

# Double Voice, Single Vision: A Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

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In her 1980 study of Margaret Atwood's poetry, Sherrill Grace calls *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* "Atwood's major poetic achievement to date" and notes that "Atwood has given it her own endorsement by including it, *in toto*, in Selected Poems."<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, however, the difference between the initial publication and the reissue is the absence of the "Afterword" in the new volume. The "Afterword" to the *Journals*, a largely redundant account of the surface narrative, is a convenient interpretive crutch that has encouraged critical laziness with respect to the work. In spite of the poem's widely acclaimed importance to contemporary Canadian poetry, critics and reviewers, in using the "Afterword" as a point of departure, have generally avoided all but a superficial reading of the text, a reading which reduces its significance to "a compelling articulation of a Canadian myth and a dramatic incarnation of our past."<sup>2</sup> However, the reissuing of the entire text minus the "Afterword" invites an examination of the *Journals* on its own terms.

Although Grace attempts a fuller reading by considering a variety of important thematic concerns, she still leans heavily on the "Afterword"

and ignores a most obvious fact about the *Journals*, a fact which Frank Davey's brief description of the work in his *From There to Here* almost points out. He describes it as:

...a reading of what the responses of the pioneer writer Susanna Moodie to the Canadian wilderness might have been had they not been filtered through various nineteenth-century literary and social conventions. These poems envisage a Moodie very much like Atwood, who sees the forest and streams as threatening shapes, who feels remote from her husband and fellow settlers, but who, in addition, cannot help trying to impose some order on the green chaos she senses around her.<sup>3</sup>

This statement is both misleading and instructive. By imposing a simplistic and also inaccurate thematic reading on the work Davey subtly dismisses it as just another nationalist poem. Although there is indeed fear associated with landscape in the *Journals*, there is little evidence of Moodie's "trying to impose some order on the green chaos she senses around her." What in fact Atwood's persona tries to do, as I shall demon-



*Mask* batique on silk satin quilted  
D. Caldwell, (Hastings, Ont.)  
photo - John Burrows

strate, is to come to terms with the landscape and thus with herself. Davey does, however, describe Moodie not merely as pioneer but as a "pioneer writer" who, in Atwood's hands, becomes "very much like Atwood." These clues, along with the many direct references to doubleness in the poem, are crucial to the exploration of a more important story that lies like a near mirror image just below the surface of the narrative. The night a bear makes a dream appearance in the *Journals* is "one / night the surface of my mind keeps / only as anecdote," the speaker tells us, "though beneath [are] stories."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, *all* the historical and quasi-historical events which organize the surface of the text are Moodie's literary anecdotes which serve as metaphors for Atwood's own experience of being both a woman and a poet.

Although paranoid schizophrenia, "the national mental illness," is offered in the "Afterword" as the reason why "Mrs. Moodie is divided down the middle" (p. 62), this appears to be a reductive interpretation of all the varieties of doubleness that inform the poem. The immigrant Susanna Moodie, who is only one aspect of Atwood's persona, was first of all a woman and a human being in an era in which—even more markedly than in our own—the term "human female" was assumed to be a contradiction in terms. Living out the split demanded of women between "human" and "female" is a condition of female existence in patriarchy. Second, as a woman writer—a similar contradiction in terms—Moodie was split between her loyalty to art and her duty as wife and mother, a situation exacerbated by the demands of pioneer life. Finally, as Atwood's poetic persona, Moodie suffers a further doubleness by sharing her identity with the poet. Moodie's attempt to create literature out of her pioneer experience in the language of Victorian Romanticism, a language decidedly inappropriate to that experience, is analogous to Atwood's struggle to describe female experience in the only language we have: the language of patriarchy. The present paper attempts to shed some

light on these three aspects of doubleness related to the persona and to show how that doubleness is rooted in language. My interpretation of the *Journals* is dependent upon a reconsideration of Atwood's language in terms of the female tradition in modern poetry.

