in this poem if the persona reaches an awareness as well of her ability to take action, to break the mirror, or if, rather, the creation of an ironic contrast is her only aim. The persona assumes responsibility for the mirror's existence in this poem, something she did not do in "My face, my other faces". Accepting the fact of the mirror's existence allows the persona a greater measure of detachment from the painful state of inner isolation. She is, therefore, able to examine the continuing relationship with irony and even a kind of humour.

Several levels of reality are simultaneously present in the poem. The title suggests that the function of the mirror as a tool for creating and sustaining illusion is the particular quality which will be emphasized. The persona becomes the master illusionist.

In the opening lines of "Tricks with Mirrors", we see that the transitory room of "The Circle Game", defined only in terms of the interim of time spent within

its walls by couples who come and go, has been transformed, but the change has not been in the direction of an increasing sense of permanence: "It's no coincidence / this is a used / furniture warehouse". This setting, which could be simply a place where pieces of used furniture are brought and later taken away again, can be seen equally easily as the set of a surrealist movie. The sense of a dual reality pervades the poem from the start. "It's no coincidence", the persona says, perhaps referring to the temporary nature of activities connected with a warehouse, thereby making it a suitable setting for the continuation of the relationship, perhaps referring to the dream-like quality of what is to follow, or perhaps simply to the fact that, in the room, she ceases to be an individual, becoming instead just one more piece of furniture: "I enter with you / and become a mirror".

Unlike the beginning of section ii of "The Circle Game", in which the simile of the mirror and its melted glass is used to convey the formlessness of her partner and herself, in "Tricks with Mirrors", the persona confronts her companion with the oblique metaphorical statement of a total metamorphosis. The mirror is no longer simply an obstruction which stands between them, obscuring their perception of each other; rather, the mirror supplants the persona completely. This technique, the use of a metaphor of total isolation, recalls the opening poem,

"This is a Photograph of Me", and the feeling of being stopped short by an impervious wall.<sup>2</sup> The technique implies no relation between the two levels of reality (metaphorical and actual) as the use of the simile does; the effect is of two realities which are concurrent but not touching. The distance between them is formal, defined. In "The Circle Game", there is a sense of immediacy, of urgency to break through the distortions and postures, particularly in the poem's final section (although, as has been pointed out, this sense of urgency is not entirely consistent with what the persona reveals about herself and her failure to realize that she is capable of action); in "Tricks with Mirrors", there is no sense of urgency. Formal separation of the two levels of reality, the world of the self and the world of appearances, lends detachment.

The illusionist's first "trick" with the mirror is, then, to confer upon herself the cloak of invisibility, and with it the gift of a superior, ironic knowledge by means of which she alone steps easily between the two worlds. She continues in the slightly condescending tone one uses toward a person whose understanding is crippled in some way, and who needs to have perfectly obvious things

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<sup>2</sup>This feeling is created in "This is a Photograph of Me" by the statement: "I am in the lake, in the center / of the picture, just under the surface".

pointed out to him:

Mirrors  
 are the perfect lovers,  
 that's it, carry me up the stairs  
 by the edges, don't drop me,  
 that would be bad luck,  
 throw me on the bed  
 reflecting side up[.]

In the continuing metaphor of the mirror / warehouse, the persona parodies the behaviour of the lover who carries his mistress up the stairs and over the threshold. The reader is aware of the speaker as one-half of a real couple, but also as the mirror ("don't drop me, / / that would be bad luck") which subsumes her identity. In the last lines of the section, the sexual act becomes the meeting of the man's body with an unyielding surface which gives him nothing except his own image:

it will be your own  
 mouth you hit, firm and glassy,  
 your own eyes you find you  
 are up against closed closed[.]

In these lines there are no "flowers opening / and closing" (YAH, 56). The persona is no longer concerned about her companion's "attempts to keep [her] / at a certain distance / and (at length) avoid / admitting [she] is here" (CG, 35-44). In "Tricks with Mirrors", the persona has removed herself

completely from involvement or concern. Instead of trying to break through her partner's subjective perception of her, she gives him back his idea of her. In the metaphor of the mirror, she gives him himself.

The tone of section ii suggests the illusionist's manner of pointing out the limitations of the object with which she is working, and the difficulties which must be overcome in order to sustain the illusion, in order to increase the observer's awe at the completeness, the masterful skill, with which the illusion is performed:

There is more to a mirror  
than you looking at

your full-length body  
flawless but reversed,

there is more than this dead blue  
oblong eye turned outwards to you.

What the persona seems to be doing in these lines is reminding her companion of the existence of the mirror as metaphor. Even as it gives him himself, it is more than a reflection, more than a "dead blue / oblong eye". This image suggests not only the mirror's static quality, but also the man's reflected blindness. The poem continues to function on two separate levels. The persona reminds the man that she gives him himself ("your full-length body / flawless but reversed"); she gives him his blindness to her existence (the reflected "dead blue / oblong eye");

and, thus, she effectively gives him her own non-being except in the metamorphosed form of the mirror (again, in the image of the "dead blue / oblong eye"). Paradoxically, the persona draws the male figure's attention to the existence of the mirror (herself) so that he will become aware of the non-existence of herself.

The persona forces her companion to focus on the physical actuality of the mirror, its "frame" analogous to her physical being, in order to show more effectively the mastery with which she has accomplished the disappearance of her inner self:

Think about the frame.  
The frame is curved, it is important,  
  
it exists, it does not reflect you,  
it does not recede and recede, it has limits  
  
and reflections of its own.

In order to both be there and not be there, the persona has subjugated the "limits / / and reflections" which the man provides for her to the total effort of giving him back his image of himself.

The remainder of the section, in which the mirror is given full actuality, complete with "nails" and "nail / marks in the wood", extends the sense of the persona's disappearance. If the persona's first illusion is to disappear into the mirror, the second is to show by

illustration, and with a kind of detached satisfaction,  
how difficult it is to do this.

Section iii reiterates these difficulties:

Don't assume it is passive  
or easy, this clarity  
  
with which I give you yourself.  
Consider what restraint it  
  
takes: breath withheld, no anger  
or joy disturbing the surface  
  
of the ice.

This is straightforward, but in the reference to "withheld breath" and the absence of "anger" or "joy", the persona momentarily drops the metaphor of the mirror and speaks in her own voice. It is not easy, she says, to be the mirror, to be there within his sight and yet withhold herself so completely that he sees only what he wants to see ("this clarity / / with which I give you yourself"). To do so, she must preserve a frozen exterior, a "surface of ice" similar to the "[f]ace of steel" in "My face, my other faces".

The mirror-as-ice is a negative symbol. Ice suggests the rigid dividing line between air as an image of ordinary reality and water as an image of the unconscious mind.<sup>3</sup> As such, it is an image of the

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<sup>3</sup>J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1962), pp. 345-47.

inaccessibility and isolation of the persona; she exists somewhere behind the ice. The exterior she presents is simply the manifestation of a function: "beautiful and frozen, I / preserve you, in me you are safe". Her companion's self-image, as it is projected by the persona's frozen surface, is ambiguous; he is "suspended" and "preserved" in the ice, words which suggest the state of suspended animation. He is "safe", therefore, in the sense that he is protected from being actively, vitally alive. The imagery of the section suggests that non-confrontation is, at least, safe, even if it does destroy the possibility of "joy" or "anger", even if the stasis which results is like continuously holding one's breath.

As the speaker says, this is no illusion: "[i]t is not a trick either, / it is a craft: / / mirrors are crafty". The art she performs is the art of evasion, the construction from the mirror of a barrier which effectively excludes the possibility of interaction. "[M]irrors are crafty", the persona says, replacing the craft of the detached performer of illusions with the cunning instinct for self-preservation of the being who hides behind the ice-mirror.

In section iv, the persona admits that she does not want to be the mirror: "I wanted to stop this, / this life flattened against the wall". The latter image suggests



a position of self-defence or an attempt to remain unnoticed, and echoes, therefore, the final image of the preceding section ("mirrors are crafty").

The description of the mirror's characteristics which follows is really a description of the persona's outward appearance and the manner she has assumed toward her companion: "mute and devoid of colour, / built of pure light, // this life of vision only, split / and remote, a lucid impasse". The repeated consonant sounds ("mute", "light", "split", "built" and "remote") create the sense of formal definition which we associate with the ice-mirror. The "l" sounds and flowing vowels give the sense of a liquid, non-formal element, air or water. These associations are analogous to the literal meaning of the image, the "split / and remote" reflections returned by the mirror which "recede and recede" and give no hint of what lies under the surface, their clarity and rigid definition hiding the formlessness of what lies behind them. It is the persona who is hidden behind, "mute", trapped by the mirror's clarity in a blind alley, the paradoxical "lucid impasse", a position from which there is no escape.

The speaker is no longer the illusionist; the illusion has got out of hand. The mirror no longer works as a symbol of the persona's detached recognition of her

isolation, or as a symbolic barrier constructed by the persona to protect herself against becoming involved. It has served only to trap her in a worse state, a "life flattened against the wall", a "life of vision only".

There is nothing for the persona to do except confess her artifice; again, she does so in terms of metaphor: "I confess: this is not a mirror, / it is a door / / I am trapped behind". In traditional symbolism, the mirror-become-door can express the trapped soul's access to freedom.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the speaker seems to be saying she wanted her companion to see in her outward appearance not a reassuring image of himself, but the door to her own inner being: "I wanted you to see me here, / / say the releasing word, whatever / that may be, open the wall". Although this expresses the wish to become fully alive, for once, it is a passive wish; it wants the positive action, the breaking of the mirror, to be done by the other person. As in "The Circle Game", the persona's awareness of her isolation has been followed by a wish to have someone else accomplish her escape from isolation. Although in both poems the persona is aware that she herself

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 201-02.

is responsible, at least as much as her companion is, for her isolation, in neither poem is this accompanied by an awareness that she herself must be the one to break out of the trap. The process in "The Circle Game" is one of gradually increasing self-knowledge; in "Tricks with Mirrors", however, the persona possesses ironic knowledge of her dilemma from the start, yet will not act upon it. The male figure, locked in his own subjectivity, is incapable of acting: "Instead you stand in front of me / combing your hair". This statement, expressive of the man's unconcern, deflates the speaker's elaborate explanations in terms of the mirror metaphor of the state of their relationship. Ignoring, or perhaps just unable to see, its significance, the man simply takes the proffered mirror as a mirror and stands "in front of [it] / combing [his] hair". The irony and humour in this line derives from the male figure's unquestioning acceptance of the persona's extended analogy as literal truth. Her attempts to communicate her sense of isolation, the feeling that her companion does not know her inner being but only her appearance as he has "learned" it, have been to no avail. She has communicated nothing. The final irony restores the persona's detachment from the situation and in section v she returns once more to metaphor.

In section v the persona accepts the fact that her companion is not going to "say the releasing word" ("whatever / that may be"), and stops trying to explain or clarify. Since her metaphor of the mirror has not been very illuminating, she now offers another which is even less illuminating:

You don't like these metaphors.  
All right:

Perhaps I am not a mirror.  
Perhaps I am a pool.

Think about pools.

In these lines, the persona no longer offers her companion a metaphor for her outward appearance ("a mirror"), but offers instead one which suggests her inner self, her unconscious ("a pool"). The pool is a more accurate symbol for the self. Whereas the mirror suggests the distortions inherent in perception and, therefore, places more emphasis on the person observing than the person being observed, the pool, on the other hand, is a kind of acknowledgment on the part of the persona of the depths which exist within her. The implication of the poem's final statement, "[t]hink about pools", is that the persona's companion, when he looks for himself in the persona, may see a side of himself which he does not know, having become accustomed to surfaces and masks, and, more

importantly, he may suddenly see the persona as more complex than a simple exterior, as a being whom, finally, he cannot know.

"Tricks with Mirrors" is thematically more unified than "The Circle Game" and its imagery is more consistent. The mirror functions continuously on both a literal and a metaphorical level, so that the reader is always aware of two levels of reality in the poem. The theme of isolation resulting from the impossible difficulties of getting beyond appearances and from the complacent inclination to simply accept appearance as reality is carried both by the imagery and by the persona's ironic detachment.

The poem does not, however, have the iconoclastic energy of "The Circle Game". From her detached position, the persona in "Tricks with Mirrors" illustrates the condition of non-communication as it continues to exist in the intimate relationship. Except in section iv (and even then only passively), the persona does not try to alter anything. She is content to remain the illusionist, the clever manipulator of metaphors.

The last poem which this chapter will deal with is related in some way to each of the others. "Frame" (PFU, 21) appears in the same group in Procedures for Underground as "A Dialogue". In it, the vague sense of loss conveyed

by the latter poem's image of "triangles / and grey geometrical flowers" is made more explicit. As well, the "window" in "Frame" is related both to the "photograph" as a symbol of an inaccessible reality in "This is a Photograph of Me", and to the mirror in "The Circle Game", "My face, my other faces" and "Tricks with Mirrors" as a symbol of the limitations of the reflected reality in which the persona finds herself trapped.

The window is a symbol of possibilities and distance; it gives access to another reality, whether in a positive sense like the symbol of the opening door, or in a negative sense like the mirror as it usually appears in Atwood's poetry. The fact that the title of the poem is "Frame" suggests also that the "window" may be like a still photograph, capturing a moment from the past, and defined by its edges. There is in the poem an alternating sense of the window as each of these things, opening, mirror and photograph (or drawing). The metaphorical nature of the window is established in the first four-lined section:

I made this window;  
it stands in the middle of my floor.  
Around its edges it looks  
exactly like a window[.]

In these lines there is the suggestion that, whatever associations the "window" has for the persona, she wants

her constructed "window" to look real. She tells us that she has created the appearance of reality. It is the frame, however, which looks most real (the "edges"), and throughout the poem there is a sense of the window's rigid boundary, defining and limiting whatever reality is suggested by the window itself.

The four lines quoted above echo the wording of the beginning of "This is a Photograph of Me", and the persona's ambiguous description ("you see in the left hand-hand corner / a thing that is like a branch"; "half-way up / what ought to be a gentle / slope, a small frame house") of the landscape of the photograph. In both "This is a Photograph of Me" and "Frame", the persona undermines our faith in the reality of appearances. This, however, is as far as the similarity goes. In "This is a Photograph of Me", it is the photograph itself which seems unreal, supplanted by the expanding reality of the landscape represented within it. This does not happen in "Frame"; the reality seen on or through the window in this poem remains fragmented:

on it I can see  
a street, a sidewalk, a blue corner  
where birds fly with the jerkiness  
of home movies,

the houses where I once lived  
cut out of magazines  
lined up, one  
beside the other;

cardboard figures  
 of myself, unnaturally short  
 are propped on each of the lawns  
 with their backs toward me.

The first and second of these four-lined sections equate the window with a child's drawing or collage of pasted-on bits of pictures. In one sense, the persona has "made" a picture of the past (her own); in another, she is looking at a picture of her past which she made as a child, a picture in which she can determine certain physical aspects of a landscape ("a street, a sidewalk, a blue corner"), and on which the "houses where [she] once lived" also appear.

The scene which appears in the picture, or which the persona projects onto the window, is fragmented. Things appear at random. Again, this suggests the work of a child, but as well it suggests the persona's inability to reconstruct her past as an organic whole. Thus there is a sense of the fragmentation of time, as well as of space. There is no sense that the persona's picture (or "window") is accessible to her. She cannot enter it. Her access to the past is blocked by the sense that the window retains its frame and remains, therefore, a picture.

In the last of the three central four-lined sections, the sense of a picture or photograph is superseded by the sense of the "window" as a mirror, reflecting various



past identities of the persona. The fact, however, that the "cardboard figures" are turned away from the persona ("with their backs toward me") suggests the inaccessibility of these earlier identities.

From these four sections it is apparent that the window the persona has constructed is not one which gives access to a landscape ("it stands in the middle of my floor"), but one which opens onto the persona's past. It becomes a metaphor for her conscious memories of another time. In it are recreated the distortions inherent in the passage of time and in the change from the child's ("myself, unnaturally short") to the adult's way of perceiving the world. The various "cardboard figures" of the persona are the focal point of the mirror-window scene. As images of multiplicity, that is, as images which present multiple past identities of the persona, they suggest fragmentation within the persona's being. In fact, the houses and figures take on the characteristics of talismans, metaphorical representations of the persona's past which retain their hold on her. They do this through their presentation in terms of a child's drawing, which invests them with pathos and the sense of a present loss.

The "window", in the aspects of it which are similar to the mirror, symbolizes the inaccessibility of the world which it images. In its photographic aspects, with

the emphasis on a formal boundary and a world which is completely contained, it suggests the past's desirable and exclusive order. The past continues to hold the persona by virtue of the fact that it excludes her, as the image of "unnaturally short" figures of herself "with their backs towards [her]" suggests.

The final part of the poem is ambiguous because of the tensions which the glimpse of the past creates. "Who left me here?" the persona begins, and the suggestion is that she has been left behind, "propped on each of the lawns", trapped in the past, but also that she has been left alone "in the middle of [her] floor" to contemplate her own constructed memory window. Taking this one step further, one could say that she is trapped in the present because part of her remains inaccessibly locked in the past. The next line, "[w]ho gave me / these scissors", also suggests both past and present, the past of the child who lived in and, thus, "created" "the houses ... / cut out of magazines", and who formed the "cardboard figures / ... unnaturally short", but also the present of the persona, who "made this window". The lines express the persona's bewilderment. She doesn't know how her predicament has come about, who is responsible; she doesn't know what to do to change things. Because of her vivid evocation of the past, the speaker's reality in the present is made to

seem dream-like, insubstantial. Thus when she says, "I dream / always of getting outside", there is still the dual sense of dreaming in the past and in the present. A kind of inversion occurs and the persona becomes one of the "cardboard figures" dreaming of escaping from the window. Her release would be a release from the fragmentation of her present. The statement is similar to the lines in "Tricks with Mirrors": "it is a door / / I am trapped behind. / I wanted you to see me here, / / say the releasing word".

In the symbolism of window-as-mirror, the statement "I dream / always of getting outside" expresses the desire to escape from the present "life flattened against the wall" (YAH, 27), as well as from the image of a retained past reality. The final image again creates the persona's bewilderment: "Nothing opens, / I don't know who to forgive". The implications of "[n]othing opens" are that there is no way back to the past's "cardboard figures" and also no escape from them.

The key word in the last line, and perhaps in the whole poem, is "forgive". There is no longer the sense, as there is in "The Circle Game" and "Tricks with Mirrors", of someone else as responsible for the persona's psychic disunity. There is no longer any placing of the blame. There is no second person being characterized as

coldly analytical, freezing the persona by his posturing into a meaningless pose of her own, as there is in "The Circle Game". The persona is not possessed of an ironic self-knowledge and its subsequent detachment as she is in "Tricks with Mirrors". She is not removing herself from the hope of eventual communication with another human being, as she does in "This is a Photograph of Me". The use of the word "forgive" suggests, not the negative desire to blame, thus preserving the fragmentation and isolation, but a positive desire to move beyond the mirror, to regain the part of herself which has been lost. Although the persona says "I don't know who to forgive" for the fact that "nothing opens", it is she herself who constructed the window; she admits it in the first line of the poem. It is herself whom she must learn to forgive. With her "scissors" the persona has cut herself off from the past (by the very act of re-creating it in a distorted picture) and, therefore, cut herself off from herself.

"Frame" is the first poem to be examined in which the persona, although she does not know why or how it has come about, accepts the fact that her feeling of incompleteness and loss (and, therefore, her present isolation) derives somehow from her own past, from the process which has resulted in her former selves being frozen into a stance in which they are turned away from her. "Frame" represents a progression in attitude from any of

the other poems. We saw that the wish to break away from a constricting external order in "The Circle Game" is essentially passive, a wish to have the circle "broken". In "Frame" it is not an external order but the persona's perception of herself, as she once was, as she is now, which creates the feeling of isolation. In "This year I intended children" the persona merely accepts, and finds a kind of strength in, her inability to be reconciled with the procreant force shared by all living creatures and all the natural world. In "Tricks with Mirrors", the persona wants to be released from her isolation, but she wants her companion to accomplish it for her. When he doesn't, she resumes her manner of ironic detachment from the situation. "This is a Photograph of Me" posits no hope, no solution, to the persona's inability to be reached by another person. In "A Dialogue", the persona does not possess the self-knowledge which might make a resolution of the problem of continuing isolation possible. In "Frame", however, the persona does recognize, in terms of metaphor, her own incompleteness; she does possess, intuitively, the knowledge ("I made this window") that she herself is somehow responsible for "nothing [opening]", somehow implicated in the construction of the figures of herself "with their backs towards [her]". In "Frame", isolation inheres in the split within the self

which is accomplished by the process of growing older. The desire to find "who to forgive" becomes in this context a desire to reunite the halves of the self, to become fully human again.

The next chapter will focus on the various aspects of loss which "Frame" hints at. In it, poems will be examined in which the persona, recognizing the split within herself and the resulting feeling of isolation, looks back on the lost world of childhood, in which she re-creates a now inaccessible landscape, and explores the vestiges of a once-existing, meaningful order and the correspondent sense of completeness, of belonging, which is now missing. The poems in the next chapter represent the first step toward the more complete self-knowledge which is necessary before the persona can see herself as a being capable of positive action, and of affirmation.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LOST FOREST

(you find only  
the shape you already are  
but what  
if you have forgotten that  
or discover you  
have never known) (SM, 25)

In the first chapter we have seen that the mirror in Margaret Atwood's poetry is used symbolically to suggest a barrier between the persona and her other inaccessible selves and also between the persona and the male figure, and that it becomes a barrier because, metaphorically and actually, it limits and distorts the world which it images. In the use of water imagery, we have seen not only the mirror's characteristic of distortion ("This is a Photograph of Me"), but also the potentiality for vision, for the persona's realization of her own complex being ("This year I intended children", "Tricks with Mirrors"). In this chapter's exploration of the poetry of lost worlds, we shall see that, although it is no longer symbolized by the mirror, the barrier between the speaker and the unattainable areas of the self still continues to exist. Now, however, it becomes primarily a barrier between the present and the past. The past is therefore identifiable

with the completeness, or oneness of being, which, in the poems already discussed ("The Circle Game", "Tricks with Mirrors"), the persona sees as existing somewhere out of reach within or behind the mirror. We shall see in this chapter that the possibilities which once existed and are now lost are expressed in nature imagery, in imagery of the natural world's dynamic cycle, just as they are suggested in two of the poems already explored ("This year I intended children", "Tricks with Mirrors") through the symbolism of water. Colour is more noticeable in the poems in this chapter; in the glimpse the persona provides of a lost world, the earth's natural greens and yellows, suggestive of growth and fecundity, replace the sterile greys or the total absence of colour characteristic of the poems of stasis and isolation.

The poems to be examined in this chapter differ in kind from those in the first chapter. With the exception of "A Dialogue" and "This year I intended children", all the poems in chapter one are of the type of the dramatic monologue, addressed by the persona to an unseen but particular audience of one. Like "A Dialogue" and "This year I intended children", the poems of this chapter are, on the other hand, addressed to no one in particular. They are contemplative, meditative. In them, the persona suggests, chiefly by contrast with the vague dissatisfaction



she feels in the present, the existence of a feeling of completeness and of harmony with the natural world which she once experienced. The motif of the lost forest is used to suggest, in varying degrees of emphasis in each of the poems, the time or the place in which the persona once felt completed, or the feeling of wholeness itself. Various things are seen by the persona as having a causal relationship with the "loss" of the forest: the routines and other forms of conditioning which devitalize life in the present, the tendency to "cauterize [the] senses" (PP, 32) in order to protect the self from pain or disappointment, the loss of innocence which results from recognition of the brutal nature of modern life. From a study of the lost forest poems as a whole, a composite picture begins to form: the forest is lost because of the refusal (for whatever combination of reasons) to allow its existence. An awareness of this fact may give the persona the strength or confidence to alter the situation.

The first poem to be examined in this chapter, "A fortification" (AIC, 16), restates the persona's self-protective attitude revealed indirectly, in "Tricks with Mirrors" and "My face, my other faces", in the assumption of the mirror as her metaphorical identity, and, in "The Circle Game", in the refusal to accept any responsibility for the stultifying love relationship. In "A fortification",

the persona acknowledges, more explicitly than she does in "Frame", the barrier she has created or allowed to be created between her past and her present. The accompanying sense of something being lost in the process is also made more explicit.

The glimpse which the persona experiences of a lost world occurs, in "A fortification", in the extended moment between sleeping and waking. The poem begins: "Upon waking a nerve complains in the / (briefly) voice of an airdrill". The image suggests a silent inner noise, inner, because a "nerve" is contained within the body, silent, because of the use of synesthesia, of a sound ("voice of an airdrill") to embody something which is felt (a "nerve"), not heard. The ungrammatical wording contributes to the sense of the lines. The odd placement of the adverb "(briefly)" suggests that the nerve is stilled even before it is completely (consciously) recognized and recorded, and in spite of the fact that the comparison to an "airdrill" suggests its persistence to be felt or heard, like a toothache. The lines which immediately follow make the image more complex:

because my opening eyes close hydraulic  
doors between the hands and some other time  
that can't exist[.]

These lines suggest that the act of waking, of regaining consciousness of the real world, is responsible for shutting out the nerve's voice, just as it closes the "doors" between the present moment and the realm of sleep. The image of "hands" suggests not only the regaining of a consciousness of the body, but also of the present moment, the insistent now of the "hands" of a clock. The image of "hydraulic / doors" suggests the automatic or involuntary resumption of a daylight world in which "nerve[s]" are not permitted (now, automatically) to "complain". The "some other time / / that can't exist" becomes, therefore, associated with the sleeper's unconscious recognition of things which the conscious mind will not permit itself to recognize. This "other time" goes on in a place within the persona where something wants to be heard, wants to be allowed to be, and which her "opening eyes" will not allow her to acknowledge. Throughout "A Fortification", the "other time" which is inaccessible to the persona is informed by imagery which suggests place, and this "place" is within the persona, behind the "hydraulic / doors" which close as she awakens from sleep.

The "fortification" of the title is created in terms of machine images. It (the "fortification") is the persona herself, who becomes, upon waking, an automaton: "I get up, extend the feet / into my body which is a metal spacesuit". The whole poem develops around the imagery

of the machinery of defences, "hydraulic / doors", "control [panels]", the "spacesuit". On a literal level, the persona "arms" herself against the day by erecting a "fortification" made up of nonliving, functioning machinery. "I have armed myself, yes I am safe", the persona says, "safe: / the grass can't hurt me". Machines can't feel. On a metaphorical level, what the persona does is nothing more than to perform the morning ritual every person performs, the donning of the clothes and the faces with which the world is kept at bay. For the persona, however, the erection of the "fortification" is something which is consciously self-protective. She is aware of what she denies: "My sense swivel like guns in their fixed sockets: / I am barriered from leaves and blood". An epigraph for "A fortification" could have been lifted directly from section v of "The Circle Game": "Why is it / ... / that in this time, such / elaborate defenses keep / things that are no longer / (much) / worth defending". There is the suggestion that the "elaborate defenses" in "A fortification", the "senses [that] swivel like guns", protect something not worth protecting, an existence which is mechanical and which denies the life force imaged in "grass", "leaves and blood". The persona's defenses guard her from any hurt from the natural world, its "grass" and "leaves", but they also protect her from herself and from any involvement with other human beings, as the use of the

word "blood" suggests. In "This year I intended children", the persona expressed the wish to "finally / be reconciled to fur seeds & burrows". In "A fortification", this wish is not expressed. As the images of the stilled "nerve" and the barrier against "leaves and blood" suggest, the persona has inured herself against life.

The tone of the last two four-lined sections of the poem is evocative of a sense of loss. Up until this point in the poem, the persona has used the metaphor of the automaton to express the reflex action of self-protectiveness. The use of the metaphor lends a certain degree of detachment from what she is saying. Even the "nerve" of the opening line is divested of any urgency by being linked to the image of the "hydraulic / doors", and its sound explained in terms of the sound of machinery. Now, however, the tentativeness of the imagery undermines the persona's calm rationale, and the reader is made aware of her uncertainty: "But there is a thing, person, a blunt groping / though the light denies it: what face / could be here among the lamps and the clear edges". The imagery of the poem suggests that the persona has opted for the reality represented by "the lamps and the clear edges", a definable reality of functional machines and no "grass", "leaves" or "blood".

The amorphous creature suggested by "thing, person .. blunt groping" does not belong in this context; "the light denies it". Its appearance, when the persona has "aimed" herself and feels "safe" from any threat, whether from outside or inside, is, therefore, shattering. It is a glimpse of another reality, tenacious and enduring although denied and, therefore, inaccessible except in a glimpse, which occurs only in the moment between waking and assuming the ritual "fortification":

Still for an instant I

catch sight of the other creature,  
the one that has real skin, real hair,  
vanishing down the line of cells  
back to the lost forest of being vulnerable[.]

In these lines we see that the "some other time / / that can't exist" does exist, but it exists only as some other time which is not accessible to the speaker in her daylight world of "clear edges". The means to invulnerability, the armour, finally supplants the "vulnerable" person, with "real skin, real hair", so that the persona becomes the fortification. The futility of the "elaborate defences" (CG, 41) is that there isn't much left worth defending.

The last two lines of the poem express the loss of the persona's nature as a vulnerable human being in terms of the evolutionary process inherent in time and responsive to environment ("the line of cells"), but also in terms of place. The "lost forest" belongs to a past time's

wholeness of being, but it also continues to exist in the present somewhere behind the speaker's closed "hydraulic / doors", out of reach within her unconscious.

The poem expresses the persona's ambivalent attitude, which is partly ironic detachment born of the knowledge that the construction of the fortification is something she does consciously to "steel" herself against the onslaught of the day, just as she consciously chooses the apt metaphor of the automaton to express this; partly it is one of uncertainty, which is conveyed by the repetition of "safe" (as if to convince herself) in the third section, and by the question in the fourth section. The suggestion of the last lines is not that the persona does not know what has been lost, but that she is unsure what the loss will mean. The poem therefore poses an unspoken question: how much does one lose by maintaining a position of "safe" isolation from others, of alienation from a part of the self? The poem suggests that the inability to feel which must accompany invulnerability is too high a price.

"A fortification" represents a progression in attitude beyond the poems studied in the first chapter in that the persona not only recognizes her isolation, but also sees that this was not always the state of affairs. She recognizes the existence of the "lost forest"; she

also recognizes that it is "lost" because she herself has banished it to "some other time / / that can't [be allowed to] exist".

The next poem to be looked at in this chapter is different from "A fortification". In it, the "lost forest" exists first of all as a real place in the past, in addition to its existence as an inaccessible part of the unconscious mind, which is its primary association in "A fortification". From the forest as an actual place, the poem which follows progresses to the forest as a symbol of the unconscious.

The beginning of "The Shrunken Forest" (PFU, 18) re-creates the forest as a place which is naturally inhabited by children:

When we were in it we were very small very  
small, at least we thought we were small  
and it was giant it was too green  
for us it was like living  
on the surface of the sun (green) only not  
burning[.]

The running-on of short, unpunctuated clauses in these lines creates the feeling that what is presented is a child's view of the world expressed as a child might express it. The lines have a breathless quality and a kind of energy which is related to the accumulation of direct observation ("it was giant it was too green / ... it was like living / on the surface of the sun").



The colour green usually symbolizes growth, fertility or the function of sensation.<sup>1</sup> The two references to "green" in these lines create the sense of prolific life; the emphasis on the forest as "too green" and the comparison to life on a "green" sun suggest the perception of an almost tangible quality, a sense of being inundated by greenness, and thus a life of sensation rather than of contemplation. The comparison of life in the forest to life on the surface of a "green" sun is perhaps the central image in the opening lines. The sun, associated with heat and energy and the source of life is also, like the circle, a natural symbol of wholeness or unity. The child, although "very small", shares in these qualities. In spite of the fact that the forest is "giant", the child is not diminished by being there; he (or she) is not consumed by its size or the manifestation of its energy (its greenness). The child partakes of the wholeness, energy and dynamic growth of the forest, without "burning".

This sense of oneness with the natural world is also suggested in the first section of "The Circle Game", in which the "single bodies" of the children merge in the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 51-52.

circular dance. In "The Circle Game", however, the reader sensed in the persona's inability to understand the point of the ritual motion her exclusion from its dynamic unity. In "The Shrunken Forest", the persona re-creates the time in her own childhood when she was not outside this instinctive feeling of harmony with the natural world. In "The Circle Game", the persona sees the children as only "single bodies", momentarily joined for the sake of a meaningless children's game; in "The Shrunken Forest", the persona retains the feeling she experienced as a child of being a separate identity, as the opening line suggests, but she also captures the sense of union with, or immersion in, the life-source.

The remainder of the first part of the poem further develops this sense of separateness and simultaneous dissolution of identity:

and we were clear  
as ice we looked at each  
other and saw nothing but a  
bending in the air and through  
us that element extending placid  
as water but it was not water[.]

The use of the pronoun "we" creates the sense of inclusion, of another or others sharing the "forest" experience, and helps to retain the sense of the separate identities of the children. The image of the ice-like clarity of being recalls the image in "Tricks with Mirrors" of the surface

of ice which the persona presents to her companion. That image, however, is essentially negative, suggesting as it does the mirror's distortion and the perpetuation of the condition of stasis and isolation. In "The Shrunken Forest", on the other hand, the "ice" image suggests, not reflection and distortion, but transparency and true clarity. It suggests the persona's perception of the essential nature of the other person, and vice versa, rather than the perception of a mask. There is in the lines no sense of a barrier, either self-erected or already existing, between the children. The persona says they "saw nothing but a / bending in the air", but there is no sense of being destroyed which the persona in "The Circle Game" and "Tricks with Mirrors" feared would be accomplished by an unmasking of the self. The image is, rather, suggestive of the dissolution of the self in the positive sense of union or harmony, both with the other person and with the natural world. The final image of the first half of the poem ("that element extending placid / as water but it was not water") suggests that the air itself confers upon the children the special power of intuitive knowledge and true perception, and a sense of identification with the dynamic life cycle, which one associates with water.

In a sense, then, the childhood experience of being in the forest becomes identifiable with immersion in

energy and wholeness at its source. The reader is presented with the forest as an actual place from the persona's childhood but also as a symbol of the qualities which accrue to it traditionally. These qualities are made explicit by the references to the colour green and by the comparison of the forest to the sun and of the air of the forest to water. The total impression of the forest is not so much of a place as of a state of being.

The other half of the poem is in direct contrast to the first part. It is physically separated from the first part by double spacing and by the ominous "and now" which precedes it. These words return the persona to the different world of the present. There are readily apparent differences in the second section. The more regular sentence structure and the use of punctuation, for one thing, suggest the loss of the child's way of seeing. The second part of the poem does not re-create the flow of perceptions and sensations which in the first part was the result of the lack of punctuation together with what was expressed within the lines. The punctuation, and especially the use of the questions, in the second part creates the effect of fragmentation. This is paralleled within the lines by the uncertainty and doubt which overcome the persona:

and now

we are out of it we wonder  
whether we were even there  
at all, here light  
is so hard and different.

Again in these lines, as in "A fortification", there is the sense that, although the forest has been given an actual existence in the speaker's past, it continues to exist in some other place (as the use of the words "there" and "here" suggests) and not just "some other time". This, paradoxically, places emphasis on its continuing existence as a state of being. The "place" where it exists is, in the present time of the poem, within the persona's mind. In "A fortification", the image which suggests this is the "some other time / / that can't exist" which gradually comes to be equated with an inaccessible part of the persona's unconscious. In both poems, then, time is used in the dual sense of the chronological or clock time of the present, and a concurrently existing (inaccessible) time which has affinities for both place and state of being. And the primary associations of that other time-space-state of being, in "The Shrunken Forest", are of clarity, energy and wholeness, or unity.

In the second half of the poem lies the significance of its title. In the chronological time of the present,

where light has the effect of fragmentation, its clarity no longer fluid and "placid / as water" but "hard and different", the forest dwindles; its hugeness seems to have been only relative to the child's smallness.

Just as the existence of the "thing, person, . . . blunt groping" is impossible in "A fortification", here, the existence of the forest becomes impossible. Just as, in the former poem, the existence of "the lamps and clear edges" seems to preclude the possibility of any less tangible level of existence, so, in "The Shrunken Forest", the evidence of "sinks" and "vacuum cleaners" points to the reality of now as the only reality: "Can you doubt / the word of sinks? of vacuum cleaners?". These lines suggest that the inanimate, sterile world of the persona's present (sterile, because she chooses as an image of the present world man-made articles used to produce a kind of aseptic cleanliness) contradicts the existence of the vitally inclusive forest world. The persona is isolated from her past and, therefore, from a part of herself, her unconscious, where the lost forest continues to exist.

The last part of the poem is ambiguous. It suggests the beginning of a neurosis which is the direct result of the repression of the forest-unconscious, induced by the trivial order and created sterility of the modern world. The confusing statement which begins the image translates

the persona's uncertainty into metaphor: "I would believe / even doorknobs if it were not / for the diagrams of your skull". In a world where the persona is forced to believe in aggressively functional and, therefore, assertive, articles like "sinks" or "vacuum cleaners", a doorknob is relatively innocuous. Its presence does not actively impose itself upon the persona. Nevertheless, committed as she must be to the reality of this world, since she lives in it, even the insignificant doorknob would be believable, "if it were not / for the diagrams of your skull". The other person, with whom the persona shared the actual forest, is no longer "clear / as ice". The barrier to perception has returned, and the persona has recourse only to diagrams in order to prove to herself that the lost forest ever existed. In spite of this, the "diagrams" offer her at least a glimpse of that other world, enough to make her uncertain whether "sinks", "vacuum cleaners" or "doorknobs" can be taken as manifestations of the only reality.

"[D]iagrams", however, belong to the world of "hard and different" light. The instantaneous perception of, and feeling of oneness with, the other person in the liquid atmosphere of the "[s]hrunken [f]orest" no longer exists, and, therefore, even the proof which the "diagrams" offer is ambiguous. Hence, the increasing uncertainty in the last lines of the poem:

On one

of them I note, marked  
by a dotted line, an area, a bulge  
behind your left ear  
intensely green and shining  
transparent even on this paper,  
roughly the size of a thrush's  
egg, or a tumour.

The "green and shining" "area", in size similar to a "thrush's / egg", momentarily re-creates for the persona the possibility of the forest's existence. Because of the comparison to the "thrush's / egg", it is evident that the persona's first association of the colour "green" is of the growth and energy which she once experienced in the forest world. Because of the transparency of the area, "even on this paper", the kind of perception associated with the lost forest, where the children were "clear / as ice", becomes again an unspoken, fleeting possibility. Immediately after, however, green's suggestiveness of prolific growth changes, through the alternate comparison of the "bulge" to a "tumour", to its other associations of lividness, disease or death.<sup>2</sup> Because the "tumour" is the last thing to be mentioned, the full-stop of the poem, this suggestion is the one the reader is left with.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 51-52.



The perception of a livid green "bulge" could indicate a developing neurosis within the persona, resulting from the frustrated need to retain the "thrush's egg", the lost sense of wholeness. If this is the case, the image is particularly apt, since the inaccessibility of the "thrush's egg" translates for the persona into a symptom of disease. On the other hand, the persona's suspicion that there is something wrong with her companion could indicate, not her own neurosis, but simply the growing awareness that the inability to retain the past, and its continuity with the present, manifests itself as a kind of psychic disorder. The image of the "tumour" is in this sense similar to the image of "grey geometrical flowers" in "A Dialogue".

This awareness, more than any other factor, proves the existence of the lost forest. If it had not once existed, and if it did not, in fact, still exist, "sinks", "vacuum cleaners" and "doorknobs", and the reality they embody, would be enough. The feeling of internal disorder, or unease, makes it impossible for the speaker to believe in the present's artificial, sterile world as the only reality. It is ironic that the proof of the existence of the lost forest depends, finally, on the disorder, or the disruption of harmony, caused by its loss.

"The Shrunken Forest" is positive in that the persona recognizes that the feeling of rootlessness caused by living out of touch with one's inner being, one's past, and one's sense of being part of a dynamic natural order, was not always a condition of life. It is negative in that the persona is unable to see any solution; hence, the feeling of fragmentation and isolation must continue. The poem does not depend for its effect on the translation of image into denotative meaning; rather, its effect derives from the contrasting emotional tone created in the two parts. In the first, image patterns and the form contribute to a feeling of innocence, spontaneity and harmony; in the second, these elements, especially the more ambiguous images, contribute to a feeling of the persona's bewilderment and her growing suspicion that experience in the present world destroys the intuitive wisdom and the ability to perceive associated with childhood innocence.

"Stories in Kinsman's Park" (PFU, 38-39) again suggests the contrast between the child's world and the adult's. Certain differences emerge between this poem and "The Shrunken Forest" in the persona's attitude toward, and re-creation of, the lost forest.

"Stories in Kinsman's Park" is similar in some ways to sections iii and v in "The Circle Game", which

deal with the persona's perceptions of the child's world. The differences in tone and attitude from "The Shrunken Forest" originate, in both "The Circle Game" and "Stories in Kinsman's Park", primarily from the differences in point of view. The speaker in "Stories in Kinsman's Park" is not trying to capture the lost forest of her own childhood; rather, she sees the forest as an imaginary place inhabited by children in general, a place to which she may temporarily escape from the pressing reality of her own adult world.

The beginning of the poem establishes the contrast between the child's and the adult's worlds:

We take the children to the park  
where there are swings,  
a wading pool;

their father is in the hospital,  
the latest scar contracting  
across his scalp.

The first three lines suggest the world of the child; the next three, of the adult. Immediately there are observable differences in attitude between this poem and "The Shrunken Forest". The child's world here is merely an artificial place with activities designed by adults to temporarily entertain children and, finally, to tire (or bore) them: "When they are tired of water / and climbing, we tell stories, / making witches from coloured wool".

The adult world suggested by the "father" "in hospital" is ominously real. The developing contrast between the two worlds is, however, different from that of "The Shrunken Forest", in which the objects of the present world in which the persona finds herself image the loss of the vitally inclusive other world. Here, in "Stories from Kinsman's Park", the imaginative world of children is solely an imaginative world, having only a fabricated existence, like the "witches" made "from coloured wool". The persona, like the persona in sections iii and v from "The Circle Game", observes the children from outside their world, but there is a fundamental difference between these two poems as well. In "The Circle Game", the persona senses an intrinsic energy and completeness in the child's response to the world which is much like her own childhood feeling of belonging as revealed in "The Shrunken Forest". Although in "The Circle Game" she does not verbalize this feeling, or even understand it, it acts as an unspoken contrast to her feeling that her own world consists of an imposed, meaningless order. In "Stories in Kinsman's Park", however, there is the feeling in the first three sections that the persona actively manipulates the lost forest experience by manipulating the contrasts between the two worlds. First of all, the persona gives the reader the reason for the outing to the park by saying that the

children's father has been hurt somehow, and not for the first time. Secondly, she does not allow the children simply to play, but intercedes with "stories" when they grow tired of playing. This creates the feeling, in the lines that follow, of escaping from reality rather than of sensing the continuing existence of another harmonious reality:

In the sun all wounds  
are imaginary or cured  
by secret leaves, the green place  
expands around us, holds us  
enclosed, the high  
voices of children immerse  
us, quick and continuous as insects[.]

In "The Circle Game", when the persona tells the children stories, she is surprised later to find how completely they have made the story's danger and energy a vital part of their own world. In these lines, however, the persona does not observe the children; she does not show the reader that the children belong to a harmonious and vital imaginative realm, as the images of "sun", "secret leaves", and "green place" should suggest (and as the similar imagery in "The Shrunken Forest" does suggest). Rather, she baldly states the existence of this world. Nothing in the poem thus far suggests that the sun-green world of secret leaves is anything but a fabrication of the persona. In view of this, and especially in view of

the fact that the persona's awareness of hospitals and wounds suggests her entrenched position within that world, her immersion in the imaginary world which she creates seems to suggest not inclusion within a dynamic order, but, rather, a temporary and arbitrary suspension of more pressing concerns. It is a kind of diversion from the real world, just as it is meant to be a diversion for the children.

The other half of the indented section also suggests this sense of contrivance:

Here, we are convinced  
death can occur only  
to witches and in  
the sanctioned ways. The victorious  
children live, as they should,  
in the forest forever.

In the use of the pronoun "we", the speaker is including herself with the children. Again, this indicates for the persona the suspension of the other world's actuality. It is simply not believable that she is "convinced / death can occur only / to witches and in / the sanctioned ways". She is, after all, aware of the other reality where death can and does occur. Besides this, the forest world is something she has created, an imaginative world existing only in a story, as the second reference to "witches" serves to indicate.

The other aspect of using the pronoun "we" which undermines the credibility of the section is that the persona is assuming a knowledge of what the children think or believe. In "The Circle Game", it is precisely the fact that the persona does not assume an understanding of the children's behaviour which makes the relevant sections of that poem effective. In this section of "Stories in Kinsman's Park", the persona has not evoked the magical qualities of the lost forest. She has stated their existence blatantly. The impression the reader is left with is not, therefore, of a place or a time or a state of mind which is at best only tenuously connected to the present, but of a totally imaginary world, unrelated to reality.

The images of wounds "cured by secret leaves" and of death occurring "only to witches" relates to the image of the children's father, "the latest scar contracting / across his scalp", but only because the persona has consciously chosen these images to represent the magical qualities of the "green place", and not because they are intrinsic to the child's perception of this world. Perhaps they are, but the persona has not shown us that this is so. The last sentence of the section reads, therefore, as a non-sequitur: "The victorious / children live, as they should,/in the forest

forever". In order to see why this is so, one should examine the indented section in relation to the title; that is, one should attempt to decide what parts of it, if any, belong to the "stories" the persona tells, and what parts belong to the atmosphere or mood which she is trying to create. The series of images in the first half of the indented section serves to erase the sense of an unpleasant reality. The images are not part of the story; they are the means through which the persona transforms the park into the setting for a fairy-tale. The "witches" of the second part of the section may be part of the story, but the earlier reference to their being made "from coloured wool" makes them seem an extrinsic reinforcement of the idea, which the persona obviously wants to convey, that good things live and evil things die in the world she has created. There is really no sense of a story at all; there is only the persona's feeling of the way things should be. The last line does not follow, therefore, because the reader has been presented with everything from the persona's point of view and nothing from the children's point of view. There is no reason to believe that the children are "victorious"; there is no reason to believe that they live "in the forest forever". Again, perhaps they do, but the persona has not shown that they do. Merely saying so does not make it so.



In the final section of "Stories in Kinsman's park", the true subject of the poem becomes apparent. The persona has told the story, has tried to make the setting of the park into the same kind of world which, in "The Shrunken Forest", she herself experienced as a child, in an attempt to make the children forget the harsher facts of their real existence. It does not work; only children in stories can live "in the forest forever". The last section of the poem suggests that harmony and identification with the natural world (which she experienced as a child in "The Shrunken Forest") is no longer available even to children:

Cars start; the day re-enters  
us, the pool water is gone  
before we notice.

Driving for home,  
the older one wants to know  
how to stop thunder;  
he says he is afraid of things  
that get in through the windows.

The younger says  
he is afraid of nothing;  
he is the one who wants

the light on, who has  
bad dreams, the caterpillar  
eating the side of his head.

The fact that the persona sees the way things should be for the children has nothing to do with the way the children perceive and react, which these lines effectively communicate.

The idea in these lines of hidden fears which manifest themselves differently for either child is presented without comment or interpretation by the persona. She merely relates what the children tell her, and thus preserves their point of view. Like the image of the "tumour" in "The Shrunk Forest", the images of "caterpillar" and "things / that get in through the windows" are suggestive of a deep, hidden malaise induced by the pressures of trying to cope in the modern world (for instance, with the uncertainty of living with a frequently injured father).

"Stories in Kinsman's Park" is similar in structure to "The Shrunk Forest". Its effect derives from the contrast between the lost forest and the present world. Now, however, the lost forest is not a real place as it is in "The Shrunk Forest"; nor it is a state of mind which is no longer accessible. It is instead a totally imaginary realm, unrelated at any level to reality. It exists only in the story, and the story, even for the children, is now only a temporary diversion from the harsher realities of the modern world. The persona's attempt to re-create the vital harmony between the imaginative and natural worlds fails. For the children, the natural world supplies only external correspondences ("thunder", "things / that get in through the windows", "caterpillar") for an inner state of fear and psychic disorder.

"Stories in Kinsman's Park" reflects a different treatment of the lost forest motif from that in either of the other two poems examined so far. In it, the persona consciously attempts to call into being the forest as a vital force in the lives of children, and it cannot be done. In the next poem to be examined, there isn't the sense of the persona's conscious control of the imagery and, as a result, the evocation of the lost forest world is more natural than in "Stories in Kinsman's Park".

In "Eden is a Zoo" (PFU, 6), there is no sense of the imagery being directed by the persona; she remains at a discreet distance, thereby allowing the imagery to develop its own energy. The title suggests the speaker's distance. It is a metaphorical expression of the anti-thetical qualities of the particular Eden this poem explores. Eden traditionally has associations of innocence and an inclusive harmonious order; in the context of the title, however, it has the additional suggestion that its inhabitants, like animals in a zoo, are trapped there. Implicit in the suggestion of a barrier which keeps things in is the alternate suggestion of its function of keeping things out. This unspoken idea works as a counterpoint in the poem to the persona's vision of her parents as trapped in an Eden which she has created. That the persona is outside is evident in her being able to see both the

positive and the negative aspects of the garden, as the title suggests. The persona retains this distance, as the poem begins, through the use of the drawing motif to externalize and image emotion:

I keep my parents in a garden  
among lumpy trees, green sponges  
on popsickle sticks. I give them a lopsided  
sun which drops its heat  
in spokes the colour of yellow crayon.

It was seen in "This is a Photograph of Me" that the use of the photograph or drawing metaphor is a means of distancing the persona from the experience or feeling she is exploring. This technique allows the emotion to develop through the imagery, and is, therefore, much more effective than direct statement, such as the statement in "Stories in Kinsman's Park" that "the victorious / children live, as they should, / in the forest forever". The garden, in "Eden is a Zoo", is presented in terms of a child's drawing, as the distortions ("lumpy trees", "lopsided / sun"), the unambiguous colours ("green", "yellow") and the mention of objects associated with childhood ("popsickle sticks", "crayon") suggest. Because it is a child's drawing, it functions in the same way as the window in "Frame", as a kind of memory window opening onto the past. In "Frame", however, there is the sense that what the persona sees projected on the window has only a metaphorical existence in the present. The persona's vision is essentially

directed inward (in "Frame"), and the window on the past expresses this through metaphor. In "Eden is a Zoo", there is the sense that the drawing has a literal as well as a metaphorical existence.

In "Stories in Kinsman's Park", there is the feeling that the persona consciously uses the images of "sun", "secret leaves" and "green place" to evoke the energy and organic unity of the child's experience of the lost forest. In the opening lines of "Eden is a Zoo", the similar references to colour ("green", "yellow") suggest only the child's preference for vividness, and the tendency to represent objects in traditionally acceptable colours (trees as green, sun as yellow). Thus the drawing, although it is imperfectly executed, suggests the persona's attempt as a child to impose order onto the world she perceives. The use of the words "keep" and "give" also suggests this kind of ordering of things which, in reality, would probably not submit to being ordered or placed within a restrictive pattern.

The next part of the poem describes the parents as they appear in the ordered world of the drawing:

They have thick elephant legs,  
quills for hair and tiny heads;  
they clump about under the trees  
dressed in the clothes of thirty years  
ago, on them innocent as plain skin.

In these lines, the persona captures the distortions of the child's drawing; in the words she chooses to create the scene for the reader, however, she reveals that she is interpreting the drawing, investing her parents with the attributes of animals ("thick elephant legs", "quills for hair", "they clump about") and an Eden-like innocence ("on them innocent as plain skin"). Whatever meaning the child may have attached to the drawing is impossible to know; what the reader does know is the feeling of simplicity which the description of the drawing generates; a simplicity which equates with the mute, perhaps uncomprehending, innocence of the figures in the drawing, and which extends to the persona herself. The drawing represents an order which, whether or not it ever actually existed, belongs to the past, the persona's childhood, and is therefore inaccessible. Because it cannot be experienced again, there is a sense of loss which is not particular but generic, the loss of a time which once existed ("thirty years ago") and no longer exists. The persona can only speculate about meaning or motive; the drawing itself is innocuous, neutral. It is for this reason that the remainder of the poem is in the form of questions.

The sense of the drawing as an actual entity begins to recede, in the lines that follow, as the persona's parents move out of the garden into a place which is like

the persona's memory of that other time and, yet, which is not memory:

Are they bewildered when they come across  
corners of rooms in the forest,  
a tin cup shining like pearl,  
a frayed pink blanket, a rusted shovel?

These lines are central to the poem; the mood they create is the one which remains with the reader. As the poem continues, and the harmless garden of the poem's beginning is transformed into a zoo (of sorts), the reader discovers the negative aspects of Eden, and, by implication, the negative aspects of the parent-child relationship as it existed "thirty years ago". The lines quoted above, however, give the only hint of the persona's present feeling, as an adult, about her childhood and her parents.

Because "corners of rooms" are not found in actual forests, the forest here may be taken as a symbol of the persona's unconscious, like the forest in "The Shrunken Forest" and in "A fortification". In this forest, her parents wander, blessed or cursed with the innocence the persona has bestowed upon them, unaware, therefore, of the significance of the objects which they find there. These objects, the "corners of rooms", "tin cup", "frayed pink blanket" and "rusted shovel", do not belong to the Eden-world of the drawing, but to the actual world of the persona's past. Whatever they once meant to the persona,

their being retained in her unconscious invests them with new significance; they become talismans, intrinsic symbols of the past that are possessed of a kind of energy. Like the drawing itself, they are evocative of loss. Whatever it meant to be the child she once was is contained in these objects. By their retention in the unconscious, they suggest a lost psychic unity. They provide an oblique and only momentary alternate view of the past preserved in the drawing. Because she asks the question, "[a]re they bewildered", it seems the persona knows that, as a child, she erected a barrier between herself and her parents by freezing them into a pattern of innocent perfection. Because they were not allowed to grow or change, the persona could not know her parents as individuals; nor they, her. In the persona's present, therefore, her parents still exist as she saw them "thirty years ago":

Does it bother them to perform  
the same actions over and over,  
hands gathering white flowers  
by the lake of tracing designs in the sand,  
a word repeated till it hangs carved  
forever in the blue air?

These lines re-create the stasis of the drawing, which has come to suggest the persona's failure to see her parent as complex and individual human beings. The question and the ones that follow ("[a]re they content", [d]o they want to get out") also suggest the impossibility



of ever knowing her parents as they truly were (and, therefore, as they are now). They are locked in a part of the past which, like the drawing, is external to the persona's true past as it exists in the "forest" of her unconscious.

The narrator of Atwood's Surfacing is similar in some respects to the persona in "Eden is a Zoo". Among the other distorted versions of the past which she preserves, the narrator sees her parents as figures of innocence. At the climactic point of the narrative, however, she realizes the falsity of such a view; her eventual recovery of her past becomes possible through the destruction of the self-constructed illusions. Finally, the narrator is able to say of her parents: "they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human. Something I never gave them credit for; but their totalitarian innocence was my own".<sup>3</sup>

The persona in "Eden is a Zoo" has not reached the point, at least not consciously, of realizing that it is her "totalitarian innocence" which has denied her parents a full, individual existence within her childhood world. The disturbing final image of the poem establishes that it was the persona's need or desire (perhaps arising from a fear of change) to retain an Eden-like world of

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<sup>3</sup>Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1972), pp. 189-90.

trees, sun, "white flowers", "blue air", of absolute innocence, then, which results in her parents now being trapped in a "zoo":

Do they see me looking at them  
from across the hedge of spikes  
and cardboard fire painted red  
I built with so much time  
and pain, but  
they don't know is there?

The persona's innocence, conveyed by the drawing she made as a child,<sup>4</sup> was totalitarian, autocratic; it retained the mute, illusory innocence of her parents at any cost, as the images of "spikes" and "fire" suggest. The cost is that they have become inaccessible to her as human beings. The barrier of "spikes" and "fire" works to keep her parents locked in a static pose of harmony and order, but it also bars the persona from the part of her past which they inhabit.

"Eden is a Zoo" contains two central motifs, the child's drawing and the forest. The child's drawing embodies the persona's conscious re-creation of the past. It corresponds to conscious memory. In the drawing, the persona sees her parents' resemblance to animals "clump[ing] about" in a zoo. She sees them performing "the same actions

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<sup>4</sup> It is of little significance whether the drawing is real or metaphorical. Either way, it is the means through which the persona conveys her manner of perceiving her parents when she was a child.

over and over" and, because all she knows of them is contained in the unchanging pattern of the drawing's several versions, the idyllic qualities of the "garden" are superseded by the sense of her parents' being held captive in a cage. Thus the past which the drawing retains remains inaccessible to the persona. She cannot get in; they cannot get out. The forest motif, on the other hand, embodies the vital, intangible past as it continues to exist in the unconscious. It cannot be examined as the drawing can because it will not surface in the persona's conscious mind. It is, therefore, mentioned only indirectly, through question. The objects found there are not clarified or explained; they are not assimilated within a constructed order. They contrast with the artificial harmony of the drawing's Eden. The objects are unrelated and yet each has a place in the "forest". This suggests that at one time all things were held by the persona as random and separate but equal in significance, that the energy of objects was not competitive but co-existent. The kind of order suggested in the retention of dissimilar but equally valuable objects within the unconscious is not arbitrarily selective but inclusive and fundamental. The drawing's external manifestation of the loss of the persona's parents corresponds to her inner loss of the past's dynamic harmony, which must once have existed. The

poem's effectiveness derives from the multiple associations of images, the relation between them forming and dissolving, suggesting stasis and organic vitality, innocent harmony and an interpreting ironic knowledge. The poem is open-ended; no blatant statements are made, and no conclusion is demanded of the persona.

In the poems examined so far in this chapter, the forest symbol is used in several different but related ways. It is used deliberately, in "Stories in Kinsman's Park", in an attempt to evoke the harmony and order which the child perceives in the natural world. In "A fortification", it is used primarily as an image of a simpler, more direct way of living than the persona permits herself in the present. The forest is used in "The Shrunk Forest" as an actual place in the persona's past, and as a natural symbol of psychic energy and wholeness experienced through harmony with the natural world. In "Eden is a Zoo", it is primarily suggestive of the persona's unconscious, where this energy continues to exist imaged in random objects which appear only momentarily. In each of the poems, with the exception of "Stories in Kinsman's Park", the forest suggests a non-formal area of the mind which parallels the growth and energy manifested by nature, and which is antithetical to the manipulating and conceptualizing of external data by the conscious mind.

The remaining poems in which the forest appears are different. In them, the forest continues to mirror the landscape of the unconscious mind; now, however, it is inhabited by animals, and it has an energy and a meaning of its own, which the persona attempts to decipher. In the two poems that remain to be examined, the forest is not primarily associated with the persona's direct experience of the natural world as a child; rather, it is suggestive of a past and a present which are not related to any one person's history, which are, in a sense, outside historical time.