During the Restoration, when women first began writing professionally, the most common responses to their work were hostility and indifference. Those responses had the effect of silencing all but the most intrepid women writers; rather than be silenced altogether, these women incorporated silences into their work by writing in accordance with "received" male literary criteria but encoding their own experience at a sub-textual level in their texts. In this way they subverted male-created literary forms and conventions. These techniques later developed into what feminist critic Jeanne Kammer calls "the art of silence," a female aesthetic that in modern poetry originates with Emily Dickenson.<sup>5</sup> What the art of silence says in women's poetry is that its creators are acutely conscious of the extent to which a patriarchally-conceived language has excluded them from poetic discourse. As a male symbol system, language—particularly the heavily allusive language of literature—is virtually devoid of meaning for the woman poet. Carolyn Burke has noted that "when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be personally uncomfortable."<sup>6</sup> The woman poet must therefore choose carefully from among the empty symbols and reinvest them with a meaning that conveys something of her experience of the world. It is this careful choosing that accounts for Atwood's sparseness of language and the visual sparseness of the text on the page. Her flatness of tone has the effect of denying admittance into her language of all those patriarchal overtones which each word threatens to drag into her poetry. Atwood's use of syntactical compression performs a similar function in that it denies admittance to patriarchal rhetoric. Her syntactical

method creates a doubleness in her language: read syntactically, the *Journals* carries out a narration of the persona's life but below the surface of this narrative the syntax begins to break down and as the spaces between the lines open up, a new language consisting of a series of discontinuous and often oracular epigrams of aphorisms emerges. When lifted out of their syntactical arrangement within the poem, lines such as "time a thin refusal" (p. 11) and "words, my disintegrated children" (p. 41) take on profound meaning in terms of female existence and female art. Significantly, this new language is not dissimilar to a pre-Socratic—and perhaps even pre-patriarchal—mode of discourse.<sup>7</sup> Like the gnarled utterances of the ancient female Oracles, these powerful aphorisms also create ambiguities which are nevertheless functional in that they open up the text to a wider play of meaning. That *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* was born out of the silence which has threatened so many generations of women poets is amply demonstrated in the "Afterword":

These poems were generated by a dream.  
I dreamt I was watching an opera I had  
written about Susanna Moodie. I was alone  
in the theatre; on the empty white stage, a  
single figure was singing. (p. 62)

The poet, as sole occupant of the theatre, is swallowed up by its vast emptiness, even as Moodie, the creation of the poet's dreaming mind, is threatened by the empty whiteness that surrounds her. Moodie sings out Atwood's text but there are no ears but the poet's to hear it. These empty white silences, represented in the *Journals* by snow covering the landscape and vast empty spaces on the page, run like a *leit-motiv* through the work.

It is not only language but also form that has been subverted in the *Journals*. An overall formal structure is suggested by the three parts of the work, which on the surface correspond to Susanna Moodie's youth, middle life, and old

age. Journal I appears to comply with this structure, for it is a fictional recreation of Moodie's experiences as a young pioneer woman, and this first Journal must, of course, be interpreted on those terms. However, a journal is a document of process, a work without premeditated formal structure. What the *Journals* becomes in the second and third parts is a record of the poet's own thought processes as she begins to discover just how fluid the identity boundaries are between herself and her persona. Gradually, Moodie becomes emblematic of the struggle faced by all poets who are women; finally, she is transformed into the vehicle for a kind of utopian vision that is rarely—if ever—found in the works of Margaret Atwood. In the final poem Atwood and Moodie become fully integrated and Atwood restores formal structure to the work by making it circular. As we shall see, the final result is remarkably effective in bringing into single focus what at first appears to be the work's "double vision."

As many reviewers and critics have noted, visual perception and inner vision are central concerns in the *Journals*. What few have considered however is that women's perception of themselves and the world is uniquely different from male perception. In this connection, John Berger has written:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself ....From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.<sup>8</sup>

Berger's description of woman's space and woman's perception corresponds with stunning accuracy to the vision which carries the *Journals*, for Atwood's Moodie is entrapped in that "allotted and confined space." Like Moodie's sister poet and contemporary, Emily Dickenson, whose life was "shaved/And fitted to a frame."<sup>9</sup> Atwood's persona is entrapped in ironclad Victorian convention variously represented by a photograph, a mirror, a burning house, a Victorian parlour and finally, a grave. Survival in this confined space is indeed, as Berger's words suggest and Atwood's poem demonstrates, "at the cost of a woman's self being split into two." Like all women, Moodie "has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually," and as the opening lines of the *Journals* suggest, she is indeed "continually accompanied by her own image of herself":

Is it my clothes, my way of walking,  
the things I carry in my hand  
—a book, a bag with knitting—  
the incongruous pink of my shawl (p. 11)

This is a uniquely female version of the "inward gaze," a static self-image that corresponds to the way culture has taught Moodie to perceive herself; it is a self-image that obstructs deeper inner vision. The incongruities between this self-image and Moodie's own instincts about her true nature initiate the obsessive search for her authentic inner self.