"Departure from the Bush" (SM, 26-27) has a historical context which establishes an automatic distance between the poet and her material. It is the last of a sequence of poems in which the persona Susanna Moodie relates her various experiences in the bush country of nineteenth century Ontario. The Journals of Susanna Moodie exists as an artistic work independent of the original Susanna Moodie or the experiences she relates in her books. There is, however, within this work, a continuity from poem to poem, so that any one poem cannot be examined in complete isolation. That is, it is not important to the book as an artistic whole whether or not the persona is Susanna Moodie; what is important is the change the persona undergoes, between the beginning and the end of the book, in the way in which she perceives and experiences the world.



is safe from the natural cycle makes possible the advent of the "lucid season" within her. Fire is, like water, a symbol of transformation and re-birth; here, the image of creeping "green" (life) suggests a transformation within the persona similar to the gradual re-birth of life in a landscape which has been destroyed by fire. This is further suggested in the following lines in which the persona likens herself to a burned landscape to which the animals gradually begin to return:

In time the animals  
arrived to inhabit me,

first one

by one, stealthily  
(their habitual traces  
burnt); then  
having marked new boundaries  
returning, more  
confident, year  
by year, two  
by two[.]

Again, the overt reference is to the poem "The Two Fires", in which the first fire destroyed the forest surrounding the persona's house. Without reference to that earlier poem, however, the reader is impressed with the sense of a beginning identification of the persona with the landscape.

The image of animals arriving "two / by two" to "inhabit" the persona echoes the poem "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (AIC, 36-39), in which the

pioneer's insanity results from his refusal to accept the land's prolific life and awesome size on its own terms. The image used in that poem to express the acceptance of everything "other" without losing the self is the image of the ark. In "Departure from the Bush", the ark is also suggested in the image of the animals arriving "two / by two", and in the following lines:

but restless: I was not ready  
altogether to be moved into

They could tell I was  
too heavy: I might  
capsize[.]

Two images inform the first part of this poem: the image of the persona as, first, a landscape and second, the image of the persona as an ark. The images are not opposed. The persona is first reduced by fire to dealing with the land directly ("crept in / upon by green"), without the barrier of a house or possessions between her and the landscape. The animals too, deprived of their "habitual traces" by fire, are in the same position and, gradually, persona and animals begin to accept each other. On a metaphorical level, the destruction by fire results in a transformation of the persona so that she becomes the landscape, and the returning animals "inhabit" her. The persona is "restless", however; she is "not ready" to accept either the immensity of the land or the presence of the animals.



A more apt metaphor for her state of being is therefore the ark, with its association of the potential re-birth of all things, of potential transformation. As such, she floats upon a landscape which also is potential and which takes the form of water, a natural symbol for the source of all life and energy, and also for destruction. The implied relation of the land to a formative sea echoes the poem "The Settlers" (CG, 79-80), in which the country of discovery is spoken of as "water turned / to land by having / objects in it". What the persona fears, in "Departure from the Bush", is her own possible destruction by immersion ("I might / capsize") in the landscape-sea. She expresses this fear through the image of the animals who have arrived to "inhabit" her: "I was frightened / by their eyes (green or / amber) glowing out from inside me".

The animals are the energy and fecundity of the landscape made manifest, as the colours "green" and "amber", and the use of the word "glowing", suggest. Up to this point in the poem, fire has transformed the persona by destroying her ties to a structured, civilized world, but she is not ready to accept the final transformation, the rebirth or metamorphosis, which accepting the land through a metaphorical immersion in its "sea" would accomplish.

The immersion, the possibility of which is expressed in "I might / capsize", suggests the kind of metamorphosed vision, or acquired insight, which is associated with water. It is this kind of vision which is suggested in the following lines: "I was not completed: at night / I could not see without lanterns". The implication in these lines is that the persona cannot see because she feels no sense of wholeness or unity with the natural world, its landscape or its animals. Her vision is restricted; it is similar to the kind of perceiving of the world which the adult persona in "The Shrunken Forest" experiences, and it is antithetical to the child's vision of the world in that poem, expressed in the lines: "we looked at each / other and saw nothing but a / bending in the air and through / us that element extending placid / as water". What the persona in "Departure from the Bush" cannot perceive is the kind of order manifested by the natural world; she can perceive this world only in images of oppressive energy and growth, which frighten her. Nevertheless, the persona's acknowledgment that she "could not see without lanterns" is an acknowledgment that there is something to be seen which is foreign to the sane world in which "lanterns" exist. In "Further Arrivals" (SM, 12-13), she expresses the same awareness of the landscape's insistent and undeniable reality in this image: "I need wolf's eyes to see / the truth".

The remainder of "Departure from the Bush" is anti-climactic. Having reached a point where she recognizes her own lack of wholeness, and sees intuitively that this is the result of her inability to find her place in the profound and unalterable cycle of the natural world, the persona leaves the bush country for civilization. Letters, clothes, sleighs, things belonging to the world she once knew, inform the last part of the poem: "He wrote, We are leaving. I said / I have no clothes / left I can wear". "He" is presumably the husband who has appeared in earlier poems in the sequence. The reference to the lack of clothes recalls the actual fire which destroyed the persona's house and possessions; however, the phrasing of the sentence suggests the additional sense that the clothes of a civilized world no longer suit her, or she no longer suits them. The lines indicate that the persona's experience in the bush country has indeed altered her, more perhaps than simply through the fire's destruction of her worldly goods.

The decision to leave having been made, the ark experience of the "lucid season" is quickly relegated to the past. Therefore, the persona says: "The snow came. The sleigh was a relief; / its track lengthened behind, / pushing me towards the city". The snow covers all vestiges of the restlessness and fright the persona experienced during the burgeoning season, the season of the animals'

"green / or amber" eyes. The snow covers chaos and energy and, perhaps, formlessness. One suspects that "the sleigh [is] a relief" because its tracks impose a discernible order onto formlessness, something man-made and linear. At any rate, it is the return to a recognizable order, an understandable way of life, which destroys the persona's awakening feeling of kinship with the animals and the land itself: "... rounding the first hill, I was / (instantaneous) / unlived in: they had gone". The suddenness and completeness of the animals' disappearance, as the use of the parenthesized word "instantaneous" suggests, make the persona's experience seem as if it had never really occurred.

The key word in the last line is "almost": "There was something they almost taught me / I came away not having learned". This is a regression from the earlier statement that "at night / I could not see without lanterns". In these lines, the persona is on the verge of a discovery. In the last lines of the poem, however, the sense of wholeness and identification which the persona had almost discovered is now only "something" that she has failed to learn.

In the earlier poems in this chapter, we saw that the experience of identification with the natural cycle, the "forest" experience, is intrinsic to the child's perception of the world. "Departure from the Bush"

demonstrates that for the adult, unused to dealing with the manifest power of nature, the landscape, the "forest", is something which must be chosen. The persona in "Departure from the Bush" chooses instead to leave. If there is the sense in this poem that the animals, when the persona leaves the bush country, have gone back into the forest, there is also the sense that they have disappeared into her unconscious, where they are waiting for her to complete the process of discovery. The poem, like the poems already examined, re-creates a feeling of loss. In this case, it is the loss of "something" never really possessed, an "almost" gained wisdom, a loss, finally, of an unformed area of the self. It is a loss made more poignant for never having been completely recognized. In "Departure from the Bush", the forest (or landscape) exists in an actual historical context, but there is the sense also that it exists always as a potential experience of unity or wholeness, as the image of the ark indicates. It embodies possibilities as well as loss, and extends into the future as well as back into the past; it is, therefore, in this poem and in the one that will follow, outside historical time.

"The Totems" (AIC, 22) is a completely metaphorical expression of possibilities and loss. There is no sense in the poem that the experience the persona recounts is an actual experience occurring within historical or

chronological time. Equally, there is no sense of the forest as an actual place. Its occurrence within the poem is part of a dynamic complex which is in essence non-spatial and non-temporal. The sense of timelessness is created in the opening lines:

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

The conjunction "then", used in the sense of "in that case" or "therefore", expresses continuity with an inner state of unrest or perplexity which exists before the opening of the poem, as if the persona were engaging, at the beginning of the poem, in a recurring interior dialogue. This gives to the questions the effect of occurring in a kind of continuous present which has nothing to do with the passage of time. The questions are rhetorical; they demand no answer. They are informed by the images within them, the "hollow totems", "cast skins", "poised / faces without motion". These images are visually dramatic to the point where their reality exists as statement, overriding the sense of bewilderment the persona is expressing, indeed, supplanting even the persona herself. The impression the lines create is that the images, like the questions, spring unbidden to the persona's mind.

Totems are carved images of animals, used by aboriginal races to externalize the assumed blood relationship of either the clan or the individual to animals. They are, therefore, symbols of an existing unity with the natural world, and are imbued with a power which derives from this symbolism. In this poem, the "totems" lose their association with unity because of the qualifying adjective "hollow" and the use of the verb "crowded". "[H]ollow" suggests that the totems have been removed from their function of externalizing the relationship between person and animal, that they are now only masks without the vital meaning. "[C]rowded" suggests the multiple imaging of these "hollow totems". As an image of multiplicity, "crowded with hollow totems" suggests fragmentation, the loss of unity or wholeness. The occurrence of the image within a question reinforces the sense of fragmentation. The speaker feels no sense of communion with the totem-image. Her lack of understanding of its presence suggests the disintegration of psychic unity with the natural world.

The remaining lines of the first section repeat this motif of mask without meaning. The "darkness" in which the persona sees the "cast skins, poised / faces without motion" is a regressive rather than primordial darkness, occurring as it does after the advent of light, for the fact that the "totems", "cast skins" and "poised / faces" exist at all indicates that they were once part of

an order which either no longer is apparent or no longer exists. The visual effect of the lines is of the dramatic projection of static images against a backdrop of darkness. The suggestion is that if the persona could penetrate the darkness, she might see more than lifeless images; their context and, therefore, their meaning might become clear to her. Her inability to see through the darkness is similar to her inability to see "at night" "without lanterns", in "Departure from the Bush". This we saw is a metaphorical expression of the absence of a feeling of communion with the animals, a lack of wholeness ("I was not completed"). In "The Totems", darkness also suggests the lack of completeness. It is a darkness of the mind which obscures the continuity between "some other time / / that can't exist" (AIC, 16) and the poem's continuous present. It thus obscures any possible feeling of wholeness.

The "other time" is referred to in the next section of "The Totems" as "[o]nce". "Once" does not refer, as it does in "A fortification", to an earlier period within the persona's lifetime. As the related images in the section seem to indicate, "[o]nce" refers to the formative era in the world's history:

Once I watched them dancing  
in a warmer place,  
their dance was a slow costume;  
the deer had moon hooves,



the snake was a morning dragon;  
but I fell asleep and forgot them.

Because the time referred to does not belong to the persona's individual past, the section exists as a symbolic statement of a generic state of being which once existed and has since been lost. The images of the dance as a "costume" occurring in a "warmer place" and of the metamorphosis of the "deer" and the "snake" into mythic animals have associations which in this poem are complementary. The consistency of the imagery's suggestiveness realizes the content of the section without conscious interpretation by the persona. Again, this creates the sense of the images rising unbidden to the persona's mind. There is, therefore, no sense of the persona's explaining something which the first section seemed to suggest she did not understand.

The entire middle section of the poem is invested with the energy of becoming rather than of being. This derives mainly from the fundamental motif of the dance, which suggests the "incarnation of eternal energy".<sup>5</sup> Its occurrence in an indefinite time ("Once") and an indefinite

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<sup>5</sup>Cirlot, p. 73.

place ("a warmer place"), and the sense that this gives rise to of the dance as a continuous process, suggests its symbolic relation to the act of creation, to the dynamic sense of coming into being, which contrasts with the lifelessness and stasis of the mask imagery in the first part of the poem. The reference to the "warmer place" adds the association of maturation to the dance motif's sense of rhythmic energy, since heat or warmth always bears this relation to the life process or cycle. The dance is therefore the external manifestation of the passage of time and of change, or the life cycle. Because the dance involves participation and involvement, it also suggests an inclusive order, and the sense of identification of its participants (the animals) with the life cycle which it manifests. Again, the order which includes time and change contrasts with the sense of fragmentation and disintegration of the first part of the poem.

In the remainder of the middle section, the sense of the dance as the embodiment of dynamic change is further developed. In the image of the dance as a "slow costume", gradual change, which might in the first two lines of the section be equated simply with evolution within the natural world, becomes dramatic metamorphosis or transformation. The animals assume masks to facilitate and disguise the transformation implicit in the dance. The dance itself becomes a ritual, a pageant, an image which suggests both

the vital principle of metamorphosis and also a ritually inclusive order. The animals partake of both aspects of the dance; their participation in the "slow costume" invests them with magical qualities. They are changed into mythic animals, and yet they retain their connection with the natural order of the life cycle. The "moon hooves" of the deer suggests that the deer participates in the moon's traditional relation to the tides, the seasons or, simply, the regenerative natural cycle. Similarly, the mask of the snake is the dragon, an animal which has been in tradition a symbol of rhythmic life.<sup>6</sup> "Morning" reinforces the symbolism of the dragon; it suggests both the dawn of time and each day's cyclical return. The order which the middle section re-creates is one of re-birth and regeneration, an order which is both ageless and perpetually new, one which is reflected in a changing design of beauty and intricacy. The impression the middle section creates is of an achieved balance between order and chaotic energy, imaged in the dance. In it, animals which we now regard as mythical are not extrinsic symbols created to explain or illustrate by analogy the origins of the world's profusion of animal life; rather, they are a

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

fundamental part of the slow process of becoming, of the formative era when the dance took place. The "slow costume" of the dance embraces an order which includes myth and the continuing existence of the cycle of life.

The imagery of the section suggests the continuity of the order but, because the imagery is not interpreted by the persona, and because it is placed in the distant and indefinite past ("Once"), there is the sense that it "occurs" before her only in the form of fragmented or disembodied images. This is also suggested by the last line of the section: "but I fell asleep and forgot them".

We have seen that the "dance" the persona observed does not belong to her own personal past; therefore, the statement quoted above can be regarded as symbolic. It brings to mind a line from William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations": "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting".<sup>7</sup> If the persona's statement of falling asleep and forgetting can be viewed in the light of an intuitive knowledge lost at birth, then what she "forgot" is something she never actually experienced and, therefore, which belongs to her unconscious, or, more correctly, to the collective unconscious. The images of "dance", "deer" and "snake" are, therefore,

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<sup>7</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (2nd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 460.

archetypal images which cannot be explained in terms of personal experience, or conscious memories. The persona's forgetting them suggests that her unconscious, where they continue to exist, is inaccessible to her. This casts a new light on the first part of the poem: the "totems" are "hollow" because their vital meaning is no longer available to the persona. The myth is accessible, the mask of "moon hooves" and "morning dragon" with which the animals performed the "slow costume" of the "dance", but not its inherent relation to animals as they now are or to the cyclical order of nature.

The last section of the poem images again the loss of the experience of unity suggested by the title of the poem:

In that long night  
the animals crept out  
through the burrows of my blind eyes;  
they went away to a different part of the forest,  
leaving their masks behind.

The lines recall "Departure from the Bush", in which the animals that arrived to inhabit the persona left before she could learn what they might have taught her. The feeling of wholeness and of communion with the animals and with the natural cycle is lost in that poem before it can fully develop. In "The Totems", the possibility of identification with the life cycle as it is manifested in animal life is lost in "that long night" before birth, or before consciousness

is formed. The reference to "blind eyes" suggests the impossibility of perceiving the unity which the archetypal images reveal did exist once. The animals, in going "away to a different part of the forest" have been separated forever from the "slow costume" of the dance, from the "moon-hooved deer" and the "morning dragon". The division, which occurred at some point between the "[o]nce" of the second section and the present of the beginning and ending sections, is manifested within the persona as a split between the unconscious and the conscious mind, between the "warmer place" where all phenomena reveal an abiding dynamic unity and the "different part of the forest" where the animals now simply exist. The magical sense of order and energy is lost. All that remains to suggest that it ever once existed are the masks which the animals have left behind.

In the poems examined in this chapter, the forest motif has suggested, in varying degrees of emphasis, a time, a place or a state of being which, in the continuous present of the poems, is now inaccessible to the persona. It has suggested an imaginary world where things happen as they should, as in "Stories in Kinsman's Park". It has suggested a real place where the speaker once experienced the unity and vitality of the natural world at first hand, as is the case in "The Shrunken Forest". In "A fortification" and "Eden is a Zoo", the forest is re-created only momentarily, and the glimpse the reader experiences is of the forest as a state

of being, a lost feeling of wholeness. In "Departure from the Bush", the forest and the animals that inhabit it exist as a potential experience of union with the natural cycle. Finally, in "The Totems", the forest is both the place of the mythical origin of multitudinous life and order, and the actual place where the animals, divorced from this order, still live. It represents both past and present, both the unconscious and the conscious mind of the persona. It is emblematic of fragmentation and loss but, because it still exists, it also suggests the possibility of re-discovery of the vital order. In each poem, the forest as a symbol of unity contrasts with the disintegration of any discernible natural principle of order in the present.

The poems in this chapter progress from the exploration of the speaker's personal state of mind, in "A fortification" and "The Shrunken Forest", to the indirect comment, in "Stories in Kinsman's Park", about the adverse effect on the child's psyche of the pressures of life away from the "forest"; from the persona's exploration of the self-erected barrier between herself and her parents and, obliquely, between herself and her past, in "Eden is a Zoo", to the persona's realization, in "Departure from the Bush", that she has failed to overcome another kind of barrier, the barrier between herself and the potential experience of union with the natural cycle.

Finally, in "The Totems" this failure to overcome the barrier between the self and the natural world is seen as a generic inability to perceive the well-spring of order at the heart of the natural world.

In the poems in this chapter, the persona looks more deeply into the self and also more closely at the natural world than she does in the first chapter's poems of isolation. In those poems we saw that the persona's feeling of isolation is inherent in the way in which she and her companion order their lives and their relationship to each other. In the poems examined in this chapter, the persona looks into her own past to discover a more meaningful order. The process of introspection reveals to her that a feeling of order once existed but is inaccessible now, in the present. In looking outward, the persona sees that the natural world also manifests a dynamic order, but it too is inaccessible to her. Inner wholeness and the outer natural order become equivalent; the persona has not attained either. Neither has she given up the attempt.

The last poem, "The Totems", is important in relation to the next chapter, which will examine poems in which the prolific natural life evidenced in the landscape lacks any sustaining and order-conferring mythology. In "The Totems", we saw that the myth embodied in the "masks"



and "hollow totems" lacks its earlier application to the life cycle. These masks, which originally were manifestations of unity and order, become, at the end of the poem, images of fragmentation. In the following chapter, poems will be examined in which the landscape is without a myth of order. The search for a viable order in which the self can exist in harmony with the apparent chaos and the negative aspects of multiplicity manifested by the landscape, becomes, therefore, a recurring theme in these poems.

### CHAPTER III

#### A VIOLENT DUALITY

I must pursue  
that animal I once denied  
was mine (AIC, 46)

In an afterword to The Journals of Susanna Moodie,  
modified from a radio-broadcast introduction, Margaret  
Atwood says:

We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born  
here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit  
completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in  
fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something  
that must be chosen -- it is so easy to leave --  
and if we do choose it we are still choosing a  
violent duality (SM, 62).

The order of nature, which is perceivable only as chaos or  
formlessness, and the order man creates and attempts to  
impose on the natural world (in the form of cities, roads,  
etc.) are the outward manifestations of this violent duality.  
Man cannot ignore the natural world, but, without a  
mythological tradition which will establish a relation between  
man and his natural environment, the natural world seems  
only to exclude man. His response is therefore divided.  
He attempts to impose his conception of order and he observes  
the rhythm of the land as it continues, indifferent to his  
order. The duality is within man; it exists in the split

between his perception of what is and his conception of what should be. In a sense, then, man's isolation from the natural world inheres in his perception of that world.

This chapter is not an exploration of the condition of personal isolation as Chapter I is. In that chapter, the persona's isolation results in part from her attempt to deny her inner life and to live according to the rigid rules imposed by false faces and the playing of roles. In a sense she causes her own isolation. More important, however, and more frequently, the persona feels that her isolation is the result of the inability of her companion to perceive more than her outward appearance, which stands as a barrier between them. Thus the emphasis is placed, not on her own perception of the world, but rather on the way in which others perceive, or fail to perceive her. In Chapter I, isolation is not seen as pandemic but as a condition of a particular individual's sensibility.

In the poems examined in Chapter II, the persona re-creates the feeling of wholeness which she once experienced as a child in the "lost forest", and contrasts this feeling with the sense of fragmentation she feels in the present. In these poems, it is implied that the split between past and present, unconscious and conscious mind, results from a different manner of perceiving the world in the present, but the persona does not realize this; the

imagery itself does. The persona does not come any closer, consciously, to discovering a reason for her isolation than simply recognizing the existence of some kind of self-constructed barrier between the past and the present (or, in "Departure from the Bush", between the actual forest and the place to which the persona moves at the end of the poem).

The poems examined in both Chapter I and Chapter II are personal, with the exception of "The Totems", which moves outward from the persona's own experience to man's experience in general. The first five poems to be examined in this chapter are not personal (in the sense of a fictional character exploring her own experience). The person speaking is not a persona; rather, poet and persona speak in one voice.

Three kinds of poems will be examined in this chapter. First, there are three poems ("A Place: Fragments", "The animals in that country" and "Progressive insanities of a pioneer") which illustrate the lack of an informing myth which will confer meaning upon man's relation with the natural world. These poems show that the duality inheres in man's perception of the natural world. They suggest that man's inability to perceive order in the chaos of the recurring natural cycle of external nature results from his one-sided and restrictive conception of himself and, in fact, from his inability to see the balance between chaos and

order within himself. Next, two poems will be examined which advocate the necessity for an exploration of the self in an attempt to reconcile the opposing forces within the self ("Journey to the Interior" and "Procedures for Underground"). Only then can man reconcile his own existence with the existence of the natural world. The last type is represented by two poems which proceed to re-discover the world by finding in the self a vitality and a chaotic energy which equate with the energy and vitality of the external universe ("Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" and "Arctic syndrome: dream fox").

In the first poem to be examined, "A Place: Fragments" (CG, 73-76), the lack of any perceivable order within the natural world is the central idea which the poet explores. The poem occurs almost at the end of the collection The Circle Game. The other two poems from this collection which have already been examined, "This is a Photograph of Me" and "The Circle Game", explore the speaker's personal sense of isolation and the inevitably crippling effect which being obsessed with one's separation or alienation from others has on an intimate personal relationship. "The Circle Game", in particular, expresses the persona's isolation in terms of not being able to be herself, of being distorted by her companion's perception of her and, ultimately, of not fully knowing herself. In "A Place: Fragments", the poet takes

the individual sense of fragmentation and alienation one step farther. Her vision in this poem is of a widespread malaise caused by the failure of man in general to achieve any harmony with the land he inhabits. "A Place: Fragments" is therefore a step beyond "This is a Photograph of Me" or "The Circle Game". It also follows (in vision) "The Totems", although it appears in an earlier collection of poems, in the sense that it moves farther away from the vision of a purely personal or individual sense of isolation or of lack of harmony with the natural order. In "The Totems", the disintegration of an earlier unity of all things does not belong to the speaker's personal experience, but seems to be a condition of all life in the present. In "A Place: Fragments", there is no vision of a formerly existing order or unity. There is only the sense of the lack of any order.

"A Place: Fragments" is in seven sections, or fragments, each one of which contributes in some way to the idea that the landscape, the "place" in which "we" live, manifests only chaos or formlessness. In the first section, this place is referred to only as "[h]ere":

Here on the rim, cringing  
under the cracked whip of winter  
we live  
in houses of ice,  
but not because we want to:  
in order to survive  
we make what we can and have to  
with what we have.

place is created in this section through images of cold. The images of "cringing / under the cracked whip of winter" and of "liv[ing] / in houses of ice" suggest that life in this geographically indefinite place is reduced to bare survival, as the rest of the section states. Although the "[h]ere" in section i is described in terms of an arctic reduction to essences, to just survival and nothing more, it is not the Canadian Arctic but an indefinite place like the "place of recurring dreams" in the poem, "A Dialogue". The metaphors of "the cracked whip of winter" and "houses like ice" are evocative of a state of being rather than of a particular place. Similarly, the "rim" of the first line of the poem may suggest the "rim" of the world (which is perhaps an accurate metaphor for Canada's far north), but it also suggests a kind of precarious balance between the external world of cold and the human necessity to somehow live in spite of adverse conditions. What is presented in this first section of "A Place: Fragments" is not, therefore, primarily the physical characteristics of "place", but the psychological orientation of the "we" who live there, and this ethos manifests itself, according to the poet, in an essentially negative manner.

The images of "cringing / under the cracked whip of winter" and of "liv[ing] / in houses of ice" suggest

stasis, a lack of harmony with the natural world and a constricted existence. "[H]ouses of ice" is therefore a negative symbol; it expresses a kind of half life, a life lacking in completion or fullness, in much the same way that the "surface / of ice" expresses the persona's constricted existence in "Tricks with Mirrors". It is also a symbol of the conscious mind, which registers impressions, and which is thus a kind of internal mirror of the external landscape. A frozen landscape as the conscious mind's external correspondence recurs more explicitly in poems which will be dealt with later in this chapter. It is an image which suggests the denial of everything existing within man which is not logical, which will not conform to his conscious struggle to order all events.

Although the poet says "we make what we can and have to / with what we have", the sense of affirmation implicit in the idea of making do in spite of an unfavourable environment is partly neutralized by the negative statement preceding these lines that this making do is not done "because we want to", but only "in order to survive". There is, in this first section, an implicit defeatist attitude which renders the "we" immobile in spite of the fact that they make do.



The section is a self-contained "[f]ragment" for several reasons. For one thing, the tone the poet assumes is emotionless, detached, dispassionate. There is, therefore, no sense of a dynamic exploration of the state of existence expressed in the section. Secondly, the poet does not admit the possibility of an alternative to this grim endurance, and in this sense her vision is one-sided and restrictive (or fragmenting). There is no sense in this section of a "violent" duality, either explicitly "chosen" or simply unavoidable. The split between what man sees and what he thinks he should see, or what he thinks should be, becomes "violent" when he attempts to impose his concept of order onto something to which man-made order is alien. By accepting the landscape on its own terms without really coming to terms with it in any humanly fulfilling way, the "we" avoid violence. The result, however, is that they become inwardly impoverished.

The second section is a kind of alternate version. It provides a text book illustration of the duality exhibited by the relationship of man and nature. The place which in the first section is referred to simply as "[h]ere" becomes in this section a "little-visited province"; "we" has been replaced by an "[o]ld woman". The fact that the "place" is "little-visited" reinforces the sense of the lack of any inherent relation between the various "[f]ragments" of

place as they are presented in the different sections. We are again reminded of Atwood's statement that "the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely" (SM, 62); in section ii, the poet seems to be consciously formulating her conception of the land. The section begins:

Old woman I visited once  
out of my way  
in a little-visited province:

she had a neat  
house, a clean parlour  
though obsolete and poor:

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

The room was as  
dustless as possible  
and free of spiders.

Although these lines seem to be simply an objective description of a room, there is, in the use of the qualifying adjectives "neat", "clean", "obsolete" and "poor", and in the emphasis on the cleanliness of the room and its contents, a sense that the poet is interpreting what she sees. This is supported by the rest of the section:

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

What the poet does in this section is illustrate her concept of the duality inherent in man's relation to nature. In the details of the "[o]ld woman['s]" "parlour", she sees a triviality and a stringency which derive both from the collection of knick-knacks and from the care which is taken of them. This triviality and stringency are no doubt real. It is the poet, however, and not the "[o]ld woman", who invests the parlour with an added significance. The "order" which "held its delicate balance / with the random scattering or / clogged merging of / things" is her own interpretation of her essentially selective observations. The "I" who "stood in the door- / way, at the fulcrum" where the "inner order / held its delicate balance" with the seemingly absent outer order, also stands at the fulcrum of the section. The inner order is in "delicate balance" with the outside only in the eyes of the poet.

There is no sense in section ii of the poet arriving at a startling or new truth through a process of direct observation. There is, rather, the sense that she has chosen the details of the room to illustrate a concept which she has accepted as truth from the beginning; and this concept is that of the duality manifested by the relation of man to nature. Section ii gives the appearance of objectivity while remaining the essentially subjective vision of the poet.

There is, however, something powerful about the section in spite of its lack of movement, of exploration. The power resides in the flatness of tone, the total lack of emotional involvement. The tone lends to the section the effect of a pronouncement. In the listing of the things belonging to the old woman's parlour, whatever their meaning or lack of meaning for the old woman, there is no longer any meaning other than the negative associations of multiplicity. That is, by being placed together in the list, the objects, "cushion", "animals", "mirror", "teacup", "spoons", "lamp", are divested of all personal associations. There is no center, no organic unity, in the room to the outsider poet, but only the fragmenting effect of the juxtaposition of disparate objects. Man's (not the old woman's) order is thus seen by the poet as both meaningless ("trivial") and strictly enforced ("stringent").

The last object on the list, the paperweight, is a kind of inversion symbol, of chaos turned to order by being contained. By its position last on the list, the paperweight becomes the most important object. The paperweight, because of its inherent suggestiveness as an object, quite apart from its use, becomes the catalyst by means of which the whole list passes from enumerative to selective or impressionistic description. Because the reader actually tends to see the paperweight as a representation of something (chaos contained) and not in terms of its use, the other objects as well take on a momentary other significance. The animals of the outside world become, through their representation by "glass" animals, subordinated to the order of the room; the order of another time and another place, through its representation in the "teacup ... from Scotland" and the "several heraldic spoons", also becomes a part of the room's order. Even the "mirror" can be seen as a symbol of a limited and contained reality. This symbolic vision of the room exists as a kind of undercurrent of impressionistic associations beneath the straightforward enumerative description of the objects in the room. It is upon the poet's impressions of the objects' various symbolic significances that she bases her statement in the latter half of the section of the room's "trivial but / stringent

inner order". In effect, the poet demands that the reader see the room as a symbolic representation of man's attempt to order his world. Atwood has presented an order which, upon examination, is revealed as static, aseptic and inanimate. One suspects her of creating this version of reality in order to contrast it with the apparent chaos of the natural world.