If Moodie's gaze, then, is obsessively inward, how does one interpret the landscape imagery in the *Journals* and the fear associated with it? As a reflection of the humanist philosophy which is central to Western thought, landscape in literature is "other," i.e. that which is set over against man and the culture he creates. Indeed, as has been pointed out by the thematic critics, there is a substantial body of Canadian literature that clearly exhibits this nature/culture opposition. Furthermore, women are presented as features in that landscape. As anthropologist Sherry Ortner,

in her article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" has pointed out,

"culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) recognizes that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with, nature."<sup>10</sup>

This relationship between women and nature, based upon female biological functions, the social roles those functions have been made to enforce, and the resulting female psychic structure, is universal and is reflected in virtually all products of human consciousness, including literature. This androcentric literary tradition is most apparent in literature featuring a male hero who, as Margaret Atwood herself has written, "moves through a landscape that is a landscape of women as well as one of geographical features."<sup>11</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that in a poem which presents a woman as the central figure, landscape is not "other" but "self."

Beginning with the *Odyssey*, literature depicting the central character's quest for identity describes a journey through an often terrifying landscape. This tradition, coupled with the universal association of women and nature, makes Susanna Moodie's emigration from over-cultivated England to uncultivated Canada a particularly appropriate metaphor for the female quest for identity. There is probably little difficulty in identifying a young, well-bred, well-groomed Victorian "lady" with the soft, verdant, "curvaceous" English countryside, both landscape and lady in Victorian England having been virtually transformed into cultural artifacts. But for the woman who has been taught to perceive female attractiveness in horticultural metaphors, the fading of her "bloom" of youth and her "ripening" into maturity signal a shift in self-perception. These physical and psychic changes, which occur early in her life, constitute her loss of the sexual power that is her only power in patri-

archal culture. This loss of power makes the rejection of self as cultural artifact an act of psychological survival. The historical Moodie arrived in Canada as a new wife and mother, the point in her life that marked the decline in her sexual power. And it is at precisely this point that Atwood takes her over as a poetic persona. The difficulty Atwood's Moodie has in making the shift in self-perception is manifest in the tension between woman as cultural artifact and woman as uncultivated landscape, a tension that characterizes the first two Journals and most of the third.

As a product of patriarchal conditioning, Atwood's persona recoils from the changes which time, her greatest adversary, forces upon her; indeed, as the *Journals* opens, time has already begun to close down for her, as the epigrammatic "time a thin refusal" of the opening poem suggests. Moodie gazes for the first time upon a landscape that is anything but soft and curvaceous, and sees instead "vistas of desolation" and "omens of winter"—promises of a hard, prickly, and understandably frightening part of herself with which she needs to come to terms. But entombed as she is in patriarchal gender conventions, Moodie finds this new landscape alienating:

this space cannot hear

.....

The moving water will not show me  
my reflection

The rocks ignore. (p. 11)

In this initial confrontation, the landscape defies comparison with Moodie's image of herself. On a second level of meaning, these lines convey the sense of invisibility and inaudibility that characterizes female experience in patriarchy. As Moodie enters this new landscape of self, she sets in motion a process that leads to her ultimate release

from the hermetically sealed space that confines and isolates her. It is a process of continually alternating self-denial and self-recognition.

The process of female self-awareness which the *Journals* records leads through long years of isolation, eventual insanity, death, and rebirth. It involves an initial discovery of where one stands in relation to the "real" world:

Whether the wilderness is  
real or not  
depends on who lives there. (p. 13)

To Moodie, who "lives there"—indeed, *is* the wilderness—it is very real. Men however, as she discovers in a sudden flash of recognition, "deny the ground they stand on" (p. 16) and thus deny her. Her husband and the other men live in a phallogocentric world of pretense and "illusion solid to them as a shovel" in that they refuse to "open their eyes even for a moment" to female presence in the world. Moodie, "surrounded, stormed, broken // in upon" by sudden self-insight, realizes that she is "the dark / side of light," the "unbright earth," an absence against which a sun-favoured male presence is defined. In this newly-felt remoteness from her "shadowy husband," Moodie perceives him as "an X, a concept" (p. 19), an unknown quantity in a system of male logic. Significantly, Mr. Moodie is quickly written out of the poem (p. 19) and Susanna is left in the bush to make her greatest self-discoveries. In his absence she suddenly recognizes the extent to which she is imprisoned in the cage of male logic. Illuminated by the light of an "inner" fire (p. 22), her house can be seen for what it is: an artifact of culture designed by men as "a protective roof" over the heads of women and children, yet "prisoning [them] in a cage of blazing / bars." Carefully designed to mathematical specification, this prison exhibits "the logic of windows" and "all those corners / and straight lines" so foreign to the landscape it inhabits and thus to Moodie herself.

The looking-glass, symbol of patriarchy's ultimate judgement on all women, plays an important role in Moodie's quest for self. In "Looking in a Mirror" (p. 24), she finally comes face-to-face with that cultural artifact, her "heirloom face," now a "crushed eggshell / among the other debris" of her former self. She now becomes fully conscious of that other landscape of self:

the mouth cracking  
open like a rock in fire  
trying to say

What is this

But before she can fully speak herself into existence and release herself from the surface of the imprisoning glass—emerge reborn from the "crushed eggshell" of a former self—her husband writes himself back into her life: "He wrote. We are leaving" (p. 26), and returns her to stifling confinement in a Victorian parlour, where she spends her middle years sifting through memories in an attempt to piece together her fragmented self.

In a Toronto lunatic asylum, where female insanity intensifies floor by upward floor, Moodie reaches the top-most level of madness and finds herself once more face-to-face with the landscape she seeks: "It was a hill, with boulders, trees, no houses" (p. 50). But she is unable to make contact: "The landscape was saying something / but I couldn't hear." She has come a long way from "the rocks ignore" of her initial self-confrontation. Therefore, she declines an invitation to descend again into the assumed sanity of culture:

They wanted me to go out  
to where there were streets and  
the Toronto harbour

I shook my head....

She prefers insanity, because at least it promises "all kinds of answers" about herself.

With the death of Atwood's Moodie all semblance of an autonomous persona—and an autonomous poet—disappears. It is more accurate to call Moodie's "Resurrection" a reincarnation in the person of Atwood. What needs to be explored further before the final *Journal* can be interpreted is the relationship between the nineteenth-century poet Susanna Moodie and her twentieth-century counterpart, for it is this relationship which is responsible for the doubleness of text and voice that becomes obvious as early as the end of *Journal II*. Atwood's interest in Moodie is hardly surprising, given the concern among women writers for a literary matrilineage. The source of this prevailing concern has been brilliantly argued by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and widely received by feminist critics. As Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out, the woman poet, confronted by a largely male literary tradition, is involved in a particularly intense struggle for self-creation, and "she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor."<sup>12</sup> The very private and traditionally female genre which the *Journals* imitates in poetic form suggests the existence of a strong and intimate bond between Atwood and her literary foremother. But like all relationships patterned on the mother-daughter bond, the relationship between Atwood and Moodie is fraught with ambivalence. What Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia"—not the fear of one's mother but the fear of becoming one's mother<sup>13</sup>—can be traced through Atwood's rejection of Moodie's art, to the fusion of their identities in the *Journals*. Here is Atwood's initial reaction to *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings*:

When I read them I was disappointed. The prose was discursive and ornamental and the books had little shape: they were collections of disconnected anecdotes. The only thing that held them together was the personality of Mrs. Moodie, and what struck

me most about this personality was the way in which it reflects many of the obsessions still with us. (p. 62)

The *Journals* is an investigation into the personality behind the “discursive and ornamental” prose, and if the poems, as Frank Davey suggests, “envisage a Moodie very much like Atwood,” it is because Atwood identifies in Moodie her own dilemma as a poet. As Atwood recognizes, Moodie reflects “many of the obsessions still with us,” and one of those obsessions is the woman poet’s search for an authentic voice. Moodie represents the female literary subculture in which all women writers in search of an authentic voice participate, and because that subculture defines itself in relation to the dominant, male literary culture, women run the risk of speaking in a double voice. For as Suzanne Juhasz, in her study of contemporary American women poets, has pointed out, “women have sought to find voices in which they could speak as poets. Some of the difficulty that they have experienced in being heard comes from the strain of trying to make one sound out of two conflicting selves.”<sup>14</sup> This is the double-bind situation women writers have traditionally found themselves in: “If the woman poet ‘writes like a man,’ she denies her own experience; if she writes as a woman, her subject matter is trivial.”<sup>15</sup> This split in the female poetic voice is made explicit in the *Journals*, not only in very obvious places, such as “The Double Voice” (p. 42) but also in poems such as “Charivari,” where the story told by the “American lady” is quoted word-for-word by the persona, as are Brian’s comments in “Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter” (p. 36), as if the poet were testing out various voices available to her. The ultimate voice to be tested and discarded is, of course, Susanna Moodie’s, a voice whose echoes surface in such poems as “Thoughts from Underground”:

due to natural resources, native industry,  
superior
penitentiaries

we will all be rich and powerful  
 .....  
 who can doubt it, look how  
 fast Belleville is growing. (p. 55)

Although Atwood rejects Moodie’s “discursive and ornamental” poetic voice, she embraces the spirit behind it, which can be seen to represent a whole generation of Atwood’s literary foremothers.