The last part of the section presents this world in terms of its multiplicity. Present also, in the use of the words "clogged", "ditch", "wet bush" and "grey sky", is the impression of moisture, of water, as the element at the basis of all life, but also as a disruptive and, therefore, repellent element which threatens the dry inanimate order contained in the room. In section ii, the room subordinates time (history), space (another country), animate nature (animals) and elemental nature (wind and snow) to its own non-vital order, while outside, nature exists in a different kind of time, the continuum of the always changing, always present moment, which manifests itself to the observer poet as pure, centerless space.

In section i, the "we" accept passively the dictates of a cold and capricious universe. Section ii creates the picture of a self-contained world which achieves a "delicate balance" with external nature by

ignoring its existence, its force or power, and creating instead an inner order where natural elements are divested of their power by being contained in miniature. Section iii transposes the poet's inner vision to the psyche of an unspecified person ("that man"). In section ii, the poet's feeling that two forces exist in the world in potentially violent opposition has transformed an ordinary parlour to a room rife with symbols of a static, created order; in section iii, this same inner vision transforms her observations of a man walking along a street or sidewalk in some unnamed city. It is the concept of the city as an "outpost" which informs the poet's perceptions of the "man" in this section:

The cities are only outposts.

Watch that man  
walking on cement as though on snowshoes:  
senses the road  
a muskeg, loose mat of roots and brown  
vegetable decay  
or crust of ice that  
easily might break and  
slush or water under  
suck him down[.]

The geography of the poem, which in section i is simply "[h]ere", has moved outward from the room (section ii) to the city. At the same time it has moved farther inward, from a field of objects seen only in terms of their symbolic value (section ii) to a landscape which is the external equivalent for an inner dis-ease.

"The cities are only outposts", the last bastions of defence against what exists beyond, the unknown. The city in this line is the "room" on a larger scale, the "trivial" order man has created to avoid being swallowed up by the natural world's larger order, which seems so much like chaos. This chaotic outer world, however, no longer exists in precarious balance with man's ordered world. Now the chaos, the formlessness, resides within man himself, an unknown area within his unconscious for which the world of nature is an external correspondence. Again, in section iii as in section i, it is not an actual geographical place which is important but, rather, the man's feeling or suspicion that the apparent permanence of the city's order is only illusory. Just as in section ii, where the room's objects themselves suggested to the poet a "trivial but / stringent inner order" balanced precariously against an outer lack of order, so also in section iii, it is the poet's inner conviction of an unknowable force existing in nature and within man himself which colours her observation of a man walking along a sidewalk. The lack of reason or meaning which the poet senses exists at the heart of the order man creates results, in section iii, in a feeling of rootlessness within man. The cities provide no stable link between man and the rhythm of the natural world. This



instability or lack of meaning is expressed in the images of "muskeg" or "ice", two aspects of the natural landscape which may confound or frighten man by obscuring any underlying principle of unity.

The land appears to the poet in the guise of water, with its associations of formlessness and dissolution: "The land flows like a / sluggish current. / / The mountains eddy slowly towards the sea". In the comparison of the land to water, which has associations of potential life, or life in a pre-formal state, as well as of dissolution, is another possible explanation for the man's unease. His lack of harmony with the natural world, the poet seems to suggest, may be a result of the fact that the identity of the land is not known; in effect, the land has not been discovered; it exists in potential. Landscape-as-water suggests again the lack of an informing mythological tradition through which man can find his place in the landscape. In section iii, an awareness of the lack of relation between the order man creates and the incomprehensible natural order creates a violent duality within man, a feeling that he has a foothold in both worlds, neither of which is stable enough to give him a sense of security.

Each section of "A Place: Fragments" examined so far is fragmentary. The poet has established no sense

of communication between the people of each section, or between their different responses to the natural world. Indeed, their responses are dictated by varying degrees of recognition of the duality, from the recognition and resigned acceptance of a hostile force in section i, to a largely unconscious attempt to achieve a balance with the outside world by containing its forces within the man-created order of the parlour in section ii, to the conscious feeling of discord in section iii which springs from the unconscious recognition of the natural world's formlessness. There is, then, no sense of a community awareness. Ultimately, the duality resides within each man and is dealt with by each man as it makes itself consciously or unconsciously felt. The poet's vision of the land and, one must assume, her belief in the existence of a violent duality have determined her interpretation of the people who inhabit the land.

In section iv, the poet presents her view of immigrants to this land of manifest formlessness and dissolution:

The people who come here also  
flow: their bodies becoming  
nebulous, diffused, quietly  
spreading out into the air across  
these interstellar sidewalks[.]

In this section, the medium for dissolution is not water

but space itself. The vision of a country which in its vastness is like outer space is similar to the conviction behind the poet's statement that this "country is too big to inhabit completely" (SM, 62). The people in this section are not "exiles and invaders", however; rather, they undergo a kind of dissolution of personality, expressed as "their bodies becoming / nebulous, diffused". In these four sections, then, the poet traces what happens to the personality in this "place": either it becomes stolidly resigned, as in section i, where individuality is sacrificed to survival; or, as in section ii, it creates a meaningless but tightly structured order to effectively keep reality at bay; or, it begins to exhibit schizoid tendencies as section iii demonstrates. In section iv, personality, the individual's sense of his own physicality, his being, disintegrates.

Section v explains why:

This is what it must be  
 like in outer space  
 where the stars are pasted flat  
 against the total  
 black of the expanding  
 eye, fly-  
 specks of burning dust[.]

The metaphor the poet uses is outer space, where there is nothing to allow the eye to establish a perspective, and everything assaults the eye at once. Personality is

reduced to "the total / black of the expanding / eye"; it becomes "diffused" (or it disintegrates) because it becomes solely a reflector of the natural world's images of multiplicity. Essentially, in "A Place: Fragments", it is the visual perception of the land's vastness, its randomness and its unceasing state of change, which shapes the inner states of being of its inhabitants. The eye sees no center, no order, and the mind decides that there is none.

The pressures of the landscape in "A Place: Fragments" are insistent and insidious. Eventually the perceiving eye yields to its vision of centerless space. Section v presents this as the annihilation of personality. The poet has taken the effect of the manifested duality to its ultimately violent conclusion, and the poem must either end here or provide an alternative method of perceiving the landscape. Sections vi and vii do provide that alternative. They present the poet's vision of the landscape which is in essence non-visual. Although all the illustrations given in sections i to v of the discord between man and nature lead to the hypothesis expressed in sections vi and vii, there is not the sense that this concept results from the exploration of the various states of disharmony; rather, the dogmatic statements in sections vi and vii ("[t]here is no center"; "[w]e must move back";

"there are too many foregrounds"; "[a]n other sense tugs at us") suggest that these two sections represent the poet's true starting point in the poem. The preceding sections of the poem prepare the reader to accept the vision expressed in sections vi and vii. Everything leads, by way of "proof" or illustration, to the concept expressed in these two sections. Therefore, although the subject matter of the poem seems to be presented as an exploration, the technique is not exploratory, and the form the poem takes is end-stopped. Whatever might have been discovered during the process of exploration is lost when the conclusion is both the reason for the poem and its starting point.<sup>1</sup>

Section vi begins with the concept which has determined the direction of the poem and which is behind the poet's view of the fragmented and fragmenting nature of "place":

There is no center;  
the centers  
travel with us unseen  
like our shadows  
on a day when there is no sun.

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<sup>1</sup>This does not negate the value of the vision in "A Place: Fragments", but it does provide evidence that the speaker in the poem is not the persona of the poems in Chapters I and II, who does not have this kind of exclusive knowledge. Her more limited awareness would make the kind of over-view expressed in "A Place: Fragments" impossible.

The individual as the center is not presented here in the positive sense of man at the center of a benign universe; rather, the emphasis is on there being no discernible principle of unity in the natural world, so that man, as he travels about in this "centerless" place, provides, in his physical being, the only center there is. "[C]enter" is a limiting concept; it is restricted by the physical limits of man's being and, therefore, it excludes the natural world's other system of order, which, if it exists at all, must embrace change and chaos. The image through which this concept is presented is visual: the absence of the sun is the absence of a symbol of unity. The center which travels with man, by being compared to an invisible shadow, is made to seem insubstantial, as if it exists only as an intellectual concept, something which is not supported by the evidence of external phenomena. The lines provide no alternative to the diffusion or disintegration of personality (or the loss of a center) in section iv. If man is himself the center, as the poet states, the comparison she uses also suggests that the experience does not have much immediacy or force. Deprived of a center, unable to discover a visual perspective from which the order of the natural world may be perceived, man must find some other means with which to achieve a balance between his own existence and the demands of the physical universe.

In the remainder of section vi, the poet states, as she suggested in section v, that man, seeing only with the eye, can perceive in nature only negative images of multiplicity:

We must move back:  
there are too many foregrounds.

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

The statement that "[w]e must move back" does not refer to moving back physically from the natural landscape in order to establish a perspective from which to perceive it more clearly; rather, it seems from the context to indicate that we must end our reliance on visual perception in order to perceive other than "foregrounds". The list of things which insistently demand the eye's attention echoes the "random scattering or / clogged merging of / things" in section ii. The acceptance of the appearance of things, indeed, the obsession with how things appear, is an obstruction to the perception of reality in Atwood's poetry. The failure of the "you" figure to perceive the narrator in "This is a Photograph of Me" is a failure to see beyond appearances. In that poem, a strange bond of shared isolation

is created between narrator and the surrealist landscape in which she is "drowned", because the essential being of neither narrator nor landscape can be perceived by the "you" figure. The distortion inherent in a reliance solely on appearances is also suggested in the mirror symbolism of "The Circle Game", "My face, my other faces" and "Tricks with Mirrors". The last lines of section vi in "A Place: Fragments", suggesting as they do a pre-occupation with surface appearances, seem to indicate a relation between man's failure to find his place in the order of nature and the failure to form anything more than a temporary liaison with another person. The fragmenting of experience resulting from a lack of harmony with the natural world extends into all aspects of the individual's life.

In the poems of isolation of Chapter I, the narrator is unaware of any means of overcoming the distortions of visual perception (and thus her own painful sense of isolation). The whole focus of "A Place: Fragments" is on the existence of a sense other than seeing with which to perceive the true reality of the natural world. Recall that in section iii, "that man" "senses" another principle of organization in the world which is at odds with what he sees. In this third section, "sense" suggests a kind of intuitive faculty, an un verbalized recognition. Likewise, at the start of



section vi, when the poet says "[a]n other sense tugs at us", she is not referring to any of the five senses, but rather to a kind of vestigial sense, something which exists just beyond the conscious mind. The passage which follows suggests that we have lost the ability to recognize a principle of order in the natural world:

we have lost something,  
 some key to these things  
 which must be writings  
 and are locked against us[.]

This seems to imply that once a feeling of identification between the internal and the external worlds must have existed but that it has since been lost. There is an obvious similarity between these lines and the point in "The Totems" at which the poet "remembered" a formerly existing time and place of symbolic unity and order. In that poem, the order is no longer accessible to the narrator, having been replaced by "hollow totems". In the following lines from "A Place: Fragments", however, an alternative exists in the image of potential discovery of something which will make comprehensible the natural landscape's seeming randomness and lack of order:

or perhaps (like a potential  
 mine, unknown vein  
 of metal in the rock)  
 something not lost or hidden  
 but just not found yet[.]

The image of something coexistent with the surface appearance of the land, and yet not visible to the eye, suggests again that the perception of the land's true reality will not be visual perception. Whatever it is "that informs, holds together / this confusion, this largeness / and dissolving" will be perceived by the "other sense" that "tugs at us".

What we will subconsciously recognize, Atwood says, is something

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

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

In "A Place: Fragments", Atwood examines two concepts which are central to her poetic vision. In the first five sections, she illustrates the existing relation between the order man creates and the natural landscape's apparent lack of order. At best the two states of being exist in "delicate balance"; at worst, they are violently opposed. In sections vi and vii, she explains this outward manifestation of a duality in terms of man's failure to find the "key" to a true perception of the natural world. His perceptions are distorted by what he sees with the eye: vastness, multiplicity, randomness, apparent chaos. The

"identity" which Atwood posits as existing "one / with" the landscape is its being in terms of myth, for myth-making is a means of ordering experience, revealing for man the origins of his world, its imaginative and continuous history, its geographical features, its changing nature. We, who are "immigrants to this place even if we were born here" (SM, 62), have not discovered the mythic structure of the land, its identity, which will make our being here something more than a random occurrence in place and time.

"A Place: Fragments" represents a development in poetic vision beyond the poems in Chapter II. The poet is no longer seeing childhood as the only time in which a feeling of harmony with the natural world is possible. "A Place: Fragments" has been examined in detail because the concept of a mythical identity as a unifying force in the relationship, now, in the present, between man and the landscape recurs in Atwood's poetry. What myths are available to man as a system through which he may order experience? Must he first balance the antinomies of order and chaos within himself before he can view the landscape free of the distortions imposed by fear and the human need for order? In the poems which remain to be examined in this chapter, the poet explores these questions. The remaining poems either explore some aspect of the failure to perceive any identity, any ordering force, within the landscape, or they

attempt to find some resolution of the duality by exploring the self.

In "The animals in that country" (AIC, 2-3), the poet suggests another side of the lack of an accessible identity or myth in this "place". This time, however, the poem does not illustrate an explicitly stated concept as "A Place: Fragments" does. Rather, the relationship between man and nature is implied through the way in which man views animals "[i]n that country" in contrast to the view held of animals in the poet's own landscape.

The first (and longer) part of the poem suggests the transformation of animals in myth and fable into beings with the characteristics of humans. It both recalls their past mythical identities and presents them as they are seen now, so that each animal seems to possess a continuity with ancient tradition. The poem begins with a metaphorical statement: "In that country the animals / have the faces of people". As Anthony Mercatante points out, in Zoo of the Gods: Animals in Myth, Legend and Fable, animals in mythology "speak, love, hate, plot and kill - in short [they] do everything man does".<sup>2</sup> Atwood's statement suggests this

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<sup>2</sup>Anthony Mercatante, Zoo of the Gods: Animals in Myth, Legend and Fable (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. xii.

attributing of human character or actions to animals, but as well it suggests the pictorial representation of animals as having human physical characteristics, a kind of portrayal which dates back to the earliest civilizations.

The first example in the poem of an animal with a human face is the cat: "the ceremonial / cats possessing the streets". For centuries, the cat has been a domesticated animal, and yet, even to this day, it gives an impression of aloofness, detachment and supercilious condescension. The cat, in a sense, "possesses" its territory, acknowledging the prior rights of no one. The adjective "ceremonial" applies to the cat as well, for its movements, often slow, measured and dignified, nearly always graceful, suggest that it is involved in some ceremony of which the observer, man, is unaware. The lines suggest a literal truth about cats, based on either direct observation or knowledge of their manner of behaviour. As well as this, however, the cat has a long and complicated history in mythology as a magical animal. Beryl Rowland attributes its sacred place in ancient Egyptian civilization to "its peculiar ability to see in the dark and to widen or narrow its glance at will, [and to] its strange aloofness".<sup>3</sup> At

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<sup>3</sup>Beryl Rowland, Animals with Human Faces (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), pp. 50-51.

any rate, the cat was sacred to the Egyptians. The Egyptian goddess Bast was identified with the cat; anyone who killed a cat in Egypt was punished by death. The unique combination in Ancient Egypt of the cat's being represented, literally, as having a human face, together with its place in that society and the ceremonies attendant upon its death (an elaborate funeral procession held for it through the streets),<sup>4</sup> suggests a specific source of Atwood's image. In the lines, "the ceremonial / cats possessing the streets", the actual manner of the cat, together with its mythological associations, gives the cat a significance which is residual and which extends back through history.

Having presented us with an animal which is not simply a cat, but also the mythological qualities which are associated with the cat, the poet then goes on to the fox "[i]n that country":

the fox run  
politely to earth, the huntsmen  
standing around him, fixed  
in their tapestry of manners[.]

There is a split between the fox's depiction in mythology and its treatment by man throughout the ages. The fox has been commonly regarded as a trickster, a dissimulating and crafty being, as far back as Aesop, a compiler of fables

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<sup>4</sup>Mercatante, p. 49.

who lived in the sixth century before Christ.<sup>5</sup> This quality was not always regarded as pejorative, however, and by the late twelfth century, there were many stories circulating about the fox in which he appeared as a trickster-hero.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the actual animal was hunted as vermin, not merely by the aristocracy, but by anyone, using any means at hand.<sup>7</sup> The idea of the fox as a trickster-hero persists today only in expressions such as "foxy" or "out-fox". Because of the scarcity of wild foxes near towns or villages, the idea of the fox as a marauder holds hardly any weight at all.

The lines from "The animals in that country" which deal with the fox do not re-create the animal as an animal at all. He is merely one necessary performer in the static ritual of the fox hunt, the "tapestry of manners". Similarly, the fact of his death is made to seem less than actual in the euphemism of the image, "run / politely to earth". The view in mythology of the fox as a being who by sheer cunning could defeat an adversary of superior strength, and

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<sup>5</sup>Rowland, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

the contrasting view of the fox as a destroyer of live-stock who must be exterminated, may provide the original *raison d'être* for the hunt; however, the fox hunt as it appears in Atwood's lines is only a victory over a symbol, a victory in which the real animal is eclipsed. As in many of Atwood's other poems, such as "Eden is a Zoo", "Frame" and "The Totems", the creation of a static picture is accompanied, like an old photograph, by a correspondent sense of loss. The ritual of the fox hunt no longer has any relation to reality because the mythology which must once have sustained it is dead. What is lost is the fox.

The bull, like the fox, is given a stylized death "in that country":

the bull, embroidered  
with blood and given  
an elegant death, trumpets, his name  
stamped on him, heraldic brand[.]

Bull-sacrifice has long held a prominent place in mythology. The bull was viewed by the ancients as a life force and as a symbol of strength and fertility. The Persians ensured the continuing renewal of their lands through the sacrifice of a bull each spring; likewise, Dionysus, the god in Greek mythology who was sometimes represented as a bull with a human face and who personified the sun as the ripener, was



honoured each year by the sacrifice of a bull.<sup>8</sup> According to Mercatante, the Jungian interpretation of the victory of man over the bull, or the ritual sacrifice of the bull, is the subduing by man of his animal nature.<sup>9</sup> Both these aspects of bull sacrifice, that is, celebration of the life force and control of the passions, are present in the spectacle of the bull fight. The bull which is sacrificed is not a particular animal but the qualities he represents, and these are qualities which man admires and sees himself master of. Atwood makes it explicit that the bull is not simply a bull but also the man-qualities he embodies:

because

(when he rolled  
on the sand, sword in his heart, the teeth  
in his blue mouth were human)

he is really a man[.]

Again, as in the preceding section on the fox, the images ("embroidered / with blood", "given / an elegant death") suggest an ornate ritual, rich with tradition ("his name / stamped on him, heraldic brand"), but having no relation to the individual animal's death.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> Mercatante, p. 97.

When, in the next section, the poet says "even the wolves", she is including them with the other animals that have personified human qualities in man's mythological system, even though the wolf is no longer much in evidence. Indeed, all that remains to remind man of the wolf's once prolific existence in the forests of eastern Europe is its cry or call. There are now few wolves as compared to an earlier time when, either singly or in packs, they would even venture into towns in search of food.<sup>10</sup> The image of the "resonant / conversations" of the wolf suggests the resounding or carrying quality of its voice, but as well the image suggests the echo from a former time when wolves were numerous and myths about wolves were made immediate through man's fear. Man "thickened" the "forests... with legend[s]" in which his fear of the wolf transformed the creature from animal into a symbol of evil energy and rapacity. In Atwood's lines, there is the odd sense that the wolf is now only a disembodied voice, its hollowness another association suggested by the image of "resonant / conversations". The wolf, hidden somewhere in the "forests thickened with legend" "[i]n that country", is present now only in the lingering and rather haunted quality of its voice.

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<sup>10</sup>Rowland, p. 164.

The entire first section of "The animals in that country" is itself resonant. In it are echoes of myths from an older time, of rituals which have lost their earliest meanings but which still retain a weight of tradition. The "animals in that country" are both more, and also less, than simple animals. They are the qualities which man, rightly or wrongly, has invested them with. These qualities may still exist, as the cat's majestic aloofness does, or the bull's elemental power; or they may have been lost or forgotten, or just changed through the passage of time, so that nothing much remains of the animal either as animal or as symbol, as the study of the fox's death indicates, and the disembodied cry of the wolf suggests. The first section of "The animals in that country" is presented neither positively nor negatively; the construction of myths is neither praised nor condemned.

The second section of the poem, because of its shortness and the directness of its comment, and also because of what it says, has the effect of a devastating denouement. In it, the reader finds the poet's true subject, not another country but her own, not the existence of a mythological tradition but its absence. The section is composed of four flat statements, the economy and simplicity of which contrasts with the long complex sentence which comprises the entire first section. Both

the economy of statement and the placement on the page contribute to the apparent anti-climactic quality of the lines. The reference to "this country" appears almost as an afterthought:

In this country the animals  
have the faces of  
animals.

Their eyes  
flash once in car headlights  
and are gone.

Their deaths are not elegant.

They have the faces of  
no-one.

This is no afterthought. Everything that has preceded these lines works to bring the images into focus. Just as place in "A Place: Fragments" is experienced only in terms of its images of multiplicity, only in terms of a kind of centrifugal force causing fragmentation in the lives of its inhabitants, so also "[i]n this country", man perceives in animals another aspect of the lack of harmony, of identification, with the natural world; in short, another manifestation of the duality of his nature. The first section of "The animals in that country" shows, without comment as to whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, the kind of order man has created in "that country", an order to which animals conform because the qualities ascribed to them are human qualities, qualities

which are therefore knowable. In the second section of the poem, when the poet says, "[i]n this country the animals / have the faces of / animals", she is refuting the existence here of that kind of order. Animals "here" are animals.

The image which unifies the four separate statements of this section is the night journey. Driving at night, man sees only the eyes of animals, which "flash once in car headlight" and disappear. Not only is there no mythology in which to place the animal, but the animal itself cannot even be named, cat or fox or deer. Behind the "flash" of eyes lies darkness. Death, if the animal is struck by the car, is sudden, arbitrary, meaningless, a random death unassimilated to any ritual of order. Death in darkness recalls the kind of "nebulous" spreading out which belongs to the "total black" of outer space, in "A Place: Fragments". It occurs in the same kind of darkness which the persona speaks of as belonging to this country in the poem "Further Arrivals": the "large darkness" of "our own / ignorance" (SM, 12-13).

Death, in this second section of "The animals in that country", describes the end of an individual life and suggests multiplicity rather than unity. The death of the fox or the bull "in that country", no matter how many individual foxes or bulls are killed, remains essentially

one death, the re-enactment over and over of a ritual of control and order. "In this country", man cannot control because he does not know, or, in the words of "A Place: Fragments", has not found the mythic "identity" which will make order out of chaos, which will place man and animal within the order of a larger whole. The last lines of the poem make explicit the contrast between unity and multiplicity: "They have the faces of / no-one". Within the unifying image of the night journey, this suggests that man does not see the animal that is killed, separated from it as he is by the moving car, the darkness, and the suddenness and randomness of his glimpse of it in the car's headlights. Within the larger unity of the whole poem, the lines suggest that animals outside the system of order of the first part of the poem are faceless, utterly foreign to man, because they mirror no human qualities but only the randomness of the natural world. In this poem, the duality which the poet conceptualizes in "A Place: Fragments" is only implied. The images through which the animals "[i]n this country" are presented, images which suggest man's perception of a kind of vacuum in which life and death occur with an equivalent absence of reason or meaning, create a tension between what appears to be and what should be. The imagery itself reveals that the duality within man still exists. The violence which this duality

does to man's inner being is also implied in the bleakness, the unrelieved darkness, of the imagery.

In a poem which occurs later in the same volume of poetry, the violence latent in man's dual response to the natural world is made more explicit. "Progressive insanities of a pioneer" (AIC, 36-39) takes the concept expressed in "A Place: Fragments" of the discord between man's ordering of things and the still unperceived natural order, and gives it a particular historical context. In a land which is just in the process of being settled, the lack of a mythology becomes more apparent than in the modern urban world. There is nothing standing between the "pioneer" and the new land he inhabits. Thus a violent response becomes more probable. The pioneer's response to the land in this poem, as the title suggests, takes the form of a "[p]rogressive insanit[y]". The title also suggests that the pioneer is not altogether sane at the beginning of the poem. The symptoms of his disorder at the beginning indicate a kind of megalomania, in which he sees himself as "the centre"<sup>11</sup> of the universe:

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<sup>11</sup>Atwood's spelling of the word "centre" is not the same in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer" and "A Place: Fragments". In quoting from these two poems, her spelling, although inconsistent, is preserved.

He stood, a point  
on a sheet of green paper  
proclaiming himself the centre,

with no walls, no borders  
anywhere; the sky no height  
above him, totally un-  
enclosed  
and shouted:

Let me out!

Even at the beginning of the poem, however, there is, as these lines indicate, a tension between the pioneer's conception of himself and his perception of the world he inhabits, which has "... no walls, no borders / anywhere; the sky no height / above". It is very difficult to be the "centre" of something which appears limitless. The pioneer's cry to "[l]et me out" indicates that he senses the falsity of such an assumption.

Nevertheless, the pioneer sets out to establish himself as "centre" by imposing his logical conception of order upon the land:

He dug the soil in rows,  
imposed himself with shovels.  
He asserted  
in the furrows, I  
am not random.

The ground  
replied with aphorisms:

a tree-sprout, a nameless  
weed, words  
he couldn't understand.



These lines, from the second section of the poem, indicate the doggedness of his attempt to impose order on the land, as the verbs "dug", "imposed" and "asserted" suggest. The ground replies with its own principles of order in a language the pioneer doesn't understand, the language of a "tree-sprout, a nameless / weed". The lines indicate the lack of a mythological system of order, of a context of familiarity, which is similar to the poet's vision in the last section of "The animals in that country".

The third section of "Progressive insanities of a pioneer" makes explicit the relation between external and internal landscapes. The pioneer is at odds with both "landscapes"; in both he is "in the middle of nowhere":

The house pitched  
the plot staked  
in the middle of nowhere.

At night the mind  
inside, in the middle  
of nowhere.

The second of these two images suggests a kind of vacuum resulting from the separation of the pioneer from a part of himself which is like the diffusion of being occurring in the metaphorical "outer space" of "A Place: Fragments". Both landscapes are a source of fear too, as the next image suggests: "The idea of an animal / patters across the roof". It is not so much a wild animal (that is, a

force which belongs to external nature) that the pioneer fears as it is the image of an animal which his mind evokes from the darkness. The darkness is an unknown quantity (which has been associated traditionally, like water, with the unconscious) in which the pioneer is assaulted, both from within and without, by the "everything" unknown:

In the darkness the fields  
 defend themselves with fences  
 in vain:  
     everything  
     is getting in.

At this point in the poem, the image refers only to the assault of the external darkness; however, it also foreshadows the assault at the end of the poem which occurs completely within the mind of the pioneer, resulting in his breakdown.

Section IV resumes the struggle for control. With "daylight", and the night's irrational fears held in abeyance, the pioneer is better able to act in a rational manner, and so he registers "disgust" rather than fear at the apparent absence of order in nature. Again, however, the natural world replies in a foreign language ("the unanswering / forest implied") that the pioneer is wrong: "It was / an ordered absence".

Section V presents several ideas simultaneously through the metaphor of fishing. It is not made explicit what "great vision" the pioneer is fishing for, with his

"hooks of sown / roots under the surface / of the shallow earth", but we can be sure that if it is for a vision of unity or harmony, he wants it to be a unity which will conform to his system of ordering the world, a vision perhaps of his lands behaving nicely and producing and (therefore) exalting him as the centre:

For many years  
he fished for a great vision,  
dangling the hooks of sown  
roots under the surface  
of the shallow earth.

It was like  
enticing whales with a bent  
pin. Besides he thought

in that country  
only the worms were biting.

The simile ("like / enticing whales with a bent / pin") which expresses the ultimate failure of his attempt is an odd one, for the pioneer most certainly does not want to hook a whale. The whale is associated with the mystic Mandorla, the plane of intersection of the circles of heaven and earth in which antithetical forces, day and night, life and death, dissolution and regeneration, are held in balance.<sup>12</sup> Because the whale lives in water, it also suggests the containing and concealing of these opposing

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<sup>12</sup>Cirlot, p. 194. According to Cirlot, the zone of existence symbolized by the Mandorla "embraces the opposing poles of all dualism".

forces within the unconscious mind. The whale, then, represents a system of order or unity which is totally opposed to the pioneer's order of rows and houses and logic. It is an order which embraces the cyclical nature of life itself, and it is this that the pioneer, by "proclaiming himself the centre", has denied. He stumbles upon this simile by chance and then goes on, wryly, to complete his thought with "[b]esides ... / / in that country / only the worms were biting". This is an ironic completion of the whole metaphor. It returns to the literal meaning of fishing with "sown / roots". It also, however, provides an exact opposite to the symbolic value of the whale as the embodiment of unity. The image of worms "biting" the "hooks of sown / roots" is an image of multiplicity. For the pioneer it can only be one more proof of the intractable land's refusal to conform to his "great vision".

The informing metaphor in section VI is the ark. The ark is inherently a symbol of unity. It ferries the potential forms of all things between death and life, over the destructive-regenerative primal waters. As in the earlier poem, "The Settlers", and the later poem "Departure from the Bush", Atwood compares the landscape to a formative sea:

If he had known unstructured  
space is a deluge  
and stocked his log house-  
boat with all the animals

even the wolves,  
he might have floated.

In these lines, the poet suggests that survival depends upon the acceptance of the landscape as non-finite, boundless, forever demonstrating the water principle of destruction and re-birth, death and life, a cycle. The pioneer ("obstinate") will not accept this vision. For him, "[t]he land is solid", something which can be measured, divided, owned. The betrayal of the pioneer's attitude of omnipotence, his arrogance in asserting himself as "the centre", comes from within. Like "that man" in "A Place: Fragments" who "senses the road / a muskeg ... / or crust of ice", the pioneer senses that his conception of the land is unsound. He senses the insubstantiality of the kind of order he would create, and this feeling is expressed in the image of "watching his foot sink / down through stone / up to the knee". Basically, the order the pioneer postulates is one of permanence, life and development, a sane daylight order. The opposing qualities which he does not admit are contained in the other order expressed in the images of ark and whale: change as well as permanence, death with life, growth but also dissolution and decay, darkness as well as light.

In section VII, an awareness of what the persona in "The Planters" (SM, 16-17) calls "the dark / side of

light", the order of the natural world which contains balanced opposites, "invade[s]" the pioneer. His illusory order, which is similar to the artificial order that the persona in "The Planters" calls "that illusion solid to them as a shovel", becomes more difficult to sustain. The natural world will not conform, will not be named: "[t]hings / refused to name themselves; refused / to let him name them". To name things, within the pioneer's rigid order, is to limit them, to confer upon them one quality, permanence, to keep them always static, and, ultimately, to avoid ever having to confront again the thing in itself. We have observed this naming of things to control and limit them once and for all in the action of the male figure in "The Circle Game", who memorizes maps in order to "hold / these places / in their proper places". The pioneer, in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer", is not capable of confronting the world as it existed before the naming day.

The pioneer's breakdown is presented through the imagery of the rising flood ("beaches", "surf of under- / growth breaking / at his feet") which signifies the non-formal outer world and his own unconscious. The effort to keep himself apart from (and, therefore, in control of) the natural world ("the tension / between subject and object") finally breaks down completely, and he is forced to confront, "through eyes / made ragged", the "green / vision", not the vision he fished for, but the existence

of a vital, living order. He is made to confront the "unnamed / whale" which is both within and without. It remains "unnamed" because it is of the nature of essential reality, reality which has not been limited, distorted and then dismissed. The pioneer, who began as a kind of megalomaniac, now exhibits symptoms of schizophrenia. The violent duality is now a split between the logical order willed by his conscious mind, and the extra-logical, vital ("green") order of the outer world which the unconscious mind embraces.

From the examination of these three poems, we have seen that the "violent duality" exists primarily within man. To free man from this duality will be to re-unite the unconscious, unrecognized part of his psyche with his conscious mind. In Atwood's vision of things, until man recognizes the existence of this non-formal area within, he will be unable to perceive the essential harmony which is at the center of the universe. Explorations of the external landscape are, therefore, almost always explorations of the inner landscape of the unconscious as well. There are several poems which make this relation between the unconscious and an outer landscape quite explicit. The earliest is the poem "Journey to the Interior" which appears in the first collection, The Circle Game (CG, 57-58).

In "Journey to the Interior", the external landscape exists solely as a metaphor for an interior landscape. "Interior" itself suggests the part of a country which is inland, away from the coastline or border or frontier; as such, it is an appropriate metaphor for the hidden or secret areas of the psyche. The poem is in two parts, the first pointing out the similarities between the journeys into the interior of a country and into the self; the second, the differences.

The landscape has characteristics, in the first part, of an actual landscape, with "hills", "prairies", "swamps" and "cliff[s]"; it "looks", therefore, like an ordinary landscape. The key to the "[i]nterior" does not, however, lie in visual perception: "the hills / which the eyes make flat as a wall, welded / together, open as I move / to let me through". The lines recall the statement in "A Place: Fragments" that "[w]e must move back: / there are too many foregrounds". They suggest that visual perception is inherently distorting, that the experiencing of this landscape does not lie in perceiving its appearance but in "mov[ing]" "through" it. Visual perception, then, will not serve as a guide in this landscape; neither will the sense of touch, as the following lines suggest: "a cliff is not known / as rough except by hand, and is / therefore inaccessible". This image suggests that the ordinary words



we use to describe and define things (a "cliff" as "rough") do not work in this "[j]ourney", that language, which is formal and restricting, a system of ordering which belongs to the conscious mind, loses its power in a journey into the non-formal, unconscious areas of the mind. Because the direct experiencing (through touch) of the geographical features of the landscape is also denied the traveller, those geographical features must be seen as metaphor, and the journey as a mental, rather than physical, one. These features, which make the landscape seem real, cannot be "seen" as an ordinary landscape can, because they "open" or alter as the persona "move[s]". They cannot be touched. They cannot be defined by ordinary words. The journey is, therefore, more difficult than travelling through an actual country:

travel is not the easy going  
from point to point, a dotted  
line on a map, location  
plotted on a square surface  
but ... I move surrounded by a tangle  
of branches, a net of air and alternate  
light and dark, at all times[.]

These lines suggest that the journey cannot be charted in advance because it takes the traveller into an unknown country; the emphasis is on moving blindly, without guidelines. The last lines of this part of the poem suggest that once she has embarked on an exploration of the unknown inner

landscape, the object of the journey becomes the journey itself: "there are no destinations / apart from this".

The second part of "Journey to the Interior" creates the sense of the lack of physical motion in the inner journey. It is an exploration of the self only, and things that the persona sees and hears are obstacles to get past in order to get "inside":

your shoe among the brambles under the chair  
 where it shouldn't be; lucent  
 white mushrooms and a paring knife  
 on the kitchen table; a sentence  
 crossing my path, sodden as a fallen log  
 I'm sure I passed yesterday[.]

Language and the appearance of familiar objects are no longer simply unreliable; now, in this section, they are active barriers to an exploration of the inner self. They represent the ordered world which the conscious mind creates to live in, and their appearance within the interior landscape indicates the difficulty of leaving that order behind. As the persona says, "have I been / walking in circles again?".

More than the difficulty, however, is the "danger": "many have been here, but only / some have returned safely". In a journey into the hinterland of any country, an obvious danger is getting lost. In the inner landscape, the danger of getting lost is even greater, as the persona states in the last lines of the poem: "I know / it is easier to lose my way / forever here, than in other landscapes". In

the language of the poem's informing metaphor, it is "easier" for the persona to lose her way inside because there are no known "destinations" and, therefore, no way to guess "directions"; "[a] compass is useless", and "words here are as pointless / as calling in a vacant / wilderness". This oblique, metaphorical statement, however, gives rise to certain questions. Why make a journey into the unexplored self? What is to be gained? The answer lies in the impediments to the journey itself. If language and the appearance of things are obstacles to the journey, then this suggests that what can be gained by overcoming them is knowledge of the self as it exists apart from a system which names and confines and distorts things, as it exists behind the deceptive mask of physical appearance. What can be gained is a knowledge of what the being that says "I" really is, not its name or its various roles, but its essential being.<sup>13</sup> In the light of this implied meaning,

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Surfacing*, p. 181. In this novel, the narrator's final exorcism of the artificial order she had constructed in order to control her world is accomplished through the re-discovery of her own essential, non-verbal being. In the epiphany scene during which this occurs, she realizes the distortions inherent in naming things and thus restricting them forever to one conceptual meaning. She realizes that things are not static, like nouns, but fluid, like actions or verbs. The imagery of the relevant section is evocative of a world in the process of becoming, when language does not name things, but is the thing itself:

the meaning of the "danger" becomes more readily accessible. It is the same kind of danger which overcomes the pioneer at the end of "Progressive insanities of a pioneer", the danger of being swept under and lost in a "landscape" which does not have the comforting stability of those things that man uses to order and control his universe. The "duality", the division of the external world into two opposing camps, man's created order and the apparent chaos which continuously refutes it, by being recognized as existing within man himself, becomes potentially "violent" for the personality. The persona in "Journey to the Interior" may succumb to the terrors of the non-formal state of being of the unconscious, as the pioneer does to the terrors of formless nature.

A more complex but no less explicit use of landscape as a metaphor for the unconscious areas of the psyche occurs

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The forest leaps upward, enormous, the way it was before  
they cut it, columns of sunlight frozen; the boulders  
float, melt, everything is made of water, even the  
rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns,  
only verbs held for a longer moment.

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

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

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which  
the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place  
(Ibid, p. 181)[.]

in the later poem, "Procedures for Underground" (PFU, 24-25). In this poem, the exploration of the landscape-unconscious is given a mythological context. Landscape in "Procedures for Underground" is, like the realm of Hades in classical mythology, a "country beneath / the earth". Like the traditional underworld, which has for an entrance a chasm in the earth or a hole near a body of deep water, this "country" is entered through "tunnels, animal / burrows or the cave in the sea". Finally, the poet's instruction to "be careful / never to eat their food" recalls the myth in which Persephone, because she ate the pomegranate seed offered her by Hades, was forced to return to the underworld for four months of every year. Myth in "Procedures for Underground" provides a context of danger and fear for the exploration of an interior landscape.

Apart from the mythological associations of the landscape in "Procedures for Underground", however, its features are inherently suggestive of the unconscious. The "cave" suggests what is hidden or concealed and is therefore an image of the unconscious areas of the psyche. The "tunnel", or fissure, may be seen as a symbol of "a crack in the conscious life through which the inner pattern of the individual psyche, or of the world-soul, may be

glimpsed".<sup>14</sup> Because the underworld is also the traditional location of hell, a journey there may confront not only the hidden areas of the self, but also the forces of evil. In "Procedures for Underground", evil and danger are counterbalanced against the positive values of an exploration of the inner landscape. The positive sense is embodied in the image which begins the poem: "[t]he country beneath / the earth has a green sun / and the rivers flow backwards". The image of a "green sun" combines the associations of the sun (the fire of life and the ultimate wholeness of man) with the cyclical order of the natural world suggested by the colour "green". Similarly, the image of backward-flowing rivers reverses the sense of the river as symbolic of the passage of time, and therefore suggests, not loss and oblivion, but a "landscape" which "remembers" the primordial unity between man and the natural world. A journey in the "[u]nderground" is, therefore, a journey of the potential discovery of the self. If "you can descend and return safely", the poet says, you will have found "[t]hose who live" in that other country, your other selves. It is these other selves who can confer the gift of "wisdom and great power", the "invisible / cloak" of unity

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<sup>14</sup>Cirlot, p. 75.

and consummate identification of outer and inner universe. The "[p]rocedures" remain largely theoretical, however; the undertaking is dangerous. "Those who live" underground are "hungry", "changed and dangerous". These images suggest the denial and starvation of a part of the self which, though unconscious, unrecognized, is as real as the conscious part of the self.

The danger of re-uniting the unconscious selves ("those who were once your friends") with the conscious, ordering mind is the fearful, heightened consciousness which results:

Afterwards, if you live, you will be able  
to see them when they prowl as winds,  
as thin sounds in our village.

As the poet states in the following lines, however:

For this gift, as for all gifts, you must  
suffer: those from the underland

will be always with you, whispering their  
complaints, beckoning you  
back down[.]

These lines suggest the kind of disintegration of personality which is implied in "Journey to the Interior" and which actually happens to the pioneer in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer". The gift must be seen as self-knowledge, a knowledge of the capacity of human beings for evil, for destruction, for self-deception, denial and "forgetting",

for starving the inner man, but also as an awareness of all the potentialities of being, of the possibility of becoming fully and fearfully alive. The last lines of the poem suggest that this kind of knowledge or awareness is not the normal or usual state of being; few achieve it, and those who do are then separated from the rest who live blindly, unable to perceive the "invisible / cloak" of self-knowledge, in the conscious world of phenomena: "you will walk wrapped in an invisible / cloak. Few will seek your help / with love, none without fear".

"Journey to the Interior" and "Procedures for Underground" present the idea of discovering the self through a journey into an inner landscape. The first three poems of this chapter have served to define man's failure to come to terms with "place". The old myths no longer apply, but nothing has been found to replace them, so that the duality, the split within man, continues to exist, imaged in the negative multiplicity of the manifest world. "Journey to the Interior" and "Procedures for Underground" state that recovery of the landscape-self is at least possible. The possibility exists in making a journey into the self. Only by discovering what he is can man overcome, or at least recognize, the duality of his nature.



The journey or exploration forms the basis of the new myth in Atwood's poetry. Through the journey, it may be possible to recover the self, to achieve wholeness of being, the lack of which we have seen is the chief cause of the persona's feeling of loss and isolation in the poems examined in Chapter II. For Atwood, unity must be recovered, or discovered, by stripping away the names and appearances of things in order to confront again the thing in itself, or as Robert Kroetsch says in his article on recent Canadian fiction, by "uninvent[ing] the world".<sup>15</sup> "Journey to the Interior" and "Procedures for Underground" present this thesis in terms of metaphorical procedures to be followed. These two poems are not explorative themselves; rather, they offer procedures for the exploration, or journey. "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" (AIC, 42-47), on the other hand, proceeds to "uninvent the world". It is not a thesis poem; it belongs to the myth-making poems. Essentially, what is created in "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" is the myth of the incompleated self. If the discoveries the poem makes are not altogether positive, the exploration occurring in the poem is itself exultant.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction", Journal of Canadian Fiction, III (1974), 43.

"Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" belongs to a sequence of poems in The Animals in That Country, one of which, "Progressive insanities of a pioneer", has already been looked at, which deal more or less chronologically with man's relationship with his inner self. In "Progressive insanities of a pioneer", the pioneer sees himself as separate ("the tension / between subject and object") from the natural world which he attempts to order; this separation parallels the inner split between his conscious mind and the unconscious, so that there is no communication between the pioneer and his inner being. In "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein", the unconscious is brought out into the open for the first time and given form. It is not named; it remains a "monster" inhabiting a "vacant winter plain", but at least it is recognizably alive, vital, a force to be contended with. It is this vitality, this greed for life, which is the affirmation of "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein"; it is also this vitality, both of image and of process, which separates "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" from the detached tone of a poem like "A Place: Fragments" or "Progressive insanities of a pioneer". In "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein", what we shall see is the other half of the duality within man, the side of himself which man attempts to subjugate to his ordering, logical, conscious mind in much the same way that he attempts to impose his

own brand of order onto nature (as in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer"). Part of the affirmation in the poem lies in the fact that this non-logical side of man refuses to be held down.

Essentially, what the poet does in "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" is to describe a scene of creation and metamorphosis. She is distanced from the material by the use of the persona Dr Frankenstein, who was the creator of a monster which destroyed him. There is also a certain distance inherent in the idea that the ten sections of the poem are "[s]peeches". The use of the word "[s]peeches" in the title, and the persona's reference to herself as a "performer" in the first line of the poem, suggest a formality of occasion which is at odds with the chaotic growth and metamorphosis which happen in the poem. In fact, the sense of deliberateness and imposed control on the part of the persona provides a major contrast in the poem to the spontaneous and uncontrolled coming into being of the "thing" created. The poem is intensely visual. This, together with the sense that what happens does not conform to logic or order, but seems, rather, to belong to a dream sequence, makes the poem manifestly surrealist. Throughout, the poet's voice is conspicuously absent.

The beginning section glitters with sharply defined visual images: the moon is "fluorescent", the "performer"

stands "masked by the table", her "wrist extend[s] a scalpel". And yet the scene refuses to define itself; it is somehow opaque, its meaning obscured, its forces felt but refusing to show themselves. Who forms this "tense arena"? Why is the cyclic "moon" an artificial one? Why is the "performer" "masked"? Is she a doctor, or is this "table" the scene of some gargantuan feast? What waits in the "emptiness" to be created or consumed? The scene the persona describes combines the operating theatre with the circus and something else. The "emptiness" which "focused / [her] intent" is evocative of the chaos which, in most western mythologies, preceded the formation of the world. The following image, "[t]he air filled with an ether of cheers", suggests not only the presence of ghostly spectators, a visual rather than a sound image, but also, in the use of the word "ether", once again evokes the primordial "ether" of nothingness out of which the world came into being. Section I, therefore, ambiguously sets the scene for a parody of creation.

In section II, the insubstantial spectators, filling the "tense arena" with their "ether of cheers", have receded into the shadowy background of this poem's dream space. With them has gone the "tense arena". The table as well has undergone a transformation, and is now "a flat void, / barren as total freedom". The "[s]peeches"

have changed from the past tense to the emphatic present. The effect of all this is to place the "performer" in center stage. She is alone, although

behold

A sharp twist  
like taking a jar top off

and it is a living  
skeleton, mine, round,  
that lies on the plate before me[.]

Again, in these images it is the visual sense which is predominant. Just as in surrealist art, which attempts to portray or interpret the images of the unconscious as manifested in dreams, so in this poem the dreamer ("performer"-creator) is both separate from and part of the dream; that is, she is both her speaking voice and also the "living / skeleton", her externalized self, "that lies on the plate before [her]". Any attempt to discover the further implications of the image of the "living / skeleton" can only end in question. Usually the skeleton is an image of death; here, it is "living", "round". There is the sense that it awaits completion, that it is the frame upon which the whole being will be formed, but also, because it "lies on the plate", that it is something which will be consumed or which is all that is left when the rest has been consumed. Both senses are vital to the process of the poem, through which the "performer" is revealed to be both creator and destroyer.

What the section presents is an image of herself from her unconscious which the persona sees before her on the "flat void" which exists before creation, an image of both potential being, and also of being which has already been consumed. The primary significance of the comparison of herself (the "living / skeleton") to the pomegranate does not lie in its red colour, red signifying blood or, simply, life; rather, it arises from the internal structure of this fruit ("every cell a hot light") which is a perfect symbol for the "reconciliation of the multiple and diverse within apparent unity".<sup>16</sup> The persona's choice of the pomegranate reveals an implied truth: she has not achieved any inner wholeness of being. She is not one but, metaphorically and actually, a divided (or "multiple") being. Man's dual nature (the "violent duality") is not explicitly mentioned, but the fact that the persona is both the "performer" and the object (the "living / skeleton") that lies before her indicates that the duality still exists.

In section III, the performer, the rational mind which "murder[s] to dissect",<sup>17</sup> confronts her germinal being. It is without shape, "like yeast". All the imagery

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<sup>16</sup>Cirlot, p. 249.

<sup>17</sup>Wordsworth, p. 377.

in this section suggests both the creature's vitality and its formlessness: "[i]t dissolves, growls, grows crude claws"; "[t]he air is dusty with blood". When it "springs", and the performer "cut[s] / with delicate precision", what she effectively does is to divide her unformed being in two. As Cirlot points out, "[f]or symbolic purposes, the essence of multiplication is division".<sup>18</sup> The image of cutting is therefore an image of multiplicity. The performer destroys her own potential unity: "[t]he thing falls Thud. A cat / anatomized". Significantly, it is only after the "thing" has been partly destroyed that it can be labelled. The essence or, in the metaphor of living creature "anatomized" to reveal its inner structure, the soul, has fled. The last lines of the section are therefore ironic: "O secret / form of the heart, now I have you". What she has is the substance; the informing spirit will not be pinned down. In the first three sections, then, the reader is presented with a strange shifting "landscape" which is at once a ghostly "arena", a "flat void" and a kind of alchemic laboratory. Here, "[t]he specimens / ranged on the shelves, applaud" the "delicate precision" of the

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<sup>18</sup>Cirlot, p. 212.

performer-creator as she seeks to fathom the "secret / form[s]", the mystery of life itself. The scene is undefined, formless, and as such it evokes the pre-formal period in the world's history. Within this scene, the performer usurps the function of God.

Having dissected, now she will re-form, re-create (section IV). When she says, "I am the universal weaver", the persona is appropriating the power to create life. The questions she asks, "[w]hat would you like? / / Baroque scrolls on your ankles? / A silver navel?", indicate her desire to form something more than human, to embody art and ritual in the finished product, to have her creation elaborate and complex, with the complexity of the ornate and not the complexity of a living being. Most of all, the persona's statements and rhetorical questions in this section indicate a desire to name the creature she has trapped or created: "I surround you with intricate ropes. / / What web shall I wrap you in? / Gradually / pin you down". We have already seen, in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer", that the desire to name amounts to a desire to control, to fix forever the limits and meanings of the things to be named. This is exactly what the persona of "Speeches of Dr Frankenstein" reveals that she wishes to do: "[w]hat equation shall / I carve and seal in your skull?". This denies the possibility of ever growing or changing. It



also represents an attempt to deny the duality within man and to create instead a creature which is all logic, all order and symmetry, and which will conform to the conscious mind's need to control. This cannot be done; the half of man which seeks to control cannot be exalted at the expense of the other half. We have seen the proof of this in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer". The truth of this is explicitly demonstrated in the remainder of "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein", just as it is implied through the imagery in section IV. The images of "silver navel", "[b]aroque scrolls" and "carve[d]" and "seal[ed]" "equation" are not images of anything living; they suggest, rather, the rigid permanence of the statue. In this system of creation, the last question of the section ("[w]here should I put your eyes?") may well be asked last, for in the lifeless creature the persona creates, it makes no difference where the eyes are placed.

The system of naming and ordering that section IV suggests is based upon a conception similar to the pioneer's conception of himself as the "centre" in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer". We have seen that this view of himself effectively excludes the recognition of man as part of a cycle. If each one man is the centre then life itself is finite, doomed to the logic of an individual death. In "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein", the persona has

again tried to make her creature contain all, complete in itself. She has, however, succeeded only in denying all potentialities. It is this that she recognizes in section V:

I was insane with skill:  
I made you perfect.

I should have chosen instead  
to curl you small as a seed,  
  
trusted beginnings.

The seed is an image of unity, of that "non-apparent point which is the irradiating origin of every branch and shoot of the great Tree of the World".<sup>19</sup> Like the ark, the seed contains everything in potential. In this context, it suggests the process itself, of growth, life and death, which the persona has excluded from her perfect creature. The "plateful of results" which she is left with recalls the image, in the second section, of the "skeleton" "on the plate before [her]", except that where before it was "living", "round", now it is "core and rind, the flesh between / already turning rotten". This metaphor for the thing she has created echoes the image of the pomegranate (section II); now, however, its nature as illustrating multiplicity

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

rather than unity is fully apparent. The "secret / form of the heart" which the persona thought she had captured has evaded her completely, and she is left only with further proof of the lack of wholeness in her creation, its "rubble of tendons, / knuckles and raw sinews" the evidence of a Frankenstein-like creativity. It is clear that the persona has sought to create out of her own "living / skeleton", out of herself, a god, a completed and perfect being which would not grow or change, which would be no threat to her. Instead, she "stand[s] in the presence / of the destroyed god". Desiring only perfection, the performer-creator has destroyed the innate possibilities of the seed for unity and wholeness. It is the continuing existence of the "rubble", the bits and pieces without the synthesizing meaning, the sustaining and informing spirit of unity of the whole, which the persona refers to in the last lines of the section: "[t]hese archives of potential / time exude fear like a smell".

Part of the affirmation of "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" lies in the fact that the "secret / form of the heart" which eludes the persona cannot be destroyed. Section VI combines the ideas of resurrection of the body and the metamorphosis of animals which change structurally as they mature, within the larger, more general theme of Frankenstein and monster. The first image of the section

is complex because it works on all three of these levels: "[y]ou arise, larval / and shrouded in the flesh I gave you". "[L]arval" is an explicit reference to the early form of an animal, such as the butterfly or the frog, which undergoes a metamorphosis in the process of becoming adult; "shrouded" suggests, first of all, grave clothes; in the context of the poem, it suggests as well the destruction of her creature which the persona has brought about. The image as a whole suggests a kind of re-birth, or the shedding of one mode of existence as the new is assumed. It is fitting that the creature still will not assume one shape, will not be limited, for, as the poem progresses, it becomes more and more identified with the life principle itself, with that unconscious part of a human being which will not conform to a preconceived order of existence, but embodies instead the principle of growth and change, becoming rather than being: a cycle, embracing the paradoxical co-existence of life and death. The creature is the half of man's duality which has been denied, the half which senses the true principle of order in the universe and which is, therefore, opposed to the order-creating half, the conscious mind.

The persona, in the following lines in section VI, retains only a "covering" of "white cloth skin", an image which suggests her former role as scientist or doctor,

while at the same time suggesting that she is slowly being depleted of vital energy which the creature takes for its own existence:

you are red,  
you are human and distorted.

You have been starved,  
you are hungry. I have nothing to feed you.

The idea of appetite is a continuous undercurrent in this poem. The monster is, in the first three sections, something to be consumed, or at least "anatomized". Following this, in section V, it becomes something for which the persona has no appetite: "I wince / before this plateful of results". Now, in a kind of reversal, the creature itself becomes the hunger, the need. Gwendolyn MacEwen, in an introductory statement about her volume of poetry, A Breakfast for Barbarians, calls the kind of hunger Atwood is creating in "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" "the wilful hunger of the soul".<sup>20</sup> She explains this concept by saying that most of us have denied or ignored this hunger, which is not physical hunger, but that the "barbarian, living close to his original appetites, has not lost the capacity for joy; it is a wilful thing".<sup>21</sup> The creature in "Speeches

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<sup>20</sup>Gwendolyn MacEwen, A Breakfast for Barbarians (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1966), dust jacket.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

for Dr Frankenstein" is a kind of barbarian; it is vital ("red"), "human", and "distorted" by having been denied for so long. It is similar to "[t]hose who live" in the underworld and "are always hungry" in "Procedures for Underground". It is the hunger of the unconscious made manifest.

In section VII, the persona recognizes the being she has unleashed as the other half of herself: "Reflection, you have stolen / everything you needed: / / my joy, my ability / to suffer". She, who has been slowly diminishing in the poem, is finally subsumed (or consumed) completely, except for the ordering conscious mind, by the creature, which was first formless, like "yeast", then "larval", then "human and distorted". The image through which the persona's eclipse is suggested is an image of the alchemic transmutation of matter into another purer form: "[y]ou have transmuted / yourself to me: I am / a vestige, I am numb". The image suggests that her physical being has been expropriated by her creation, that the chaotic inner self has assumed control, and the "I" who makes these "[s]peeches" is now only the disembodied, order-creating mind. The self is still split, but the conscious mind is no longer in control. The "duality" has become "violent" ("[n]ow you accuse me of murder") because the other half of the self will no longer be repressed.

In the remaining three sections of the poem, the landscape itself undergoes a metamorphosis. There is no longer the atmosphere of decadence created by the performer's probing into the workings of the heart, or by her attempt to create a perfect being. The arena and the laboratory fade, and with them the "ether of cheers" and the applause of the "specimens". This shifting formlessness is replaced by the cold, electric atmosphere of a northern landscape (section VIII):

Over this vacant winter  
plain, the sky is a black shell;  
I move within it, a cold  
kernel of pain.

We have seen in poems like "Tricks with Mirrors" and "A Place: Fragments" that ice often signifies the rigid dividing line between the conscious mind and the unconscious. Over this symbolic frozen landscape, then, the persona of "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein", reduced to a "cold / kernel of pain" (her conscious mind) is condemned to an endless chase. Having tried to create herself, perfect and completed, she is forced now to try to recapture the thing she has inadvertently given freedom to. One statement in section VIII emerges as affirmation: "I must pursue / that animal I once denied / was mine". This animal must be seen as energy not yet mastered by the will, or that unconscious area of the psyche which is non-human

in that it has not been made to conform to the conscious mind's logic. The statement is an affirmation because it acknowledges that the human animal is not limited or restricted in essence. It is a negative statement only in that it does not foresee any way in which the duality within man may be reconciled. The last image of section VIII is also both positive and negative. It acknowledges that the "wilful hunger of the soul",<sup>22</sup> having once been brought into existence, becomes the only hunger. All else is subsumed by it: "[m]y heart's / husk is a stomach. I am its food".

In the first image of section IX, we are again reminded that the performer and her creation are no longer in the rather effete world of the arena-laboratory, where the scientist's fastidious and deadly manipulations ("delicate precision") destroy life. The first image suggests instead that the persona has "pursue[d]" her quarry into its own territory, the other side of the barrier of ice between the two realms of existence:

The sparkling monster  
gambols there ahead,  
his mane electric:  
This is his true place.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



The section glitters with visual images, images of light, motion, design. There is no longer any sense of an artificially lighted theatre of surrealistic events. The creature itself emanates light and energy, as if from the centre of a kind of cosmic dance: "[h]e dances in spirals on the ice, / his clawed feet / kindling shaggy fires". The individual parts of this section all contribute to the motif of the dance. "[S]parkling", "electric", "fires" and "light" all suggest energy. "[G]ambols" and "dances" suggest the dynamic process of becoming, of metamorphosis, or of creation. The "spiral" is a symbol of cosmic energy, growth and movement. In its moving, circular form, it reconciles the principles of multiplicity (the perimeter or rim) and unity (the center).<sup>23</sup> Thus the cycle of life is contained in the "paths" of the creature. He becomes, like the dance itself, "the incarnation of eternal energy."<sup>24</sup> The image of the persona, on the other hand, as the "gaunt hunter / necessary for his patterns", suggests never-ending pursuit, motion without design or meaning or fulfillment. Having "sliced [it] loose", she is doomed to "pursue /

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<sup>23</sup>Cirlot, p. 291.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

that animal" whose existence she has denied.

Finally, in section X, the dreamed self, the self that dreams, speaks:

Doctor, my shadow  
shivering on the table,  
you dangle on the leash  
of your own longing;  
your need grows teeth.

You sliced me loose

and said it was  
Creation. I could feel the knife.  
Now you would like to heal  
that chasm in your side,  
but I recede. I prowl.

I will not come when you call.

At the end of the poem, the ordering, manipulating conscious mind is reduced from a performer-creator to a "shivering" creature wanting only wholeness and denied it by its own system of ordering things, its own logic, the "leash / of [its] own longing". The inner self, the creature of the unconscious, has, on the other hand, grown to vast proportions, "his arctic hackles / bristling", "his paws on the horizon". Where, then, is the sense of affirmation in a poem which illustrates conclusively man's divided nature? It exists primarily in the huge vitality of the imagery itself, in its dynamic re-creation or externalization of the hitherto unrecognized inner self. It does not reside in the persona's point of view,

her "[s]peeches", but rather in the wilful declaration of being of "that animal" itself: "I will not come when you call".