“The amazing thing about women writers in the nineteenth century,” Atwood has written, “is not that there were so few of them but that there were any at all.”<sup>16</sup> The denial of the validity of women’s experience and the taboos against transforming female experience into art were among the difficulties that many women writers failed to transcend. Susanna Moodie gave birth to five children and raised them in the Canadian wilderness, yet she “composed uplifting verse” (p. 42) about Canadian scenery. Her husband brought her, unwilling, to Canada and left her alone in the bush for months at a time, yet she wrote “verses about love and sleighbells” (p. 47). Given this opposition between Moodie’s art and Moodie’s experience as wife and mother, it is hardly surprising that Atwood explores Moodie’s (and by extension her own) difficulties as a woman poet through the traditional metaphor for literary creation, the metaphor of childbirth. However, whereas the poetic process is traditionally described in terms of gestation and the actual moment of birth, Atwood expands the metaphor to include infant mortality, a notion which “Death of a Young Son by Drowning” (p. 30) seems to support. The metaphor of infant mortality is a particularly useful device to a poet working within the aesthetic of silence, for art, like a newborn child, is vulnerable to neglect and perishes as a result of the silence it may be born into. In this connection, the opening lines of “The Deaths of the Other Children” are worth looking at closely:



The body dies  
 little by little  
 the body buries itself

It is as important to read the vast empty spaces surrounding these words as it is to read the words themselves. The silence that surrounds these lines emphasizes their shortness, denies any syntactical connection between them, and even threatens to bury them, to swallow them up “little by little.” The disappearance in this way of words on the page is an intensely felt threat that is echoed throughout the *Journals*. For example, here are the opening lines of “The Wereman”:

My husband walks in the frosted field  
 an X, a concept  
 defined against a blank;  
 he swerves, enters the forest  
 and is blotted out. (p. 19)

The figure defined against a vast expanse of white snow is analogous to a word from the poet’s pen defined against a blank white page. Furthermore, to Atwood/Moodie, identified as she is with landscape, a white expanse of snow threatens to silence and erase her as well. This disappearance of poet and/or poem into a vast white silence is echoed in “Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age”:

but whose is this vapid face  
 pitted and vast, rotund  
 suspended in empty paper  
 as though in a telescope (p. 48)

Not even the enlarging effect suggested by the telescope can overcome the threat of the “empty paper” in which the image of self is suspended. Here, the poet/persona avoids being swallowed up by white, only to be “eaten away by light” at the end of the poem.

If we now return to “The Deaths of the Other Children” we can see how this disintegration of

both the poet and her poetic offspring is further worked out in terms of the art of silence. It is worth quoting the text in its entirety in order to get the effect of its appearance on the page, although the unique typesetting of the original is difficult to reproduce here:

The body dies  
  
 little by little  
  
 the body buries itself  
  
 joins itself  
 to the loosened mind, to the black-  
 berries and thistles, running in a  
 thorny wind  
 over the shallow  
 foundations of our former houses,  
 dim hollows now in the sandy soil

Did I spend all those years  
 building up this edifice  
 my composite

self, this crumbling hovel?

My arms, my eyes, my grieving  
 words, my disintegrated children

Everywhere I walk, along  
 the overgrowing paths, my skirt  
 tugged at by the spreading briars

they catch at my heels with their fingers

If we resist the syntactical pull of one line to the next—a pull which gives the poem a surface meaning corresponding to the persona’s consciousness—and allow each line to emerge as an independent entity isolated by the white silence that surrounds it, we begin to get a glimpse of the submerged meaning, which corresponds to the consciousness of the poet herself. The title itself is suggestive: as the word “other,” with its covert reference to woman-as-other, suggests, the

poem is not concerned exclusively with infant mortality. In this poem, "woman as landscape" is not merely metaphorical but literal as well. The body "joins itself," becomes fully integrated, through the burial of the self in the earth. The body is then recycled as "black- / berries and thistles." The isolation of "black-" from "berries" which emphasizes blackness and suggests a pun on berries, evokes the blacking out of the "loosened [lucid?] mind" upon integration with the earth. Woman as literal landscape is also evoked by the line that reads: "the overgrowing paths, my skirt": as in many of Atwood's lines that attempt to reduce subject-object differentiation, the connective verb "are" is dissolved in a comma.