In the continuing exploration of the inner world, the persona's statement that "[t]his is his true place" becomes prophetic. The myth Atwood is creating of the incompleted self is not negative insofar as it demands and receives continuing exploration of the self. The exploration, if it is honest, if it confronts rather than evades, is affirmative even though it may not result in the explorer's achieving the sought for inner unity of being. More and more, this exploration occurs in a frozen arctic landscape. Since ice is an image of the barrier that makes man a dual creature, it is right that the external correspondence of an inner exploration should be the exploration of an unyielding winter landscape. This landscape is usually barren, and in the next poem, "Arctic syndrome: dream fox" (AIC, 48-49), it is an unrelieved expanse of snow and ice, a "white / bedrock sheet". For Atwood, the process of unnamings things, of rediscovering the incompleted self, demands a landscape uncluttered by any visible manifestation of man's ordering of the world.

"Arctic syndrome: dream fox" expands the poet's vision revealed in "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" of the

unconscious as a vital force, a kind of "wilful hunger"<sup>25</sup> for life. This poem, however, explores the divided self completely from the point of view of the "pursue[d]" animal itself. The events in this poem occur in a dream, and the dreamer is the "dream fox".

That the landscape in which the "dream fox" moves is an inner landscape is indicated by the title of the poem. The "shifting icefloe", the "snow", the "glacier", are all symptoms which occur together and which characterize a specific disease, the "[a]rctic syndrome". The arctic landscape is, therefore, used again to suggest the rigid dividing line between the conscious mind and the unconscious, and the "arctic syndrome" describes the malaise of the divided self. The poem makes it very explicit that the frozen landscape exists because of man's creation of an artificial, sterile order to which a part of himself cannot and will not conform. The "white / bedrock sheet" and the "shifting icefloe" are "evoked by your antiseptic / tents, pitched city". This latter image suggests the impermanence of the world man creates. Although this artificial order has caused the split within man, the image of "tents / pitched city" suggests that it is a temporary order, that it will not survive. The opening lines of the poem echo

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<sup>25</sup>MacEwen, *ibid.*

the central theme and image of the poem "City Planners" (CG, 27-28), in which the desperate attempt of the "insane ... conspirators", "each in his own private blizzard", to contain and define order with their "transitory lines", is an ultimately futile gesture, defeated finally by a "bland madness of snows".

Before the sterile order of the city "far beyond / treeline of warm events" can exist as the only form of order, the animal of the unconscious must be captured or destroyed. Otherwise, the two worlds will continue to exist, side by side, unreconciled. The alternatives are madness, the complete disintegration of personality, or violence. In "Arctic syndrome: dream fox", the imagery suggests that the animal-unconscious has been driven almost to the point of madness:

I crawl  
pulled by hypnotic  
snowcall  
  
and on my skin a thick  
white fur of terror.

Snow does have a kind of hypnotic effect. To succumb to snow in Atwood's poetry is nearly always to succumb to madness. Metaphorically, this indicates that the self becomes lost forever somewhere within the barrier between its two halves. The "mind's ice / expanses" (AIC, 67-68), "evoked" by the

cities, exist to be broken through. For the "dream fox",  
this breaking through becomes a matter of survival:

My citizen, I hear you  
deducing me from my  
footprints: hunting the fox  
reek of me:  
                    reducing  
me to diagram, your accurate  
paper aiming[.]

The citizen he addresses is the creator of cities, of  
"suburb / order" (CG, 28), the creature of logic, the  
conscious mind which exists on the other side of the frozen  
landscape "far beyond" the "treeline of warm events". The  
"dream fox", hunted like the animal in "Speeches for Dr  
Frankenstein", responds in a manner which recalls the  
earlier poem, answering with "glare of moon on / glacier,  
an / arctic madness". This image, with its suggestion of  
glittering light (and, therefore, of a kindled energy)  
recalls the images of light and energy in section IX of  
"Speeches for Dr Frankenstein". The "arctic madness" of  
the "dream fox" is not the disintegration of personality;  
it suggests instead the wilful hunger for survival which  
is born of terror.

In a poem entitled "Highest Altitude" (PFU, 56),  
the persona makes the statement that "in fear everything /  
lives, impermanence / makes the edges of things burn / /  
brighter". It is this kind of sudden flicker of energy,

kindled by fear of being destroyed, that informs this part, and indeed the remainder, of "Arctic syndrome: dream fox". The fox has three choices: the madness induced by the arctic syndrome and suggested in the image, "hypnotic snowcall"; capitulation to the citizen's logical order (and, therefore, one must assume, reversion to a latent or non-manifest existence characterized by complete subjugation to the will); or violence. The fox chooses violence: "[s]hed blood, only reply / to cold; to rid / the flesh of logic". These lines are self-explanatory. It is interesting to note, however, the progression in this poem beyond "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein". In the earlier poem, the animal-unconscious will not give up its new found freedom. It is enough that the logical ordering mind, the self-destroying persona, be reduced to a "gaunt hunter" forced to pursue her elusive quarry in its own territory, its "true place". In "Arctic syndrome: dream fox", however, the fox wants to achieve totality of being. He wants to banish the arctic syndrome, to break through the frozen landscape, and finally to destroy that part of man which creates the barrier of "cold" by creating a "logic" of cities which excludes the fox. The fact that it is the "dream fox" that we are aware of in the poem, and not the dreamer, suggests that he has succeeded in doing this to the extent that the dreamer, the sleeping conscious mind, is completely external to him. The reference to "[m]y citizen" indicates this.

The final images of the poem, in which the "dream fox" turns away from the frozen wasteland to invade the transitory order erected by man and, finally, to attack the dreamer himself, are brilliantly visual:

I drop  
and run on all 4 feet  
through the nomad houses.

In the neck  
of the sleeping hunter  
my teeth meet.

In these last three lines, the dreamer himself is suddenly in the dream. The image of the fox biting the neck of the sleeping hunter is "symbolic of the sudden and dangerous assault of the instincts upon the psyche".<sup>26</sup> The effect of the image is a devastating simplicity. It presents, visually and irrevocably, the existence within man of a violent duality. We are lulled, at the first of the poem, because of the presence of only the "dream fox" into thinking that, at least in dreams, the non-verbal, non-formal area of the psyche may have a free existence. We may even interpret the dream as the unrealized desire of the dreamer to free that part of himself. The sudden, extra-logical appearance of the dreamer in his dream, however, joins the two divided halves of himself in a kind

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<sup>26</sup>Cirlot, p. 27.



of magnetic field. Neither can escape the other. Each remains as an opposing pole of the duality existing within man.

The affirmation of "Arctic syndrome: dream fox" lies in the intensity of the exploration of the self. Like "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein", this intensity is revealed through the vivid clarity of the imagery. Although Atwood "discovers", in the process of these two poems, that man is not whole, the discovery is not negative. Exploration itself is affirmation. Because of the refusal to accept the way things appear as the only reality, wholeness of being exists at least as an unachieved possibility.

In the poems examined in this chapter, we have seen the essential triviality and insubstantiality of the order man creates in the face of the order of the natural world. "A Place: Fragments" and "Progressive insanities of a pioneer" illustrate man's inability (in the former poem) and his arrogant refusal (in the latter) to recognize any order other than the one which he creates. In both poems, the known (which is, basically, all those things created by man) aligns itself with man's conscious mind, and the unknown aligns itself with the unconscious areas of man's psyche. In both poems, the poet dispels, finally, the myth of the apparent chaos of the natural world, and posits instead the myth of the unfound (in "A Place:

Fragments") and the myth of the unnamed (in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer"). In both poems, the possibility of reaching a state of harmony with the external universe is formed in terms of discovering its nonverbal language. Thus, in "A Place: Fragments", the poet speaks of "writings ... / locked against us", and in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer", of "words / he couldn't understand". The theme of the search, of the exploration, arises as a possible solution to the dilemma of the violent duality, that is, of the obvious lack of harmony between man's world and the natural world.

"Journey to the Interior" and "Procedures for Underground" are two poems which state that exploration of the landscape must take the form of an exploration of the inner landscape, if anything is to be discovered. All along, the poems which have been examined have seemed to suggest, more or less explicitly, that the key to the universe is within the self. Even in "The Circle Game", the persona's dismal failure to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the "you" figure could be seen as the result of her failure to know herself, and of her resigned acceptance of surface appearance. And in the second chapter's exploration of the lost forest poems, the loss could be equated with the breakdown of the persona's inner communication, again, a failure to know the self.

"A fortification" perhaps illustrates this most explicitly, with its metaphor of the automaton, totally inured against "grass", "leaves and blood".

If man is indeed a dual creature, operating on two levels, one conscious, the other unconscious, then the two halves must somehow be reconciled before he can exist in harmony with the external world. The two poems, "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" and "Arctic syndrome: dream fox", celebrate the life of the unconscious. If they do not reconcile the two forces within man, one a confining and restricting force, a force which seeks to deny the terrors of the universe and succeeds in denying also its joys, the other a life-embracing force celebrating itself, its transience, its place in the eternally recurring natural cycle, these two surrealist poems do, at least, discover what there is. In them, the unconscious is given form and allowed existence for the first time. Affirmation takes the form of a newly discovered myth, the myth of the incompleated self. Man is not whole; he is not a perfectly formed god; but if he is aware of his inherent cowardliness, his tendency to build systems for protection that deny growth and dynamic discovery, and also of his capacity for joy and terror, the wilful hunger of his soul, then wholeness is at least possible.

It is because of the process of exploration and discovery in these two poems that the persona is able to say of the mind of man, in a poem ("I was reading a scientific article") near the end of The Animals in That Country (AIC, 64-65):

my hands trace the contours of a total  
universe, its different  
colours, flowers, its undiscovered  
animals, violent or serene

its other air  
its claws

its paradise rivers[.]

The persona in this poem cannot name, specifically, the things which exist, hidden, in the unexplored places of the self, but they are there, nevertheless. Wholeness, completion, must come from a recognition and acceptance of an unknown area of the self, not from fathoming it or explaining it away, but from recognizing that there are "undiscovered / animals, violent or serene", that there are "paradise rivers".

In another poem, "A pursuit", which affirms both the search and the existence of an unknown within man (AIC, 66-67), the persona says:

Through the tangle of each other  
we hunt ourselves.

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I want you

to be  
 a place for me  
 to search in[.]

In the continuing exploration of man's "total / universe", both the inner self and the outer place remain unnamed. There is the sense that this is because each is being explored for the first time. In "The animals in that country", we have seen that animals "[i]n this country" "have the faces of / no-one" because they have not been mythologized, or "named". A glimpse of one of these animals is a glimpse of the actual animal and not of a quality, or a symbol of something else. As has already been suggested, the purpose of the exploration in these poems of the violent duality which in man is to find true form, or, in the words of "Dr Frankenstein", "true place". It is not to create a false system of mythology, but to discover an organic myth which will reconcile man with himself and with his world.

In a much later poem in You are Happy (YAH, 69-70), the persona states: "this land is not finished, / this body is not reversible". This is the kind of vision which the poet has achieved in her exploration of the violent duality, and it forms the basis of the poems to be examined in the final chapter of this thesis. The lines quoted above constitute a statement of the actual: man does not live in a kind of vacuum of his own creation, the center and ruler

of an ordered but limited universe. He exists in time; like the land, he belongs to a cycle of growth and change, of becoming. The poet has progressed honestly to this expanded vision. The statement quoted above, and those quoted from the two poems near the end of The Animals in That Country, are not unfounded hopes or self-delusions. They are, rather, the result of the process of exploration which occurs in the poems examined in this chapter. It is this expanded vision, this earned insight into "the heart", and the realization that it has "secret form[s]" (AIC, 43), which underlies Atwood's treatment of the love relationship in the poems to be examined in the last chapter. Having gone through the process and arrived, the poet is able to satirize the lies and hypocrisies, the masks and roles, which clutter up a relationship between two people. In her exploration of the condition of being human and alive, the poet discovers what is not possible, what is.

## CHAPTER IV

### THERE IS ONLY ONE OF EVERYTHING

These expeditions  
have no end (AIC, 67)

The poems to be examined in this chapter constitute a return of the poet's attention to the problem of establishing a meaningful relationship with another person. The poems are all taken from the last two books of Atwood's poetry, Power Politics and You are Happy. Although poems which explore the relationship of the persona and a male figure appear in all the collections of poetry, there is a much larger proportion of love poems characterized by self-knowledge in the last two books than in any of the others. In the poems which this chapter will explore, the persona recognizes the masks and roles people use to confront the world and to avoid letting others know them, to avoid knowing themselves.

In the poems in Chapter III, the poet explores the order man creates to deal with the reality of the world as he perceives it. This ordering of experience is seen as an essentially artificial way of meeting the exigencies of life within an apparently chaotic landscape, and within the self, in that it is a kind of denial of everything which will

not fit into its own scheme of things. In Chapter III, we saw that man's order is inherently a system of avoidance and non-confrontation and that, by refusing to see himself as a dual creature, man widens the split between the two poles of his nature; in other words, the "duality" becomes "violent". Atwood has not reconciled the opposing forces within man; she has not shown man as unified within himself, completed, or as having achieved a state of harmony between the inner and outer worlds, but through the process of the poems examined in Chapter III, from the thesis poems in the poet's own voice at the beginning of the chapter which illustrate the concept of a violent duality, to the surrealist poems at the end from which the poet is manifestly absent, the "secret / form of the heart" is gradually exposed. It is not captured, or pinned down, or named, but by being "un-hidden",<sup>1</sup> all its latent capacities for becoming truly, vitally alive (and whole) emerge into the realm of what is possible.

Simultaneous with the process of exploration, with the journey, in the poems in Chapter III, is the gradual emergence of a new myth of the incompleted or unformed self. It is with the positive and the negative aspects of this

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<sup>1</sup>Kroetsch, p. 43.



myth that the examination of the poems in this chapter will be concerned. In fact, the positive and the negative are inextricably joined. The journey into the self in the search for unity or completion must always contain the possibility of wrong choices, of the failure to separate the often painful need for self-discovery and self-expression from the desire for power over another or from the tendency to grasp at the security which masks and roles and the readily accessible man-made order seem to provide. The myth of the incompleted self embodies a disturbing truth, in that it suggests at the same time the potential for both completion and destruction, for immeasurable gain and irrevocable loss, which exists within the individual. Without a myth of order by which experience is defined and contained, each choice is new; each exploration of the outward form of a relationship between two people, its restrictions and deceptions, necessitates a journey into the self. In the light of the necessity for a continuing journey, the statement that "There is Only One of Everything" (YAH, 92) becomes, not a postulate of the mystical unity at the center of the universe which embraces all things, but simply a statement of the actual. It is a positive formulation of the belief that each thing, person, phenomenon, must be met face to face, without masks or lies, as something new and unique. It can be viewed as a statement of poetic

intent: to de-mythologize the condition of being "both human and alive" (PP, 30), to break down all the false systems of ordering experience and, in the last poems to be examined in this thesis, to celebrate the ephemeral life of man as it is, in time and of time.

The process contained in the poems of this chapter is not unequivocal. The affirmation implicit in the statement, there is only one of everything, is reached only after a long and painfully honest exploration of the self and the love relationship with the "you" figure. At times, the persona, assailed by doubts of the value of the journey and suffering attacks of cynicism, is tempted to let the games and roles continue, because they are "more fun and less painful" (PP, 17). For the most part, however, the poems are informed by the clear light of ironic self-knowledge.

The first poem, "My beautiful wooden leader" (PP, 7), is a metaphorical characterization of the role-player. The poem is much more than a simple satire on the stasis involved in trying to sustain a preconceived role. The reader is conscious at all times of the constant shifts in the poem from metaphorical to literal truth, from the irony of a single word to the larger irony which arises from context. The reader is conscious too of the apparent candor of the persona and, simultaneously, of the tongue-in-cheek

attitude of the dissembling poet who stands behind the poem, twisting the strands of the metaphor to the final point of self-generating irony in the last image.

The persona's opening statement is both patronizing and self-implicating in tone:

My beautiful wooden leader  
with your heartful of medals  
made of wood, fixing it  
each time so you almost win,

you long to be bandaged  
before you have been cut.

In these lines, the persona establishes the stasis, the complete lack of vitality, which inheres in trying to live a role. Her companion's "wooden" exterior suggests his lifelessness; the fact that his "medals", which might if earned in ordinary life confer special status, distinction, upon the wearer, are also "made of wood" serves to reinforce the sense of the lack of any dynamic meaning in the role or mask. In this context, the "heartful of medals" becomes an image of the badges assumed by the "wooden leader" to define himself for the world. From the juxtaposition of the words "heartful" and "wood", there is also the suggestion of inner stiffness or lifelessness. "[W]ooden", in the sense of "made of wood" and also in the sense of dull or lifeless, suggests that the persona's companion is trying to turn himself into an exterior, into the façade he

presents to the world. And yet there is the sense in the lines that he is human too, that he suffers from the human need to be special, more than just an ordinary person. He wants to be the anti-hero who "almost win[s]"; he "long[s]" to exhibit to the world proof ("bandage[s]") that he has suffered and survived ordeals, rites of passage, without any genuine venturing forth or risk on his part.

The persona reveals her companion as an orderer of experience, actively engaged in trying to convert himself into a living myth, not by journeying into himself, but by manipulating outward appearances. Because the persona shows not only the ridiculousness of his attempt but also the essential humanness of her companion, his fallibility and the seriousness with which he tries to order his world, the lines are not satirical in effect but gently ironic. The irony derives from the disparity between the attempt and what is accomplished by the attempt. Another kind of irony derives from the insights which the use of this metaphor indicates the persona has acquired into the whole process of role-playing, and from the fact that in spite of these insights she implicates herself in her companion's behaviour. When she refers to him as "[m]y beautiful wooden leader", she suggests that he behaves as he does at least partly because she encourages it. Her tone is detached; it is also patronizing of his "woodenness" (his stiffness,

or the fact that he takes himself so seriously), and yet there is more than a little of self-mockery in her tone as well. The persona's amused detachment is ironic because she is not really as detached as her understanding of the situation would seem to suggest.

In the following lines, the persona drops her own mask of condescending amusement and admits that she is not detached or uninvolved: "[m]y love for you is the love / of one statue for another: tensed / / and static". This statement is not ironic, or, if it is, only so in the use of the word "love" to describe the interaction between two "statue[s]". There is in these lines the sense that the persona is suspending her sense of amusement for a moment in order to admit a basic truth: she too wears a mask, or behaves in the expected way. The next lines, however, revert to satire: "General, you enlist / my body in your heroic / struggle to become real". The persona now addresses not the man but the role he has assumed. There is intentional irony in the choice of the words "enlist" and "heroic", since the "[g]eneral" has no army to support him other than the persona who encourages his role, and his "struggle" to become something other, and ultimately less, than what he is is closer to being absurd than "heroic". The use of the word "body" is also ironic; it is not the persona as an individual that the male figure "enlist[s]" in his army, but her appearance, a "body" that will conform

to and complement his role as "[g]eneral". The "struggle to become real" is ambiguous. It suggests the attempt of the male figure to become the part he plays, and also, by a curious inversion which occurs because the persona addresses the "General" rather than the man playing at being the general, it suggests the struggle of the general to become alive. The "promise of bronze rescues" is equally ambiguous. It should suggest a deliverance from having continuously to play a role, a reuniting of the persona with her "real" self, but since "real" has already suggested, ironically, the condition of evolving into the mask which is worn or the part that is played, so "bronze rescues" suggests, melodramatically, deliverance from the boredom of ordinary existence and the conversion ( of the persona) into a role which will complement her companion's role of "[g]eneral". In these lines, the persona satirizes her companion's disappearance into the role he plays.

The next section introduces into the poem's central metaphor a new element, an image which suggests the pictorial motif appearing on the front cover of the collection:

you hold me by the left ankle  
 so that my head brushes the ground,  
 my eyes are blinded,  
 my hair fills with white ribbons.

This reference to something outside the realm of the poem indicates a greater distance between the persona and the

situation she is describing than the rest of the poem would seem to suggest. In fact, the image of the hanged woman is a kind of poetic variation of the Tarot card of the hanged man, an enigma with a complex symbolism which includes the suggestion of mystical isolation because of the figure's suspension midway between heaven and earth, and also of sacrifice and suffering.<sup>2</sup> The image of the hanged woman retains these associations. Because the persona is suspended from the hand or wrist of the role-playing "[g]eneral", there is also the suggestion that her isolation, her strange separateness from other human beings, is somehow caused by her relationship to this man. What is sacrificed is the self that is distorted and limited by the imposition of the mask as the "real" being. What the persona gains, however, by being "hanged" is the clarity of vision associated with inversion or with suddenly discovering a new perspective from which to view the world. The persona is distanced from the situation by this clarity of vision even while it allows her to see that she is bound or held fast within it.

In the next section of the poem, the persona's vision of her own predicament expands to include all those

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<sup>2</sup>Cirlot, p. 132.

others who, like her, are trapped by the syndrome of the role-player:

There are hordes of me now, alike  
and paralyzed, we follow you  
scattering floral tributes  
under your hooves.

In these lines, the persona indicates what happens when the mask is allowed to be the only reality, complete in itself. Not only is individuality lost, but the "followers" become infected with the same stasis and lifelessness which characterizes the wearer of masks. Just as the general is the epitome of manliness, so the women who "follow" him evidence only the conventionally feminine gesture of "scattering floral tributes". The use of this image marks the return to the ironic tone which opens the poem.

The final image of the poem is a witty and diverting parody of the predictable happy ending of many western movies in which the hero and his companions or cohorts, or perhaps his chosen woman, ride off, mission accomplished, into the sunset:

Magnificent on your wooden horse  
you point with your fringed hand;  
the sun sets, and the people all  
ride off in the other direction.

The "[g]eneral" in these lines has partly evolved into a cowboy, as the "fringed hand" and the "sunset" seem to



indicate. The irony again arises from the disparity between the "magnificen[ce]" of the gesture, or the role, and its utter hollowness. It means nothing. This is borne out by the response of the "people" to the general's gesture of authority. Instead of the self-fulfilling symbolism of riding off into the sunset, the people turn and "ride off in the other direction". This is a brilliantly satiric image of the ultimate failure of role-playing to achieve anything other than its inherent absurdity. The suggestion in these lines is that the "people" obviously haven't learned their parts very well.

In "My beautiful wooden leader", the male companion of the persona achieves, finally, his aim to become the part he plays. At the end of the poem, there is no trace left of his individuality, of his human longing for recognition by others. He is completely subsumed by the role. The irony of course is that this is not what he must have had in mind. The position of the persona is more complex. She admits her complicity in this meaningless pattern; she "sees" the far-reaching effects of letting stock roles, lifeless masks, dictate the way people live; she implies that she is powerless, in spite of her understanding, to change things. And yet, her self-mockery ("[t]here are hordes of me now") and the not unkind parodying of her companion's predicament indicate that the persona is

not really powerless but just unwilling, yet, to risk the pain or failure which might result from trying to change things, from trying to become fully, vitally alive. The poem is not completely negative. The persona reveals that she understands the motives and needs behind the role-player's manipulations; as well, she reveals her own lively sense of the absurd. Although she satirizes the playing of roles, her treatment of the man behind the role is ironic rather than satirical. The poem is a kind of prelude to the persona's active attempt, in the poems that follow, to escape the distorting and confining roles and masks which threaten to drain the continuing relationship of all positive energy and meaning, and to move toward the vision expressed in the poem, "There is Only One of Everything".

"Hesitations outside the door" (PP, 48-51) captures those moments during which the persona wavers between the desire to discard the masks and to acknowledge the lies and evasions with which she has ordered her world, and the need to keep things as they are regardless of what is lost by doing so.

The poem is in seven sections. In each of the first six, the persona twists language in order to make certain limited admissions and also to avoid revealing truths about her fears and needs. Throughout the poem, language itself, that is, the act of using language, functions

as a kind of lie by which the persona orders experience. As long as she continues to conjecture in words about what lies behind the "door", or whether she wants or doesn't want to open it, the necessity for actually confronting whatever it is that exists behind the door is delayed.

The motif of the door is used in both a literal and a symbolic sense. As a symbol, it suggests access not to a space (room or house or outside), but to a state of being or a moment in time. Opening the door is equivalent to making or beginning a journey. The door is in this sense a beginning, the gateway to a new world, which may or may not be chosen.

In the first section, the persona chooses to obscure the meaning of the door with a veil of language:

I'm telling the wrong lies,  
they are not even useful.

The right lies would at least  
be useful, they would open the door.

If the door is the means of access to a secret part of the self, or even to a room in a house which contains things that the persona does not want to know about, or would prefer to leave alone, then the only way "lies" could be "keys" to "open the door" would be if they were lies which would deceive the persona herself by falsely allaying her fears. The "wrong lies" are "not ... useful" because they don't convince the teller; the "right lies" would open the door

only by robbing it of any significance. In the next lines, therefore, the persona adds realistic detail to give the door verisimilitude:

The door is closed; the chairs,  
the tables, the steel bowl, myself  
  
shaping bread in the kitchen, wait  
outside it.

With these objects and the domestic scene of bread-making that she sketches, the persona creates a house. The door becomes simply the entrance to one of its rooms. The lines suggest the persona's attempt to retract her obviously symbolic usage of the word "door" (since lies do not literally open doors) and posit instead the idea of the door as a door. The attempt does not quite succeed. The syntax of the last lines of section 1, with objects and speaker "wait[ing]" outside the "closed door", creates the sense of familiar objects and the speaker's ordinary routines united against an unknown quantity. Although the speaker implies in the first four lines of the poem that she would like to open the door, the last four lines of section 1 suggest that she is "wait[ing]" not for it to open but for it to stay closed.

Perhaps because of the undercurrent of ominousness of the image, the fact that it reveals something other than the wish to enter the hidden room, the persona again, in

section 2, retracts what she has just said:

That was a lie also,  
I could go in if I wanted to.

Whose house is this  
we both live in  
but neither of us owns

How can I be expected  
to find my way around

I could go in if I wanted to,  
that's not the point, I don't have time,

I should be doing something  
other than you.

Her insistence that she "could go in if [she] wanted to" suggests that the persona is trying to make this one of the "right lies", if not one which would "open the door", then at least one which would divest the door of significance and so make it unnecessary to go in. In keeping with this attempt is her statement that wanting to go in is "not the point"; it's just that she " [doesn't] have time".

Just as the door in section 1 functions on both a symbolic and a literal level, so "house" in section 2 is both the place "[they] both live in" and the time in which they live together or, more simply, the relationship itself. The fact that "neither of [them] owns" the "house", and that the persona cannot "find [her] way around" in it, suggests that they have just drifted into their alliance, that it is rootless, a random and temporary encounter, and

that neither of them is committed to finding out what the other is really like. The room behind the closed door therefore suggests the hidden and secretive inner areas of the self which cannot become known, to the self or to another, except by choosing to enter, by choosing to set out on the journey of exploration. Since the door, the gateway to the unknown, will not, as we have seen in section 1, become simply an ordinary door, the persona must manufacture excuses to mask her fear of opening and entering. Hence she says, at the end of section 2, "I should be doing something / other than you".

Sections 3 and 4, through the complex and complementary associations of the images, supply reasons, even if they are only imagined reasons, for the persona's fear of deeper involvement with the "you" figure. The house, because it is the place where life is lived, has associations with the human body and human thought.<sup>3</sup> In section 3, there is the sense that the man himself is the house, or "castle", his outward appearance the "metal door" the persona hesitates in front of:

What do you want from me  
you who walk towards me over the long floor

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

your arms outstretched, your heart  
luminous through the ribs

around your head a crown  
of shining blood

This is your castle, this is your metal door,  
these are your stairs, your

bones, you twist all possible  
dimensions into your own[.]

The references to "your castle", "your metal door", "your stairs" and "your / / bones" suggest that house is now the place where the man lives, his own body, and in fact it is his physicality which is threatening to the persona in this section.

The differences between the persona and the male figure are consistent throughout Power Politics. She is essentially cerebral, a manipulator of words; he is instinctual and, for the most part, wordless. In "Their attitudes differ" (PP, 10), the persona states this as a basic difference between what each wants: "[y]ou asked for love / I gave you only descriptions"; and in "They travel by air (PP, 11): "I want questions and you want / only answers". In the latter poem, she also portrays her companion as "body with head / attached"; herself, as "head with / body attached". Consistently the male figure experiences and discovers things through complete and thoughtless physical involvement, as the later poem, "You did it" (PP, 32-33), indicates: "[w]hen will you learn /

the flame and the wood/flesh / it burns are whole and the same". The persona, on the other hand, experiences and suffers mentally, as the following lines from "Yes at first you" (PP, 22) indicate: "the adjectives / fall away from me"; "my skull / unfolds to an astounded flower". These differences or this one essential difference between the persona and her companion is borne out by the imagery in section 3 of "Hesitations outside the door". Thus, when the persona asks, "[w]hat do you want from me", she is asking, characteristically, for the reassurance of words. The man's action is also characteristic, suggesting as it does a total physical response. The images of "outstretched arms" and "heart / luminous through the ribs" suggest both the passion associated with the colour red (the "heart") and also the vital character of blood, both an embrace and a kind of sacrificial yielding up of the body. The "crown / of shining blood" indicates, however, that this gesture is not selfless but self-expressive, an achievement, something the male figure does which expresses his instinctual nature. In a sense, the persona's companion offers her a door which is himself. To accept would be to lose, perhaps, something vital to herself, her words, her own way of responding: "you twist all possible / dimensions into your own".

Between sections 3 and 4, the persona apparently reconsiders, for in section 4, she drops, although not



entirely, these metaphors and provides an "[a]lternate version". In this alternate version, the house and, by implication, the life of man, have expanded to include the outside. In the process of metamorphosis which the persona uses to describe this change is contained the cycle of growth, change and decay which belongs to the external world:

you advance  
through the grey streets of this house,  
  
the walls crumble, the dishes  
thaw, vines grow  
on the softening refrigerator[.]

The "you" figure is incorporated into this cycle, perhaps because of his ability to seize each new experience without thought, even though in doing so he takes into himself rather than giving of himself. The persona, however, is still outside the house: "I say, leave me / alone, this is my winter, / / I will stay here if I choose". Although the persona says "I choose", this is a kind of non-choice, a preference for the latent form of life, life in suspended animation ("winter"), rather than the creative choice of opening and entering. Again, the reason for this refusal is given in the partly veiled metaphor of being subsumed by the male figure's self-assertive physicality:

You will not listen  
to resistance, you cover me

with flags, a dark red  
 season, you delete from me  
 all other colours[.]

"[F]lags" are the male figure's banners, his standards; by covering the persona with them, he makes her part of his country, himself. "[R]ed" again suggests passion and the vital nature of blood; in conjunction with "season", it suggests the period of time during which the persona would be swept along by her companion's needs, the necessary fulfillment of himself. The final image, like the final image of section 3, expresses the subjugating of the persona's individuality to her companion's: "you delete from me / all other colours".

Section 5, however, again begins with a retraction: "[d]on't let me do this to you, / you are not those other people, / you are yourself". This constitutes an admission that the persona has been defining her companion with words and images which are not accurate. The "crown / of shining blood" was wrong; the "flags", the "red / season", the "luminous heart" were the wrong images to convey her companion's nature: "[t]ake off the signatures, the false / bodies, this love / which does not fit you". Through this directness, the persona implies that she cannot describe her companion; she can create him only in images distorted by her fear of losing control of the situation. She is back

where she started; her "[a]lternate version[s]" have served as delaying tactics, games of words (and, therefore, of retained control) by which she avoids "open[ing] the door". Now, however, she appears to be unwilling to continue the elaborate metaphor any longer: "[t]his is not a house, there are no doors". In this line, the persona renounces her own system of naming things; their relationship is not a "house" that they can enter through a "door". Giving up these metaphors, even if only for a moment, does not mean that the persona is willing to relinquish the control that goes with naming things; rather, she will part with the man, and end the sharing of their lives: "get out while it is / open, while you still can". Though she has said "there are no doors", the persona refers to the relationship as "open" as if it were (still) a "house"; she might more accurately have said "closed", since what is implied in the image is that they have never really been inside the relationship, and that they should stop while they are still "closed" (that is, unknown) to each other.

The persona's companion does not heed her warning, and so, in section 6, the metaphor of the door is back. Now, however, the persona openly admits that her word constructs are created only so that they may avoid opening the door: "[i]f we make stories for each other / about

what is in the room / we will never have to go in". The two myths of order she creates to make what lies behind the door a known quantity reveal, in the case of the first, the thing she fears in her companion's nature, and of the second, her own innate need to have her world ritually ordered, contained and completed:

You say: my other wives  
are in there, they are all  
beautiful and happy, they love me, why  
disturb them

I say: it is only  
a cupboard, my collection  
of envelopes, my painted  
eggs, my rings[.]

The persona's vision of her companion as being blindly and uncomplicatedly loved is in keeping with her view of him, in sections 3 and 4, as a lover. Her impression of him as being content to let the other "beautiful and happy" "wives" remain undisturbed, not caring to ask questions, search out motives or investigate psychologies, but concerned only with the result, with the fact that he is esteemed, is consistent with her view of him as well. The fact that the "other wives" are of unspecified number, however, and that he will not show concern or regret about them as individuals, leads immediately to the image which follows: "[i]n your pockets the thin women / hang on their hooks, dismembered". In this image of the destroyed

wholeness of the "women", the persona has projected her fear that she also will be destroyed or fragmented by her relationship with this man. Even in a story intended to order and contain the part of her companion which remains unknown to her, hidden in the past and within him (or behind the "door"), the persona's fear surfaces. As in the earlier sections of this poem, it is not the truth of the man that the persona captures, but the essential reality of her fear. This amounts to a fear of losing herself if she opens the door. The story she manufactures does not work; the necessity to open the door has not been cancelled.

The story the persona creates to order her own unknown world does not work either. For her the room becomes a "cupboard" full of talismans. In themselves, the "ring" is a traditional symbol of continuity and wholeness, the eternally repeated cycle of time,<sup>4</sup> and the "egg" is a symbol of potentiality and the mystery of regeneration;<sup>5</sup> "envelopes" suggests the possibility of knowledge or instruction contained within. In their context, these objects acquire negative associations. "[R]ings" not worn

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

but hidden away, empty "envelopes", "eggs" removed from their connection with fertility and development, and painted as ornaments - these objects come to represent only the persona's desire to control and order, and to limit natural forces by keeping them contained. The final image of the section is equally static and lifeless: "[a]round my neck I wear / the head of the beloved, pressed / in the metal retina like a picked flower". This image of a bodiless head, labelled "beloved", but bloodless, lifeless, pressed into the blind eye of a locket, represents both the persona's final attempt to keep her system of consciously created order and also her final admission of the inherent lack of meaning or vitality in trying to live only on the surface, the outside which appearances form. It is, ironically, the "right lie" which makes it necessary to open the door. If she does not, all the persona will ever know of the beloved is the mask she carries in the locket, and the fear she associates with knowing him, with letting him know her.

Section 7 is still framed in terms of doubt and fear, but it is not negative. In this section, the persona is truly hesitant. The hesitations in the first six sections are verbal delays; now they are genuine hesitations of the spirit at the start of a new journey. Finally the persona is asking questions rather than creating lies and clever half-truths:

Should we go into it  
together / If I go into it  
with you I will never come out

If I wait outside I can salvage  
this house or what is left  
of it, I can keep  
my candles, my dead uncles  
my restrictions

but you will go  
alone, either  
way is loss

Tell me what it is for[.]

She is still voicing her fear in terms of losing herself completely to her companion; she still senses that his immediate, total response to any adventure may be destructive, eventually, for her, just as it means he will go with or without her. The persona also knows that waiting outside will ensure only the continuance of her "restrictions", that system of ordering things which she has seen is inherently life-denying. The "house" she "can salvage" by staying outside, by refusing to start the journey, will not be their relationship. Nor will it be the unknown area of the self; if it is never explored or entered, it cannot be saved. "[w]hat is left" to "salvage" will be only the building they have lived in together. The persona recognizes that to stay behind alone "is loss" but that to "go into it / together" is also loss. This must be; the persona must relinquish her words, her lies and evasions, in order to "open the door" and begin.

The persona has no words to answer the question, "[t]ell me what it is for"; there can be no more lies. The question indicates the persona's last resistance; it is followed, in the last two lines of the poem, by the statements of positive intent, of determination, of possibilities: "[i]n the room we will find nothing / In the room we will find each other". These statements are not contradictory; "nothing[ness]" here is not negation of being but the possibilities which exist in potential within the self. What the persona and her companion will find in the "room" cannot be spoken in words, except as "nothing", because it is unknown. By opening the door, they will begin the journey to find "each other" as each exists behind the lies and evasions, behind the self-constructed masks.

"Hesitations outside the door" shows some of the negative forces which work to prevent the self from finding completion or wholeness, chief of which are the lies and evasions born of fear. The poem progresses from the use of language to hide or obscure to the use of language to embody complexity in simplicity. It ends on a positive note of potential discovery which leads directly into the next poem. "Lying here, everything in me" (PP, 52), which follows "Hesitations outside the door" in Power Politics, also follows that poem in vision. In "Lying here, everything in me", the persona attempts to express in words that



sense of limitless possibilities which is suggested in the last two lines of "Hesitations outside the door".

The poem begins with the persona attempting to deny to herself her own involvement with and commitment to the "you" figure"

Lying here, everything in me  
brittle and pushing you away

This is not something I  
wanted, I tell you

silently[.]

These lines indicate, however, that the persona's flexibility has deserted her. She can no longer easily manipulate words in order to erect a screen of half-lies, half-truths, to enable her to avoid facing herself and her fears. She still resists the pressure to yield to the journey, the unknown, but her resistance is wordless ("I tell you / / silently"), "brittle" rather than flexibly evasive. It is not an intellectual resistance, but a last desperate attempt of the self to retain its protective shell ("everything in me / ... pushing you away"). The pressure to resist does not come from the "you" figure, but from the self. It is the habitual "no" with which the persona has always before maintained control, but it won't work any more. Having opened the door, the persona realizes that language as lie is futile in the new world which she

now confronts. "[A]dmitting the truth" about this new state of being necessitates a new metaphor.

Although the persona is "[l]ying here" beside her companion, they are not in any room. The lines which follow suggest that the "room" of the unknown self which she enters is much vaster than she could have imagined. The persona expresses this new unexplored space through the metaphor of a landscape:

not admitting  
the truth of where

I am, so far  
up, the sky incredible and dark

blue, each breath  
a gift in the steep air

How hard even the boulders  
find it to grow here[.]

Inside becomes outside, and the outside is sky and stone, the clear, rarified atmosphere of the mountain top. There is a literal basis for the image of "each breath" being a "gift in the steep air" and that is that in a rarified atmosphere, there is less oxygen and it is harder to breathe. However, the image and the landscape as a whole are symbolic as well. Just as ice and the frozen landscape are images of the rigid barrier dividing the two halves of the self (in "A Place: Fragments", "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" and "Arctic syndrome: dream fox", for example), so in

this poem, the purity and steepness of the air are associated with the new height of spiritual awareness to which the persona is raised. This awareness is of the transitory nature of life, not its relative shortness as a measurable length of time, that is, not of life in terms of a few brief years, but of the fact that even the next moment is uninsured, that "each breath" is "a gift", no matter how many minutes or years may follow. To see this is to realize the necessity of taking each moment as it comes, knowing it is possibly the last. There is only one of everything; each thing becomes itself again with each moment. What the persona gains with this awareness, with this "being" which she feels "in the steep air", is freedom, freedom not to be influenced by what is past or what has not yet happened, freedom to choose.

The other part of the persona's new awareness is also expressed through the metaphor of the landscape, the place where she is: "[h]ow hard even the boulders / find it to grow here". Literally, this image relates to the one preceding; that is, even "boulders", which do not require oxygen, find it hard "to grow" in this atmosphere. Stone has been thought of as that element out of which all life on earth gradually evolved, and "boulders" which "grow" also suggests this special sense. The landscape is one in which the myriad forms of life have not yet come into

being and, as such, it suggests a landscape of potential, one which has not yet grown. In these two complementary images, then, the two facets of the persona's new awareness are expressed. The first is an image of a moment, or of being; the second, of potential, or becoming. Each moment is absolute and, at the same time, part of a cycle of growth and change which is relative. The statement that "There is Only One of Everything" embodies this complexity; that is, each thing is, with each moment, both itself and also something different from what was, a moment before, itself. The importance of these lines for the development of the persona's vision as it is examined in the remaining poems in this chapter is that they suggest her beginning, although not yet explicit, awareness of the value of each moment and also of the inexorable movement of each moment toward the completion of the cycle, and death.

It is at this point in the poem that the persona turns her attention back to her companion:

and I don't know how to accept  
your freedom, I don't know

what to do with this  
precipice, this joy[.]

To recognize her own life in terms of freedom, to see that an awareness of life in terms of the moment can either free

the self to become vitally alive or cripple it through the correspondent awareness of inevitable death, is also to see her companion as equally free, or equally bound. For the persona, this awareness is both fearful ("this / precipice") and joyful. In either case, it is difficult to accept. Her companion, because he is asleep, appears to be able to accept whatever comes as he always has, thoughtlessly and unquestioningly. It is the persona's own freedom, however, and her realization of her feeling for her companion and her commitment to him, that allows her to see him as free. Finally, the last lines of the poem express the persona's new awareness and new freedom as a willingness to accept her companion as he is, just as she accepts her own life as it is:

What do you see, I ask / my voice  
absorbed by stone and outer

space / you are asleep, you see  
what there is. Beside you

I bend and enter[.]

It does not really matter what he sees, or if he sees anything at all, because the persona has recognized and accepted her commitment. The persona's words fall away and are gone as soon as they are uttered. There is the sense that in this "landscape" of the absolute moment, words do not exist. They are sequential and the moment is

now. Similarly, when the persona says, "you are asleep, you see / what there is", she is suggesting the nothingness which contains everything and for which there are no words. Her last statement, "I bend and enter", suggests her willingness to confront and experience "what there is". In effect, she "enter[s]" the unknown of her sleeping companion; she embarks on the journey, to herself, to him, with him. The image itself suggests, not the striving for dominion or control over her companion and the direction of their relationship (which we have seen, indirectly, in the persona's behaviour and aloof attitude in both "The Circle Game" and "Tricks with Mirrors"), but tenderness, gentleness, a reciprocal trust which answers the childlike trust of any person who allows himself to sleep in the company of another who is wakeful. The statement must be seen as affirmation, as the persona's free and unpressured choice. If the poem begins with her habitual "no", it ends with an unspoken "yes".

In this poem, a recognition of the vast dimensions of the unknown inner areas of the self is expressed through the metaphor of an external landscape. "Lying here, everything in me" is the first poem which has been examined in which there is both a sense of affirmation and also a lack of tension or discord between the inner world and the external universe. In both "Journey to the Interior" and "Procedures

for Underground", in which the unknown area of the psyche is equated with a landscape, the landscape to be explored has negative associations of danger and fear. Similarly, in "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" and "Arctic syndrome: dream fox", the frozen arctic landscape is a metaphorical place where the struggle between the ordering, conscious mind and the non-formal unconscious takes place. As such, it too has negative associations. In "Lying here, everything in me", the persona seems to see the landscape as something new and unknown, but not as a threatening force (as, for example, the pioneer sees it, in "Progressive insanities of a pioneer"). The persona has progressed to a point where she will now be able to see the landscape as it is, just as she has finally seen, through metaphor, the possibilities which exist both for and within the self when it is faced honestly, without the barriers of lies or masks. In the next poem to be discussed, the persona returns to an actual landscape.

"There are two islands" (YAH, 69-70) occurs at the very end of the section in You are Happy titled "Circe / Mud Poems". It has been chosen because the experiences the persona recounts as having taken place on the first island recall all the false, restrictive ways of ordering experience which we have witnessed in the poems examined in the first two chapters of this thesis (particularly "The

Circle Game", "Tricks with Mirrors" and "A fortification"), and because, in the part of the poem dealing with the second island, the persona shows that she has finally exorcized the way of thinking responsible for the creation of this kind of order. "There are two islands" is the poem in which the persona demythologizes the experiences which have taken place on the island, the location of all the "Circe / Mud" poems, and in the process demythologizes the island landscape. Although "There are two islands" does stand by itself as a complete poem, it is also part of a sequence, and in order to illuminate the particular references of some of the images in the first part of the poem, it is necessary to have some idea of what happens in the sequence as a whole.

The sequence gets its title from the myth of Circe, a beautiful enchantress who lived on the island of Aeaea and who had magical powers, among them the power to turn men into animals. In the myths of the Odyssey and the Golden Fleece, both Odysseus and Jason spent time on the island of Aeaea during their journeys and received aid from Circe. In the sequence of poems, the persona is a Circe figure, endowed with magical powers, and her companion is an Odysseus-Jason figure who arrives on the persona's island, disrupts things and, at the end of the series, seems on the point of leaving. The poems therefore have a



specific mythological context, but as the title indicates, there is another aspect of the sequence. The poems are "Mud" poems as well. Mud, by signifying the union of the receptive principle of earth with the power of water to transform, becomes associated with the emergence of life forms, with life cycles and nascent states.<sup>6</sup> The persona in the "Circe / Mud" poems is not simply an enchantress, but also a kind of oracle who has reached a state of accord with the natural cycle, who understands the language of the land. She is a kind of earth priestess, and behind her obvious satirizing of her companion's role-playing, behind her warnings and her prophecies of destruction, is the unspoken intention to show him "what there is" (YAH, 46); by creating an elaborate mythological system to confer order on their relationship, a system in which she willingly concedes to him the role of wandering hero and assumes as her own the role of the predatory female, to show him the utter falsity of such a system of ordering experience. Not only is role-playing and mythologizing false, it is also potentially violent to any meaningful relationship. As the persona states in one of the poems in the sequence, when the male figure demands more of her role than it will bear and asks to know the future: "That's my job, / one of them,

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

but I advise you / don't push your luck" (YAH, 66). The result of trying to make the roles they play include all aspects of their lives is, in this poem, that "the future is a mess". If role-playing is harmful for their future together, it is also limiting for the present. It creates stasis, and denies the possibility of growth. In the prose poem, "It's the story that counts", which precedes "There are two islands", the persona shows this life-denying aspect of the artificial world of the role-player: "Don't evade, don't pretend you won't leave after all: you leave in the story and the story is ruthless" (YAH, 68). What the "Circe / Mud" poems do is illustrate, outrageously, satirically, cynically, this ruthlessness of the "story" when it is allowed to replace reality, and the ruthlessness of the weavers of the story, toward themselves and toward each other, once they allow their lives to be taken over by the parts they play. The island where the story takes place suggests the self-imposed isolation of the actors in the drama from the real world.

The first part of "There are two islands" in a sense re-tells the story of what occurs on the island, without any of the specific details. The whole process of the poem is toward re-capturing the island as a physical place, and regaining what was lost in creating a myth in which to live. Thus the persona states at the beginning: "[t]here

are two islands / at least, they do not exclude each other". These lines reveal that the persona is aware of the island as two separate entities, or as existing in two different dimensions. There is no sense of there being two actual islands, side by side; if there were, there would be no way in which they could "exclude" or "not exclude each other"; they would simply be. Rather, there is the sense that the island appears to the persona in two guises at once, as if she had a kind of dual vision, which in fact, as the "Circe / Mud" figure, she does have. She sees the island as, first, the mythological place where the "story" occurs, the abode of Circe:

On the first I am right,  
the events run themselves through  
almost without us,

we are open, we are closed,  
we express joy, we proceed  
as usual, we watch for  
omens, we are sad

and so forth[.]

There is the sense in these lines that the persona and her companion are not actively taking part, but that they have their actions planned out for them in advance, like lines of a part which they have learned and now perform without thought or emotion. This is given even more explicit expression in the lines that follow:

it is over,  
 I am right, it starts again,  
 jerkier this time and faster,

I could say it without looking, the animals,  
 the blackened trees, the arrivals,

the bodies, words, it goes and goes,  
 I could recite it backwards.

These lines suggest all the events which have occurred on the persona's island: the transformation of those "who once were [her] lovers" into animals (YAH, 48), the desecration of the island landscape which results from changing it into something which is unnatural (YAH, 46), the arrival of the "skinny-ribbed, blue-eyed" returning hero (YAH, 50), the manipulations of roles and the casualties which result (YAH, 64) and, finally, the construction in words of a whole, exclusive system of order (YAH, 52).

In the "Circe / Mud" poems, the island is elaborately complete, more interesting than ordinary reality. Now, however, in these lines from "There are two islands", the playing out of their various roles is seen in a truer light: it is boring, predictable and repetitive. The actors, the persona and the male figure, are now seen by the persona as puppets trapped in their own mythologized world, forced to play their parts through from beginning to end, again and again. The persona "could recite it backwards" because nothing new can ever happen. Their world has already been discovered and settled because they themselves formed it. Anything new would have to come from

outside themselves, but because they are already committed to their love-hate relationship as they have formed it, with each forced to play a pre-ordained role, nothing can get in from the outside. The past merely repeats itself.

This first island is the place where they live perceived by the persona in terms of everything that has happened on it. By itself, the first part of "There are two islands" is as negative as any of the poems examined in Chapter I which illustrates the persona's feeling of alienation from her companion and from the natural cycle. However, this section forms only part of her vision. It forms, in fact, a kind of restatement of the negative aspects of the relationship which the persona has explored in the "Circe / Mud" poems. The fact that most of these poems are satirical indicates that she has deliberately created and even exaggerated a picture of all the wilfully harmful things people can do to one another in order to show their malignancy, their destructiveness of all that is meaningful or worthwhile. The first part of "There are two islands", although it depicts a negative state of affairs, is nevertheless informed by the persona's newly gained clarity of vision. She has exposed this destructive way of conducting one's life because she sees that it is not the only way. The negative order must first be destroyed or exorcized before the search for a viable alternative can begin. The persona expresses this alternative explicitly in "Men with the

heads of eagles", a poem at the beginning of the "Circe / Mud" section: "I search instead for the others, / the ones left over, / the ones who have escaped from these / mythologies with barely their lives" (YAH, 47).

In the second part of "There are two islands", which acts as a counterpoint to the first, the persona perceives the existence of the second island because of her commitment to the search:

The second I know nothing about  
because it has never happened;

this land is not finished,  
this body is not reversible.

The statement that the second island "has never happened" indicates the persona's belief that things change with time. The second island is the first island seen from a different perspective. In the first section, the persona's vision is directed toward the past, and hence toward the stasis of what took place on the island in the past. Now her vision is directed toward the future and, more important, toward the dynamic present moment. Her recognition that "this land is not finished, / this body is not reversible" expresses, not the myth of settling and ordering (by naming things), but the myth of exploration itself, of the process of exploration rather than the result. The persona's perception in the second half of the poem is of the island as it exists in time. The island in the first part of the poem is outside time; it, that is, the sum of what happens on it, is the creation of the persona and her companion,

and it does not take into consideration the passage of time, or change. This reveals an implied truth: by arrogating the power to create order and, therefore, denying the cycle of time and change, the persona suggests that she and her companion have believed themselves somehow exempt from the life cycle. They have acted as if they had all the time there is in which to play their roles. In the second part of the poem, when the persona says, "this body is not reversible", she refutes the validity of this assumed counterfeit immortality. Whatever is to be discovered or explored belongs in time. This vision is similar to her realization in "Lying here, everything in me" that "each breath [is] a gift". It also suggests the impossibility of predicting what will happen in the future and, in this sense, it is similar to her statement in "Is / Not" that "[t]his is a journey, not a war, / there is no outcome, / I renounce predictions" (YAH, 74-76). The persona's existence on the first island has, in effect, been a war with her companion to see who can survive the longer. Realizing the stifling monotony of the ordered past, and the impossibility of ordering the future, the persona is left, finally, with the present.

The last images of the poem present the landscape of the island as it actually exists, undistorted by the destructiveness which had made it something other than it

was. Significantly, the persona and her companion are together in these images, harmoniously for once, not talking, not competing with each other (as they have been in "The Circle Game", for example, or "Tricks with Mirrors"). One may assume that the persona sees her companion differently now too, as she sees the island differently. He is no longer her antagonist but, as she states in "Is / Not", "merely a fellow/traveller":

We walk through a field, it is November,  
 the grass is yellow, tinged  
 with grey, the apples  
 are still on the trees,  
 they are orange, astonishing, we are standing  
 in a clump of weeds near the dead elms  
 our faces upturned, the wet flakes  
 falling onto our skin and melting  
 We lick the melted snow  
 from each other's mouths,  
 we see birds, four of them, they are gone, and  
 a stream, not frozen yet, in the mud  
 beside it the track of a deer[.]

In these lines, the persona captures both the beauty and the transience of the actual, of the moment, and, in fact, the images suggest that the persona's perception of the beauty, the "astonishing" colour of the apples, the "flakes" of "melting snow", the "stream, not frozen yet", derives from her perception of its transience. She captures the season, the vividness of the last colours of autumn, at that



precise moment when it begins to turn to winter.

"There are two islands" is an important stage in the persona's understanding of herself and the world she lives in. She has shown the boring and joyless dogma which man continually asserts as reality in order to give him a sense of control, of his own importance and of immortality; she has also shown another world, a world of incredible beauty, freshness and transience. The achievement of her vision is to see that these separate realities are co-existent; they do not "exclude each other"; either may be chosen. We are reminded again of the persona's statement in "A Place: Fragments" that "we have lost something, / some key to these things / which must be writings / and are locked against us". "There are two islands" suggests that the "key" to the external universe is not to be found in any myth of order. Its "identity", the "something too huge and simple / for us to see", becomes accessible to man only when he willingly relinquishes control, when he stops trying to contain and limit both the external world and his own inner being. These last images of "There are two islands" present a microcosm of the entire natural world; in their simplicity and completeness they suggest that the "identity" of this external universe is not comprehensible in terms of definitely stated beginnings and discoverable ends. Its identity is the "everything"

that it is now, in the present moment. "[T]his land is not finished". It is this vision that informs the persona's exploration of the self and the world inhabited by the self in the last section of You are Happy. "There is Only One of Everything" becomes in this last section an affirmation of the world's order, not the order created by man, but the order of time, which changes with each moment.

The last section of You are Happy is different from any other group of poems in any of the six books of Atwood's poetry. The difference lies in the sustained sense of self-knowledge which informs all of the poems in "There is Only One of Everything". We have seen in Chapter III and in the poems examined in this chapter that the persona's self-knowledge has been achieved only gradually and tentatively. The process of knowing herself has involved a confrontation of the antithetical poles within the self, as in the poems "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" and "Arctic syndrome: dream fox". It has necessitated the acknowledgment of the roles and masks which people assume in order to protect themselves and to order and control the world. This part of the process toward the persona's self-awareness is illustrated by the satirizing of role-playing in "My beautiful wooden leader". The existence of a violent duality within man and the power of roles or masks to distort reality are not, however, the only obstacles to the

achievement of self-knowledge. The lies and evasions which spring from the attempt to maintain a false order of reality and the motivating fear behind them must also be dealt with. By acknowledging the existence of her own evasions and fears, the persona, in "Hesitations outside the door", progresses further toward an awareness of her own nature and of the fresh possibilities inherent in her relationship with the male figure once it has been freed of crippling fear and deceit. In "Hesitations outside the door", the closed door is a metaphor for what are essentially the self-constructed obstacles to the persona's knowledge of her own nature. By accepting her share of the responsibility for the stasis of the love relationship, something which she was unwilling, or perhaps only unable, to do in an earlier poem such as "The Circle Game", the persona introduces a new element into her exploration of the self, and this new element is the idea of choice, of freedom to choose. The persona no longer sees herself as passively acted upon. Seeing herself as capable of action, of choosing to open the door or to remain outside it, is further evidence of her increasing self-knowledge. "Lying here, everything in me" creates a new realm of heightened awareness which becomes accessible to the persona once she has recognized the artificiality of her old self-protective stance toward the world. In this poem, the ability to act

is used positively. The persona freely chooses to enter the unknown, to search for "what there is". In the last lines of this poem, a sense of potential communion between the persona and her companion replaces the former attitude of antagonistic rivalry. In "There are two islands", self-knowledge amounts to the persona's recognition that there are two worlds, the world of the manipulator or role-player, the power politician, and the world of those more vulnerable beings "who have escaped from these / mythologies with barely their lives" (YAH, 47). This second world, as we have seen, is rendered in images of the natural cycle as it occurs in a natural landscape. This landscape is presented with the directness and simplicity of a world seen in a new light, as indeed it is. The persona's vision of this landscape is part of her new awareness; she returns to it from the artificial world of constructed mythologies.

All these new awarenesses, of the artificiality of role-playing and the loss to the self, or the lack of wholeness of the self, which must be experienced and endured if the persona continues to cling to her evasions, of her complicity in the construction of meaningless rituals and poses, of her ability to choose, of the enduring reality of a world outside the sphere of man's influence, and of its eternally recurring cycle, form a kind of texture of attitude behind the poems in the section of You are Happy entitled

"There is Only One of Everything". These poems are characterized by a consistent lack of self-deception and a willingness, at last, to accept and present the truth of experience, of the condition of being alive, as the persona sees it. Perhaps the central concern of the persona in this sequence of poems is to bring her own experience, and the relationship with the male figure, into harmony with time. The spurious immortality which, as the Circe figure, she arrogates as her own in the "Circe / Mud" poems is now cast aside, as the persona attempts to discover the potentialities of the self within the limitations imposed by mortality. The poems demonstrate the persona's attempts to achieve a fulfillment of the self in the present which the closed systems of ordering reality, with their orientation toward the past,<sup>7</sup> could not provide.

The idea of a journey of discovery is still predominant in the poems in the last section of You are Happy, but now the unknown to be explored is life itself as it is lived from moment to moment. Fittingly, the persona begins the section with an invocation of the body ("First Prayer"), which she has tended to neglect as the least important part

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. "A Place: Fragments", in which the parlour of the old woman is "past"-oriented (and, therefore, static); and also "Hesitations outside the door", in which the persona's collection of artifacts from the past fails to provide any means of interpreting her present situation.

of the "self". To live fully, however, is to accept the limitations of physicality, of having a body which "is not reversible" (YAH, 69); therefore, the persona says in the first poem in "There is Only One of Everything": "let us not forget our bodies", for, "with their good help we will rise from the dead" (YAH, 72-73). The affirmation of the transitory life of man implicit in this statement, as well as its suggestion of positive action rather than passive acceptance of life or, worse, unawareness of its ephemeral nature, is echoed in the poems which follow. In "Eating Fire" (YAH, 79-83), the persona equates becoming vitally alive with choosing to recognize the limitations imposed upon life by the fact of inevitable death: "to choose / / to be also human, the body / mortal and faded, incapable of saving / / itself". This is in direct antithesis to the existence of the role-player, who is arrogantly and stupidly oblivious of time, and whose life is an ordered but meaningless series of "events [which] run themselves through / almost without [him]" (YAH, 69).

Just as the persona and her companion ignore time in the "Circe / Mud" poems, so they also ignore place; that is, the environment in which they live is also altered to comply with the mythological system by which they order experience. In the last section of You are Happy, the attempt to restore the life of the self to the present, and

thus achieve wholeness of being, is accompanied by an awareness of the landscape as a part of man's experience but not as a force which threatens him or which he must attempt to control. As the persona says in "Four Auguries" (YAH, 84-86), it is "[p]art of us, distinct // from us". Again we recall the emphasis, in "A Place: Fragments", on finding a "key" to an understanding of the natural world. Now, however, the persona's concern is not to understand but merely to accept. To interpret the world, because it is to impose intellectual conceptions upon something which is "distinct from" man, is, in a sense, to confine it within a man-made order. The persona now wants the reality of the world without interpretation, just as she wants the experience of life without masks, without evasions and self-deceptions. Her willingness to accept "what there is" (PP, 52), extends to her companion as well, and she says, again in "Four Auguries": "[y]ou are more than I wanted, / this is new, this greed for the real" (YAH, 86).