There are other isolated lines in "The Deaths of the Other Children" worth pondering. For example, the line which reads: "Did I spend all those years" is a profound questioning of the poet's very existence, for she feels powerless to write herself into existence: like her persona, she is "a word / in a foreign language" (p. 11), a symbol in a patriarchal reading of the world. The power of literary self-creation belongs to men like the husband of Atwood's Moodie, who even has the power to write himself back into Atwood's text. For the woman poet however, as the epigrammatic "words, my disintegrated children" suggests, language often disintegrates for her when she attempts to bring forth female experience in literary form.

Women who are forced to write in a foreign language are condemned to speak in a double voice, for the language of patriarchy cannot accommodate what a woman knows of the world:

that men sweat  
always and drink often,  
that pigs are pigs  
but must be eaten  
anyway... (p. 42)

The words for female experience, like "unborn babies / fester like wounds in the body." If a woman is to enter into discourse at all she must "[use] hushed tones when speaking" and "[compose] uplifting verse." Little wonder that it is by the light of an unusually "bitter candle" that Moodie writes "verses about love and sleigh-bells" which she knows are not art because "there is no use for art"; her useful creations are "exchanged for potatoes" (p. 47). Given so many unsuccessful attempts to write herself into existence, it is hardly surprising that Moodie lapses into a kind of solipsism in which her own imagined death becomes a denial that she ever existed at all. In creating "histories, worn customs" and the "frames, commas, calendars / that enclose me," Moodie tells us, "I said I created myself" (p. 52). "Or so I thought," she adds bitterly (p. 53). This failed attempt at self-creation gives her cause to wonder: "What will they do now / that I, that all / depending on me disappears?" In the asking she answers her own question: the genuine experience of her life disappears with her, for she has had no language to articulate it.

Women writers like Atwood and Moodie, who for so long have struggled with their "damaged / knowing of the language" and "negotiated the drizzle / of strange meaning" (p. 15) in an alien literary tradition, share what Adrienne Rich has called "the dream of a common language," or as Atwood calls it, "dreams / of birds flying in the shapes / of letters; the sky's codes" (p. 20). But "the sky's codes" are literally "encoded" patriarchal constellations that must be "decoded" by women writers and "re-encoded" to convey female experience. This is the process whereby women writers may reinvent language, create the *earth's* codes. But earth and sky are unnaturally opposed: "In the morning I advance," says Atwood's persona, but "The day shrinks back from me." The opposition is expressed here in mythological terms: mother earth advances around the male sun but instead of remaining fixed in the universe, sun "shrinks back" from

earth as if to ignore her. It is the rightful placement of male and female cosmological principles which Atwood/Moodie longs for:

When will be  
that union and each  
thing (bits  
of surface broken by my foot  
step) will without moving move  
around me  
into its place

Bit by bit women may break through the resisting surface of a patriarchal tradition, even as the meaning of these lines breaks through the syntax. But such phenomena do not right the balance. In the longed-for totality, "the sky's codes" will become constellations which, like the sun, "move without moving" into place around the earth to form a union of "each / thing" in a total, androgynous cosmology.

Of course, this conflict between sun and earth, victorious male and vanquished female cosmologies echoes the ancient origins of patriarchal ideology. Northrop Frye, in a discussion of the two as "earth-mother" and "sky-father" creation myths, notes "that the earth-mother myth is the older of the two, being more appropriate for an agricultural society, as its rival was for the more urban, tool-using, and patriarchal society that succeeded it....[In] Greek mythology, the sky-father...establishes his supremacy by force over a much older earth-mother."<sup>17</sup> This "supremacy by force" is suggested by another cosmological image in which Moodie, "the granular moon," is "being / eaten away by light" (p. 48). Moodie's death-bed wish is for an end to this patriarchal aggression:

the sky  
leaps at me: let there be  
the sun-  
set

The death of Atwood's Moodie, with all its references to disintegration and decay, is analogous to the erosion of women's literature by male-defined literary criteria, and the consequent erasure of women's names from literary history.

In the underground and resurrection poems that close the *Journals*, the notion of opposing male and female cosmologies is developed further to reflect the culture/nature opposition. The patriarchal cosmology in these poems is teleological and is represented by Toronto, the Celestial City that turns out to be a "rivetted babylon" (p. 57) consistently described in the patriarchal language of the Bible. Beneath the city lie the ruins of ancient, pre-patriarchal, prehistoric cultures described in language borrowed from patriarchy but purged and reinvested with new meaning. By definition, this natural cosmology holds the possibility of rebirth in a new form. In "Resurrection" the two cosmologies are held simultaneously in the consciousness of the persona. This "dual-mindedness" is reflected in the placement of the text on the page:

I hear now  
  
the rustle of the snow  
  
the angels listening above me  
  
thistles bright with sleet  
gathering  
  
waiting for the time  
to reach me  
up to the pillared  
sun, the final city  
  
or living towers (p. 58)

The lines that begin at the left, or "base," margin represent the teleological order. The cosmology of process begins to take shape at the drop-line, "the rustle of the snow," and carries on with "thistles bright with sleet / gathering" and "or

living towers." The placement of the latter half of the poem suggests the triumph of the natural cosmology over the teleological:

unrisen yet  
whose dormant stones lie folding  
their holy fire around me

(but the land shifts with frost  
and those who have become the stone  
voices of the land  
shift also and say

god is not  
the voice in the whirlwind

god is the whirlwind

at the last  
judgement we will all be trees (p. 59)

The lines that follow the unclosed parenthesis establish a new base-margin and become the main text.<sup>18</sup>

The carefully arranged visual pattern of "Resurrection" suggests that the persona hears on the one hand "the angels listening above" in "the final city" and on the other "the rustle of the snow." The fact that the existence of heavenly angels is at best disputable ("I see now I see / now I cannot see") and that the presence of a snow- and sleet-filled winter wind is not easily denied, is a further commentary on the opposition of the two cosmologies. Gradually the persona "shifts" to exclude the patriarchal voices and listens instead to "those who have become the stone / voices of the land." She makes a further "shift" to become one of those voices, a strong voice free at last of all doubleness. In this new single voice she speaks out against a humanist/androcentric ideology that insists upon the supremacy of man and his god over nature: "god is not / the voice in the whirlwind"; she proclaims instead the primacy and numinosity of nature itself: "god is the whirlwind." Signifi-

cantly, she ends by triumphantly declaring that "at the last / judgement we will all be trees," *not* angels. The term "last judgement" has been stripped of all its patriarchal overtones of authority, damnation and salvation, and becomes merely a term that marks the point of metamorphosis into vegetation of all dead creatures.

The ultimate resolution of duality occurs in the final two poems of the *Journals*. Here, the persona is depicted as kind of Persephone-Demeter figure, waiting below for her time of rebirth, and appearing above ground in the closing poem where she, like the mythological Demeter, takes responsibility for the December snow: "this is my doing" (p. 60). The Demeter-Persephone myth is a particularly appropriate tool for exploring the death/rebirth theme here because the myth holds a primary place in Atwood's imagination and in fact structures her first published work, *Double Persephone*. Indeed, Journal III appears to be a re-working of the earlier poem. Further, the Demeter/Persephone figure is analogous to the Moodie/Atwood persona, and helps to illuminate the literary mother-daughter relationship. Feminist critic Grace Stewart, in her exploration of literature featuring the artist as heroine, has discovered that "an appreciation of the Demeter/Persephone myth provides insights to women's lives and their art." Stewart deals with the two figures in the myth as one figure "because the two blur, just as the boundaries between mother and child fade in each woman."<sup>19</sup> In the final section of the *Journals* the two do indeed blur and, as we have already seen, it is not always possible to separate Atwood the poet from Moodie the persona.

The fear of vanishing expressed throughout the *Journals* is undercut in the closing poem: "It would take more than that to banish / me," says Moodie:

it shows you how little they know  
about vanishing: I have  
my ways of getting through (p. 60)

as indeed she does, via the pen of Margaret Atwood. The “you” introduced in this poem is the former Moodie, the artifact of patriarchal culture, now completely differentiated from the speaking persona. At the command of the new, self-identified Moodie, this dead “you” turns, uneasy, in her grave. She is told to “Turn, look up” to note that the city is already decaying back into “an unexplored / wilderness,” a notion which is supported by the phrase “kingdom still” with its overtones of patriarchal monarchy and death. The “you” is then invited to “Turn, look down: / there is no city; / this is the centre of a forest,” a forest held in the womb of the earth and awaiting its time of rebirth. Interestingly, this image is depicted in terms of the Persephone/Demeter theme, in Atwood’s cover design for the *Journals*: opened out flat, front and back covers together form an image of Atwood in an underground forest juxtaposed against Moodie’s daguerreotype lying coffin-like on its side above ground in a wintery black-and-white landscape.