In "Head Against White" (YAH, 87-91), the poem which immediately precedes the title poem of the section, "There is Only One of Everything", the persona at last dissociates herself completely from the claims of the past and the self-destructive patterns of behaviour characteristic of her relationship with the male figure in the past: "[n]o way I can walk back with you / to the country of these

mutilations". The last section of "Head Against White" will be examined in detail because the images of this section serve as a kind of acknowledgment of the persona's former obsession with the appearance of things and her feeling that she was powerless to act, to make herself known to her companion and also to truly know him:

In the mirror, face to glass face,  
noon, the winter light strikes

through the window, your eyes flare, the city  
burns whitely behind us. Blood flows  
under the molten skin.

These lines are reminiscent of the timeless interval spent in the room in "The Circle Game". In the image of the two figures standing near a window, there is a similar sense of the lack of any movement and of waiting for something to happen which does not happen. The lines are subtly different, however, for there is movement here which derives from the persona's new expanded awareness of her companion and of the outside world. Although the male figure stands looking in the mirror, in an image which recalls the use of the mirror in "The Circle Game",<sup>8</sup> the

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. section ii: "Being with you / here, in this room / / is like groping through a mirror / whose glass has melted / to the consistency / of gelatin"; and also, "[y]ou look past me ... / watching / your own reflection somewhere / behind my head, / over my shoulder", in the same section.



persona no longer sees this as his preoccupation with himself or as something which threatens her own individuality; rather, she sees him as a living being reflecting the changing light of a winter afternoon and giving off a light of his own ("your eyes flare"). The focus is on time and change and the strange affinity between the life of man and the life of the external universe. The silent and imperceptible fire of life informs both the "city" outside the window and the couple who stand inside. This bond is very different from the "delicate balance" achieved in "A Place: Fragments" between the world of the old woman's parlour and the "random scattering or / clogged merging" of the outside world. In "A Place: Fragments", the balance is achieved only by a "stringent" ordering of the interior world. In "Head Against White", however, life and time seem to flow, and outside merges with inside, like the calm noon light which bathes everything. The persona captures the sense of the external world as "[p]art of us, distinct / / from us" (YAH, 86). It is this implicit awareness of time and life flowing through everything, and the accompanying sense of calmness, which enables the persona to go on in the next lines of "Head Against White" to renounce explicitly those things which have played so great a part in the stasis of her relationship with the male figure in earlier poems and in the sense

of stultifying isolation which has been the essential condition of her experience: "[t]o move beyond the mirror's edge, discard / these scars, medals, to pronounce / / your own flesh". Again, the image of moving beyond the mirror recalls the persona's wish to escape from the room of mirrors in "The Circle Game" and from "this life flattened against the wall", the "lucid impasse" of "Tricks with Mirrors". In those two poems, the persona refuses to acknowledge her own involvement in the creation of the mirrors, and places all the responsibility for "breaking through" them upon her companion. In "Head Against White", however, and in all the poems which follow "There are two islands", the persona's demonstrated awareness of, and sensitivity to, the second world, the demythologized actual world of time and change, indicate that she has moved "beyond the mirror's edge". The process of exploring "what there is" (PP, 52) which began with the poem, "Hesitations outside the door", has been for the persona a journey "beyond the mirror's edge", or away from static roles and poses. Her concern in "Head Against White" is to make her companion share her knowledge or awareness and accompany her on the journey to which she is already committed. At the same time, the image continues to function as the final exorcism of her own obsession.

It is the persona who invests the mirror with the power to isolate her from her companion and from the world. The male figure mythologizes experience and, therefore, shuts himself off from growth and self-knowledge and vital communication with the persona, in a different way. In the last images of "Head Against White", the persona refers obliquely to the things her companion must escape in order to become fully alive, to begin. She has consistently presented him as a self-dramatizer, from his characterization as the player of the "orphan game" in "The Circle Game", to his complete metamorphosis into the returning hero figure in "My beautiful wooden leader". Throughout Power Politics, the persona has seen the male figure as intensely physical, as someone totally involved in whatever he is doing, and yet with a concentration and energy entirely committed to himself. Hence the women in his past she sees as "thin" and "dismembered" (PP, 50). To the persona, the male figure has seemed endlessly and tirelessly preoccupied with himself. We recall that, in "Tricks with Mirrors", when the persona desperately wants to be seen, the male figure "stand[s] in front of [her] / combing [his] hair". In his complete giving of himself to any experience, he has in reality given nothing. Thus the persona sees, in "Head Against White", that he must not only act the part of the man of action, but that he must become the "man on fire", giving more than a

"magnificent" but hollow gesture ("My beautiful wooden leader"), giving instead a part of his life, his time:

NOW

man on fire, hands open and held out, not empty, giving to be this

time / From these hardened  
hours, these veteran  
faces, burials

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to rise up living[.]
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The image of the "man on fire" recalls the poem "Eating Fire", in which the persona sees her companion as wanting always to be more than mortal, "to be the sun, moving through space / / distant and indifferent, giving / light of a kind for those watching". Because he is so heedless of the consequences of his actions, the persona, in "Eating Fire", sees the male figure as believing himself immortal. "[M]an on fire" also recalls another image from the same poem:

This is your trick or miracle,  
to be consumed and rise  
intact, over and over, even for myths there is  
a limit, the time when you accomplish  
failure and return  
from the fire minus your skin.

In this context, the "man on fire" can be seen as a phoenix symbol; again, an image of immortality. Within "Head Against

White", however, the image of "man on fire" also relates to the preceding image of "[b]lood [which] flows / under the molten skin", and suggests, not immortality, but life being consumed by the process of living, life slowly changing in an irreversible process. As the persona realizes in "There are two islands", the "body is not reversible". This awareness has not deserted her but has grown. Thus she sees her companion's salvation only in his rejection of the outward forms which have been allowed to replace his inner life, of the "hours" "hardened" by sameness, of the "veteran / faces" which are the masks he dons. He must give himself to time, and give of his time. By endlessly repeating his myth of experience, the persona's companion has eclipsed the present and stolen from the future to relive the past. In order to "rise up living", the persona sees that it is necessary to embrace the immediate moment.

"There is Only One of Everything" (YAH, 92) the title poem of the last section of You are Happy, goes beyond a mere acknowledging of life's inescapable tie to the present and celebrates the split second infinitude of the moment. In this poem, the persona affirms the "now" in which life is lived. The title expresses the persona's belief in the uniqueness of each thing. From the idea that there is only one of everything, the inestimable value of all things, inestimable because of their rarity, springs as an unspoken



What these lines suggest is that the recurring natural cycle is not simply the repetition of the same phenomenon over and over; that the words used to describe one thing will not do for something which has not yet occurred. These lines stand as a refutation of the kind of existence described in the first section of "There are two islands", an existence which is boring and repetitive because it has been systematized by the persona and her companion to exclude time and the vital natural world. The lines re-affirm instead the second part of "There are two islands" in which the persona says, "[t]he second [island] I know nothing about / because it has never happened". Both the second part of "There are two islands" and these first lines of "There is Only One of Everything" express the persona's belief that reality is essentially non-verbal. It is the sense of language as restrictive, as something which limits the boundless profusion of experience, which would define the future in terms of what has already happened or is already known and, therefore, would deny all possibility of change, that the persona is excluding when she says, "There will / have to be other words". Because they are essentially static and oriented toward what is past and finished, words obscure man's perception of life as a process of growth and change occurring in time. Part of the persona's achievement of vision in the last poems of You are Happy is

her realization of the failure of language alone to truly contain experience.<sup>9</sup> It is similar to her awareness in the poem, "The reincarnation of Captain Cook", near the end of The Animals in That Country (AIC, 61), of the failure of other man-made systems to define reality: "I know my / mistake was my acknowledging / of maps".

To experience the world through a reliance primarily on language is to experience it at second hand. In the next two lines of "There is Only One of Everything", the persona suggests that language is not even the natural instrument of perception of man: "[w]hen my / / eyes close language vanishes". Man perceives and experiences the world through his senses. In the remainder of the poem, the persona attempts to render in language the texture of a particular moment, to capture a totality of sensations and perceptions. Because of the contradictions inherent in using words to convey what she has acknowledged to be wordless, the persona must somehow rise above the limitations of language in order to express the reality of the moment. She does this by presenting a series of images, a kind of

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<sup>9</sup>This was suggested by the unanswered and unanswerable questions asked by the persona at the end of "Hesitations outside the door" and "Lying here, everything in me". These questions constitute the persona's last hollow resistance to the unknown. Realizing that no one can tell her what will happen in the future in a sense clears the way for the persona to choose, voluntarily, to renounce her old verbal system of self-protection and to embrace whatever may come.



list, uninflected and uninterpreted, which resembles her treatment of phenomena on the second island in "There are two islands". Each thing is touched on, briefly and with clarity, just as the eye might focus on each thing in the surroundings in its turn:

The cat  
 with the divided face, half black half orange  
 nests in my scruffy fur coat, I drink tea,  
  
 fingers curved around the cup, impossible  
 to duplicate these flavours. The table  
 and freak plates glow softly, consuming themselves,  
  
 I look out at you and you occur  
 in this winter kitchen[.]

The eye moves from cat to tea, to fingers "curved around the cup", to table, plates, and finally to the male figure.

In these lines, however, the persona does more than record objective observations. By investing each thing with equal importance, which she does by noting small, almost insignificant detail, the "divided face" of the cat, for example, the scruffiness of the coat, or the fact that her fingers "curve" around the cup, the persona creates a feeling of introspection or reverie. The things which surround the persona in the "moment" of this poem are perceived with such attentiveness, such electric awareness, that they seem almost extensions of herself. The moment of time itself is part of her. The moment becomes extended to a kind of timelessness because of the completeness with which the

persona experiences it and yet, at the same time, her perceptions are filtered through her awareness of the inexorable passage of time and of the fact that this moment will never occur again. Thus the tactile sensation and visual perception of her "fingers curved around the cup" are in a sense sharpened by the realization that it is "impossible / to duplicate these flavours"; the awareness that the "table / and ... plates" will eventually be gone (that they are "consuming themselves") informs their occurrence in this time and place with a sense of strangeness. The "flavours" which will be "impossible / to duplicate" are not simply those of the tea but, rather, of the almost tangible aura of the extended moment itself.

In the last half of the poem, the persona turns her attention to the male figure. She looks at him and he becomes part of the moment, part of her, in the same way as the other objects she perceives around her:

I look out at you and you occur  
 in this winter kitchen, random as trees or sentences  
 entering me, fading like them, in time you will disappear[.]

The persona is aware of the chance convergence of events which have brought the male figure, like the "table / and freak plates" to this "winter kitchen" at this particular time. The feeling that his occurrence is "random as trees or sentences", that events cannot be predicted and, therefore,

that nothing can be taken for granted, as well as the awareness of the body as "mortal and faded" (YAH, 83), of the fact that this moment cannot be prolonged or held frozen forever ("in time you will disappear"), intensifies the persona's perception of her companion as unique and separate from her in the lines that follow:

the way you dance by yourself  
on the tile floor to a worn song, flat and mournful,  
so delighted, spoon waved in one hand, wisps of  
roughened hair

sticking up from your head, it's your surprised  
body, pleasure I like.

The underlying attitude of the persona toward the male figure in these lines is radically different from the view of him which she has always before held, and this difference derives from her new awareness and acceptance of the fleeting quality of the moment.

An earlier poem in which the persona and the male figure share the enforced companionship of a room in a house illustrates this difference. In the poem, "A Sibyl" (CG, 49-51), the persona's distrust of her companion colours her portrayal of him. She sees him as a kind of automaton, someone who moves mechanically rather than instinctively ("a metronome"), a person of half-hidden motives which are vaguely threatening to her: " . . . a man dances / in my kitchen, moving / like a metronome / with hopes of staying /

for breakfast in the half-empty / bottle in his pocket". She portrays him as self-interested, his dance a mechanical act, merely a filling in of the time required to complete the process of self-gratification. How different this portrayal is from the sense of total un-selfconsciousness which animates the dance of the persona's companion in the similar lines from "There is Only One of Everything". In "A Sibyl", the persona is also aware of the passing of time as she is in "There is Only One of Everything":

There are omens of  
rockets among the tricycles  
I know it

time runs out  
in the ticking hips of the  
man whose twitching skull  
jerks on loose  
vertebrae in my kitchen  
flower  
beds predict it[.]

In these lines, there is no sense of joyful participation in the present moment. The man's dance is not seen as an instinctive celebration of life, but as an omen of eventual death, the movements not vital and dynamic but suggestive of the final involuntary spasms ("ticking hips", "twitching skull", "loose vertebrae") of one who is dying. The persona, in "A Sibyl", is aware of passing time only as a sentence of death. She is not really aware of the present moment at all; in fact, the calmness with which she accepts her future

doom (" [t]he thing that calls itself / I / right now / doesn't care") does not reflect the desire to belong to the moment which is implicit throughout "There is Only One of Everything" but indicates instead a passive resignation to the future which is crippling to the life of the self in the present.

In "There is Only One of Everything", the persona sees her companion, finally, as he is. She is no longer perceiving him through the distortions of her own fears, her own needs, as she does in "The Circle Game". She is no longer detached from all involvement and coldly analytical, as she is in "A Sibyl". Nothing of the persona intrudes into her perceptions of her companion. The detail with which she conveys these perceptions ("spoon waved in one hand, wisps of / roughened hair / / sticking up from your head"), as well as the total lack of self-preoccupation which her companion's delight in the dance suggests, creates a sense of his existence as a separate being which the persona has rarely achieved before. She captures what is essentially a private moment in her companion's life, a moment in which he celebrates nothing more than simply being. His dance is without self-dramatization; it accompanies a song which is itself low-key ("flat and mournful"), a song which conveys the inherent sadness of the human condition, and which is not unlike what Wordsworth called

"the still, sad music of humanity", in "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey".<sup>10</sup> The dance demands no audience, no other participation. It is self-fulfilling in much the same way that the dance of the children in "The Circle Game" is self-fulfilling, the reason for its performance the performance itself. Now, however, the persona no longer sees the dance as significant of something which eludes her; it is no longer a ritual of initiation from which she is excluded. The dance is celebration itself; the dancer, one who affirms the fullness of the moment. The image of the solitary dancer becomes more than simply a captured moment in the life of the persona's companion. It is an image which also suggests the ultimate singleness of man, the integrity of oneness of man's life. There is no exclusive club to which the persona must gain entrance. No person is any more or less isolated than any other person.

Everything is single.

Nothing is outside.

Implicit in the persona's portrayal of her companion is a respect for his separateness and a desire to share in his un-selfconscious response to the moment ("it's your surprised / body, pleasure I like"). An earlier poem,

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<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth, p. 164.

"Return Trips West", in which the persona realizes the inviolable privacy and separateness of each individual life, ends with the question "[w]hat can be shared" (PFU, 50-51), a question to which she has no answer. In "There is Only One of Everything", the persona answers this question:

I can even say it,  
though only once and it won't

last: I want this. I want  
this.

What can be shared is not the closed past or the unpredictable future but the moment itself. What she "want[s]" is not simply the man; he cannot be possessed. It includes, rather, the total experience of this one unique moment in which their lives impinge upon each other. Only by belonging to the moment can the moment belong to each of them.

The journey which began with "Hesitation outside the door" is not over. In the light of this last poem, "There is Only One of Everything", the persona sees that the journey is never over. It is not a journey to some mystical place where the self will be miraculously made whole, but a process of choosing to live in the present moment, of choosing now rather than the past or the future, a process which is continuous. "There is Only One of Everything" represents a progression in vision over "Hesitations outside

the door" or "Lying here, everything in me". In those two poems, the emphasis is upon making a beginning, and fulfillment of the self exists as a future possibility. In "There is Only One of Everything", however, an underlying sense of urgency informs the persona's statement that "I want this. I want / this". Aware of the passing of time, she is also aware that life cannot be postponed to the indefinite future. It is only through a constant awareness of time, of this "now" which is all man is guaranteed, that the incompleted self can become whole.

The poems examined in this chapter represent a process which occurs within the persona, a process in which detachment and irony ("My beautiful wooden leader") slowly give way to urgent involvement ("There is Only One of Everything"). In "My beautiful wooden leader", the persona is aware both of the ludicrousness of the role-player and also of the paralysing effect which role-playing has upon personal fulfillment. It has already been pointed out that an awareness of the stifling effect of roles or masks on the life of the individual or upon a relationship between two individuals is the chief difference between the poems examined in this chapter and an earlier poem like "The Circle Game". "My beautiful wooden leader" illustrates this awareness. In this poem, however, the persona does not offer any alternative to the state of affairs which she



is satirizing. Satire presupposes the existence of a better way, but the satirist is content to expose the falsity of the system being attacked. "My beautiful wooden leader" is representative of most of the poems in Power Politics in that it is a self-fulfilling verbal structure, its end and aim the expression of a detached satiric vision. In this sense, the poem is not "about" the persona's personal experience at all; rather, it exposes the machinations and manipulations of one type of power politician, the man who would deny the individuality of his partner by imposing upon her a role to complement his own assumed conventional role of heroic masculinity.

"Hesitations outside the door" is a much more personal poem than "My beautiful wooden leader"; in it, the persona faces the personal dilemma of either continuing to maintain the façade which has been allowed to replace a vital relationship with her companion, or else choosing to break down the façade forever. As the persona realizes, to go beyond the system of lies and evasions and non-confrontation which constitutes the form of their relationship is to lose what is essentially a system of self-preservation; but to choose to keep these "restrictions" is also to lose the possibility of any more meaningful relationship: "either way is loss". Implicit in this statement is the persona's unspoken realization that she must risk pain and

loss by revealing herself as she truly is in order to make fulfillment with another possible. Because it is personal, "Hesitations outside the door" creates a sense of immediacy which "My beautiful wooden leader" lacks. Within it, language is used by the persona both to hide the truth from herself, to delay making a choice, and, at the end of the poem, to embody the sense of genuine hesitation of the self at the brink of an unknown. This poem is an important step in the persona's progress toward the affirmation of "There is Only One of Everything" because it captures a part of the actual process in which the persona turns away from self-deception to the determined self-honesty of the last poems in You are Happy. There is the sense in "Hesitations outside the door" that the honesty of the last section of the poem is possible only because of the persona's relentless probing of her inner being, her behaviour and motives.

"Lying here, everything in me" is in no way a step backward from this position of self-honesty. Rather, it expresses, through the metaphor of a strangely barren landscape with its atmosphere of "incredible" clarity, the sense of newness, of wonder, which the persona feels at having broken from her old system of ordering and limiting the relationship with her companion. Landscape has appeared in earlier poems such as "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein", "Arctic syndrome: dream fox" and "Procedures for Underground"

as an external correspondence for an unexplored area within the self. In the first two of these poems, however, landscape is an image of the barrier between the order-creating conscious mind and the non-formal unconscious, and therefore has negative rather than positive associations; in "Procedures for Underground", landscape is an image of an unknown area within the self and, as such, it has secondary associations of danger and fear. In "Lying here, everything in me", on the other hand, the landscape has positive associations. Its height and clarity suggest the inner equivalent of heightened awareness. It is as if the persona, having discarded the old system of masks and evasions, is able to see the landscape as elemental, as an objective manifestation of the potential for inner growth and development. It is still not an actual landscape; it is, rather, a metaphor for the persona's new clarity of vision. Stripped of the old coloration of fear, the landscape provides a correspondence for the simplicity and energy with which the persona now views the world.

This kind of awareness informs the persona's treatment of the dual nature of the island in "There are two islands". In the first part of this poem, the persona shows what happens when the natural rhythm of time and the seasons is ignored, and she and her companion live entirely according to a prescribed and restrictive code of behaviour of their

own devising. Life on this first "island" is reduced to the acting out of a part over and over; joy and sorrow are merely conditioned and expected responses to the role itself. In the second part of the poem, the persona contrasts this non-vital existence on the first island to the non-human world of the actual island. She brings to this second "island" the awareness of time and the seasons which is evident in "Lying here, everything in me". For the first time, however, the landscape is not a metaphor for an inner state of being; it is, rather, the natural world as she is now able to perceive it, as it actually exists; and role-playing and the various ways in which man orders and defines his world are not only irrelevant in this context but also non-existent. The awareness of the possibilities for fulfillment of the self when masks and self-deceptions are discarded is accompanied in the persona by this awareness that lies, roles and the order man creates are not intrinsic to the natural world. It exists, as it always has existed, apart from and unrelated to man's system of order, following only the dictates of time and the recurring cycle of growth, death and regeneration.

With this realization comes the feeling of urgency to re-unite the process of living with the natural cycle from which it has somehow become separated. Thus, as we have seen, the persona's aim in the last section of You are Happy

is to bring her own life back into harmony with time. The poem, "There is Only One of Everything", does just this. In it, the persona conveys not only the sense of the uniqueness and immediacy of the present moment but also her feeling of urgency to make "now" belong to her, to possess the moment by experiencing it fully. Her statement at the end of the poem that "I want this. I want / this" amounts to a realization that life is not repetition; neither is it a known quantity which she can order and manipulate to her liking. She will not be given the chance to "do" this moment over again, to make it perfect. Beginnings cannot be postponed either; the persona cannot stand forever on the brink of possibilities. As she says in "There is Only One of Everything", "in time you will disappear".

The affirmation of "There is Only One of Everything" lies in the persona's acceptance of time and her desire to seize the moment, to celebrate it even though it "won't last". Affirmation also is implicit in the title itself, in the persona's ability to see the singleness of all things, the fact that there is only one of everything, not as the final proof of isolation, but as a kind of key to achieving wholeness of being, through an undivided response to each unique moment. "There is Only One of Everything" is the talismanic phrase through which all possibilities will be made actual.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has traced the development of four major themes in the poetry of Margaret Atwood: isolation, loss, the duality within man and the search for fulfillment in the present.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, however, each of these themes is a variation on another more inclusive theme, that of the exploration of the self. The development of the persona's vision, a vision which gradually progresses from an awareness of the isolation of the individual to that of the singleness of all things, is brought about by the exploration of the nature of the self.

Whatever strengths Margaret Atwood's poetry has derive from the first person narrator of the poems, the persona through whom the poet's observations and explorations of the nature of the individual are made. The tensions and the rich ambiguity of meaning in the poems of the first chapter of this thesis result from the subjectivity of the first person narrator. Thus in poems such as "This

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<sup>1</sup>The title of the last chapter, "There is Only One of Everything", represents not only a theme but also a process which the persona undergoes and which allows her to celebrate the condition of being "both human and alive" (PP, 30) through a return to the actual world and the present moment.

is a Photograph of Me" and "My face, my other faces", there is a surface of terse comment which seems to convey the persona's total isolation from other human beings and her inability to alter this condition, but there is also an ambiguity of syntax and metaphor which suggests that the persona, if not deliberately attempting to hide behind a barrier (of photograph and water in "This is a Photograph of Me" and of polished steel in "My face, my other faces"), is at least partly responsible for the creation of the barrier. In both these poems, and in "The Circle Game" and "Tricks with Mirrors", the persona directly addresses an unseen male figure; her tone is, in each case, conversational and familiar, but this familiarity and apparent easiness of tone merely introduce further tensions. The directness of the persona's statements is at all times confuted and undermined both by what the imagery reveals and by what the persona does not say. She "communicates" her feeling of isolation through statements and images which "dazzle without illuminating",<sup>2</sup> and which stand in direct antithesis to the apparent urgency with which she attempts to explain her plight to her companion.

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<sup>2</sup>Linda Rogers, "Margaret the Magician", Canadian Literature, no. 60 (Spring, 1974), p. 83.

The persona in each of the poems of isolation points out the difficulties of communicating with another and suggests that these difficulties stem from the individual's conditioned responses to the appearance of things. However, by refusing to acknowledge her own part in the creation of this state of affairs, the persona embodies in her statements themselves a kind of non-communication. The theme of non-communication is therefore explored in the poems and manifested by the poems. What we see in the poems in Chapter I is an individual who is isolated by forces external to her (the surface theme of the poems) and also by various refusals and avoidances within herself. Thus in "Tricks with Mirrors", the persona's laconic statement, "Think about pools", expresses both her conscious sense of isolation or separateness and also her refusal to allow herself to be known by her companion. She disappears behind a metaphor which reveals, more than anything else, her need to stay hidden.

The poems examined in Chapter II provide a possible reason for the persona's refusal to allow herself to be known and for the fact that she allows her companion to manipulate her (in, for example, "The Circle Game"). "A fortification" suggests that she "arm[s]" herself against the world in order to avoid being "vulnerable"; that being half alive is preferable to being hurt. The "lost forest"



poems express, much less ambiguously than the poems in Chapter I, the persona's feelings of isolation and loss. In these poems, we learn that the persona is isolated not only from others but also from a part of herself. This unknown area of the self is an inner equivalent of the "lost forest". Just as in the poems of isolation there is an underlying sense that the persona does not want to communicate her own inner nature, so in the lost forest poems there is an underlying sense that she wants to regain the lost forest, to make the feeling of wholeness she once experienced ("The Shrunken Forest"; "Eden is a Zoo") accessible again. The persona in Chapter II emerges as more human than she appears in Chapter I. The suggestion of self-renunciation and martyrdom apparent in her resigned acceptance of being distorted and confined (in "The Circle Game") gives way to a feeling of poignancy and need in the lost forest poems of Chapter II. At the end of the second chapter, we have seen that the isolation of the individual is not caused only by the failure of perception to pierce the mask of physical appearance; nor is it caused only by the failure of the individual to communicate, due to a fear of being hurt by another. In Atwood's view of the world and of man, isolation also results from the failure to know or understand one's inner being. The persona in the lost forest poems suggests that there is a

split between her present life and her past life; the imagery she uses to convey this suggests as well that the split is between her conscious mind and her unconscious, which remembers and identifies with the place (the lost forest) in her childhood in which she experienced a sense of wholeness.

Atwood's vision of the life of the individual in these two chapters is bleak. Her persona is isolated from other individuals, from the past and, ultimately, from herself. She lives in a fragmented modern world which lacks any meaning, any relation to her own life. The inter-personal relationship is seen by Atwood as a kind of *détente*, a stand-off in which there is no open hostility, but which is underlain by fear, distrust and hate. Consequently, the life of the individual is rootless; there are no permanent values. Atwood's persona may possess the ability to re-discover herself, but she has not yet used it.

In the poems of Chapter III, the poet's canvas is enlarged. The rootlessness and fragmentation of modern life are seen as the result of man's attempt to impose his concept of order onto the natural world. Atwood sees the landscape "[i]n this country" (*AIC*, 3) as a place which lacks a mythology to confer order. Traditional mythologies cannot be imported; a new myth has not been discovered.

Atwood's solution to this problem is found in the advocacy of an exploration of the self. Only by acknowledging the non-formal half of his dual nature, by not repressing this vital half of himself, can the individual hope to regain a feeling of harmony with the external universe. The lack of a traditional mythology to interpret the external world is compensated for by the formulation of a new myth, the myth of exploration. The reality of neither the self nor the landscape has yet been discovered; both are, in a sense, incomplete.

The last two poems of Chapter III, "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" and "Arctic syndrome: dream fox", are dramatic and dynamic explorations of the self. In them, Atwood expresses through the imagery man's capacity for violence but also his innate ability to perceive and identify with the expansive, continuously changing principle of order of the natural world. These two poems celebrate the process of exploration: to recognize the duality inherent in man's nature is to discover the possibility of reconciliation, of making the self whole again. In both these poems, landscape is no longer a mirror of isolation; it is, rather, a metaphor for the potential discovery and fulfillment of the self. The myth of the incomplete self is not negative; it provides the basis for the only affirmation which is possible in Atwood's poetry. A vision which ignores man's divided nature is false.

Given Atwood's vision of the negative forces that rule the life of the individual, the manipulation of power over others, the games and masks with which people avoid true communication, the unavoidable separation of the individual from his past, and the man-made order which opposes the natural order, the creation of a utopian future for the individual (the persona) would be a betrayal of all the discoveries which the poems make. Consequently, affirmation, in the poems examined in the last chapter of this thesis, takes the form of a recognition of possible failure to find fulfillment ("Hesitations outside the door"), of a willingness to experience honestly, without self-protective (and self-negating) masks or roles, whatever may occur, a willingness to choose to experience the unknown ("Lying here, everything in me"), and, finally, of an acceptance of the limitations of mortality and a celebration of the life of man as it actually is, in time rather than outside it, and akin to the recurring cycle of the natural world rather than to the false order man creates ("There are two islands"; "There is Only One of Everything"). An acceptance of the cycles of time and change as well as a renunciation of the false systems of ordering experience are both implicit in the following statement of affirmation, taken from "Book of Ancestors", the final poem in You are Happy:

History  
 is over, we take place  
 in a season, an undivided  
 space, no necessities

hold us closed, distort  
 us. (YAH, 95)

The images the persona uses in the poems of Chapter IV are the same ones she has used in the poems of the first three chapters, but the emphasis has changed. The landscape no longer functions as an image of isolation or loss but, rather, as an image of transience and beauty ("There are two islands"). The mirror is no longer an unbreakable barrier to perception but, erected by the self, it can also be broken down by the self ("Head Against White"). The dance is not seen as an exclusive ritual but as a private, and also universal, expression of instinctive celebration ("There is Only One of Everything"). Separateness from others is no longer isolation but an essential condition of human life which does not exclude the possibility of communion. The persona has taken a step backward from the self-interested apprehension of her own life and the life of her companion; this distance allows her to see, with a new clarity, the beauty of the human condition as well as the pain:

who can interpret  
 the semaphore of our bending  
 bodies, from a distance we could be dancing[.] (YAH, 9)

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