The death/rebirth metaphor, with its cyclical implications, reflects the entire structure of the *Journals* in that the closing line of the work, “your place is empty”, links up with the epigraph poem. The “your place” is “woman’s place”, that “allotted and confined space” John Berger describes in the passage quoted at the beginning of this analysis. Moodie, or Moodie in the guise of Atwood, releases her image from the frame that confines it:  
it:

I take this picture of myself  
and with my sewing scissors  
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eyes were,  
every-  
thing appears

Perception, or “eyes,” with its implied perceiver/perceived, self/other distinction, disappears and is replaced by “every- / thing,” being and non-being, the union of subject and object which is the only possible state: the transitional state of becoming. This pre-patriarchal, earth-mother vision echoes the “each / thing” of the poet’s longed-for androgynous totality. Atwood has brought Moodie through her search for self, and beyond into an identity that transcends gender and even species distinctions. This state of becoming is “a landscape stranger than Uranus / we have all been to and some remember” (p. 30), a natural landscape estranged by patriarchy but nevertheless retained in female consciousness.

Clearly, Margaret Atwood’s concern with doubleness is not confined to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, as the title of Sherrill Grace’s study, *Violent Duality*, suggests. That title, which alludes to the “Afterword” of the *Journals*, implies that Atwood’s doubleness is the source of conflict in her work. As for the source of the doubleness itself, it can be found, as Moodie’s has been found, in the anecdotes of the poet’s own experience:

...Robert Graves’s poetic theories [are] set forth in many books, especially *The White Goddess*, which I read at the age of 19. For Graves, man does, woman simply is. Man is the poet, woman is the Muse, the White Goddess herself, inspiring but ultimately destroying. What about a woman who wants to be a poet?...Graves’s pattern for the female artist was ‘create and destroy.’<sup>20</sup>

Clearly Atwood is haunted by the Gravesian create-and-destroy model of female art. It is entirely possible that Atwood has internalized the White Goddess as a sinister double. Perhaps it is that double who is responsible for the “Afterword” to the *Journals*. For if the “Afterword” has not actually destroyed the work, it has done some violence by diverting attention from it.

By focussing exclusively on the surface narrative, the "Afterword" denies the existence or the layers of meaning that lie beneath. However as I have attempted to demonstrate, those layers of meaning, like Atwood's Moodie, have their ways of getting through.

## NOTES

1. Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1980), p. 33.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Frank Davey, *From There to Here* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcupic, 1974), p. 33
4. Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 38. All further references to this title appear parenthetically in the text.
5. Jeanne Kammer, "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry," in *Shakespeare's Sisters*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 153.
6. Carolyn Burke, "Report from Paris: Women's Writing and the Women's Movement," *Signs*, Vol. 3 (Summer 1978), 884.
7. Inga-Stina Ewbank has abstracted some valuable conclusions about women's language from a recent study by a team of Norwegian linguists: "Statistical surveys conducted by contemporary researchers into linguistic sex differences seem ironically, for all the desire not to fall back on stereotyped notions of sex roles, to have found a set of predictable characteristics applying to female as against male language: it is simpler, using shorter sentences and fewer subclauses; and this also involves it being, in construction and syntax, more illogical and incoherent. It is also more emotional; and, finally, it is more adapted to the situation in which the speech occurs than its male counterpart" ("Ibsen and the Language of Women," in *Women Writing, Writing about Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus [London: Croom Helm, 1979], p. 69.)
8. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 46.
9. Emily Dickenson, "It was not Death, for I stood up" (J. 510), in *The Poems of Emily Dickenson*, ed. by Thomas Johnson, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955).
10. Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 69.
11. Margaret Atwood, "The Curse of Eve," in *Women on Women: The Gerstein Lecture Series 1976*, ed. by Ann B. Shteir (Toronto: York University, 1976), p. 20.
12. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 49.
13. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1977), p. 238.
14. Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1976), p. 5.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. Atwood, "The Curse of Eve," p. 24.
17. Northrop Frye, *Creation and Recreation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 36.
18. bp Nichol and Frank Davey's article, "The Prosody of Open Verse" (*Open Letter*, Vol. 5, No. 2 [Spring 1982] 5-13) provides useful interpretations of typographical devices such as "base-margin," "drop-line," and "unclosed parentheses."
19. Grace Stewart, *The New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877-1977* (Brattleboro, Vermont: Eden Press, 1979), p. 45.
20. Atwood, "The Curse of Eve," pp. 22-3.