

ATWOOD'S GORGON TOUCH

Frank Davey

In the opening poem of Margaret Atwood's first book, *Double Persephone*, a "girl with the gorgon touch" walks through a formal garden searching for "a living wrist and arm."¹ But she finds only "a line of statues" with "marble flesh." This "gorgon" is apparently Medusa, whose glance turned men to stone. In the concluding poem of Atwood's most recent collection of new work, *You Are Happy*, another male figure appears with similarly sculptural qualities:

On the floor your body curves
like that: the ancient pose, neck slackened, arms
thrown above the head, vital
throat and belly lying
undefended . . . light slides over you, . . . (96)

But this statue comes to life, is willed by the voice of the poem out of the worlds of art and ritual and into that of flesh:

this is not an altar, they are not
acting or watching

You are intact, you turn
towards me, your eyes opening, the eyes
intricate and easily bruised. . . .

(“Book of Ancestors,” 96)

In the seven books of poems which lie between these passages, this opposition between the static, the mythological, or the sculptural and the kinetic, the actual, or the temporal has been a central concern. Atwood's consideration of this opposition has been simultaneously ethical and aesthetic; all attitudes toward form in her work have been subject to moral judgments. The sources of this antithesis lie in the earliest days of Anglo-American modernism. Its deepest roots are in T. E. Hulme's rejection of nineteenth-century empathetic realism for "some geometrical shape which lifts him [man] out of the transience of the organic" and in the searches of Proust for "the real without being of the present moment" and of Pound for "a fragment of time in its pure state." Throughout Margaret Atwood's poetry such goals are presented as attractive, attainable — in terms of both life and poetic form — but ultimately unsatisfying. The

¹References are to the following editions of Atwood's poems: *Double Persephone* (Toronto: Hawkshead Press, 1961) [DP]; *The Circle Game* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1966) [CG]; *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968) [AC]; *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970) [JSM]; *Procedures for Underground* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970) [PU]; *Power Politics* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972) [PP]; *You Are Happy* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974) [YAH].

formal garden can be created and entered, but its marble flesh cannot be lifted from still dance into dancing life. Roles for lovers can be created and enacted in *Power Politics*, but the enactments cannot be relieved of a stylization which Atwood characterizes as both artistic and deadly. The lovers become lifeless statues:

Your face is silver
and flat, scaled like a fish

The death you bring me
is curved, it is the shape
of doorknobs, moons,
glass paperweights

Inside it, snow and lethal
flakes of gold fall endlessly
over an ornamental scene
a man and woman, hands joined and running. (56)

In "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (*AC*, 36-39) a farm can be created in formal images of fences and furrows, but it cannot be obliged to yield an ordered life. Here not only does art not bear life, but it loses even its own sterile order and predictability when shattered by "the unnamed whale" of temporality and process.

This kind of poem, which makes up the bulk of Atwood's work, is overtly and normatively concerned with aesthetics — the role of the artist, the nature of form, and the relationship of form to historical time. One can choose the aesthetics of space — style, sculpture, ritual, static beauty — or the aesthetics of time — flesh, earth, and process:

Love, you must choose
Between two immortalities:
One of earth, lake, trees
Feathers of a nameless bird
The other of a world of glass,
Hard marble, carven word. (*DP*, [13])

Many of Atwood's poems rest on this antithesis. "The animals in that country" — "ceremonial," "elegant," "heraldic," "fixed in their tapestry of manners" — are posed against the animals of "this country" that have "the faces of animals" and eyes that "flash once in car headlights / and are gone" (*AC*, 2-3). In "At the Tourist Center in Boston," a "white relief map" of Canada "with red dots for the cities" is posed against a reality of "slush, / machines and assorted garbage" (*AC*, 18-19). The imagery of alienation from process is even more overtly presented in "Totems" where the antithesis is between restored museum-display totempoles and an unrestored totempole fallen and neglected. The former are described as "static," "uprooted and transplanted," and as analogous to the tourists —

"the other wooden people" — who pose nearby "for each others' cameras"; the latter is said to have "a / life in the progressing / of old wood back to / the earth. obliteration / / that the clear-hewn / standing figures lacked." The images are again the sculptural — "clear-hewn," "static," "pose" — versus the temporal — "decay," "progressing." The poles have been taken out of time (uprooted both from the earth and from the culture which created them) and inserted into space — into a "park," into "cameras," and into "replicas and souvenirs" (CG, 59-60).

The camera, as above, is a frequent symbol in Atwood for the conversion of time into space. The poem "Camera" (CG, 45-46) describes a "camera-man" who in his search for an "organized instant" asks all reality to "stop," to "hold still":

you make me stop walking
and compose me on the lawn;

you insist
that the clouds stop moving
the wind stop swaying the church
on its boggy foundations
the sun hold still in the sky. (45)

His subject, however, insists in turn that the spatial correlative which the camera creates is itself a participant in temporality:

Wherever you partly are
now, look again
at your souvenir,
your glossy square of paper
before it dissolves completely. (45)

Despite the time-fixing and light-fixing act of photography, historical time moves at nearly "the speed of light" to ravage both the photograph and the objects the camera-man hoped to save from time; ultimately the church is reduced to "a pile of muddy rubble / in the foreground" and the woman to a "small black speck / travelling towards the horizon / at almost the speed of light" (CG, 45-46). Two other poems that use photographs with disappearing subjects to argue the incompatibility of the art-object with temporality are "This Is a Photograph of Me" and "Girl and Horse, 1928." In the first the "drowned" narrator claims to be "in the lake, in the center / of the picture, just under the surface" — presumably under the surfaces of both the lake and the photo. Her appearance in the photograph is not a spatial phenomenon; it takes place in time — "if you look long enough / eventually / you will be able to see me" (CG, 11). Temporality lurks, we may conclude, under the deceptively solid surfaces of appearance. In "Girl and Horse, 1928," the voice of the poem speaks from outside the photo to its girl-subject, insisting that her smile and her peaceful surroundings are illusory:

Why do you smile? Can't you
 see the apple blossoms falling around
 you, snow, sun, snow, listen, the tree
 dies and is being burnt

Like the formal garden of *Double Persephone*, this illusion is an attractive one. In actuality, the "instant" of the photo ceases immediately:

(on the other side
 of the picture, the instant
 is over, the shadow
 of the tree has moved. You wave,

then turn and ride
 out of sight through the vanished
 orchard,

But its illusion of permanence can bewitch the human mind, can become a "secret / place where we live, where we believe / nothing can change, grow older." The girl rides from the orchard "still smiling," in apparently happy ignorance of the effects of time (*PU*, 10).

As one reads through Margaret Atwood's body of poems, one finds her constructing a catalogue of evasions, evasions that are all extensions of this human need to "believe nothing can change." All represent an aesthetics of space and a denial of time. One is classical mythology — the formal gardens of Medusa in *Double Persephone* and of Circe in "Circe / Mud Poems" of *You Are Happy*. Another is popular mythology — the Superman figure of "They Eat Out" in *Power Politics*, the comic book heroes wearing "rubber suits" of "Comic Books vs. History" in *Procedures for Underground*, or the "starspangled cowboy" with "porcelain grin" of "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" in *The Animals in That Country*. Closely related is popular art — formulaic, "endless," and "stale":

You take my hand and
 I'm suddenly in a bad movie,
 it goes on and on and
 why am I fascinated

We waltz in slow motion
 through an air stale with aphorisms
 we meet behind endless potted palms
 you climb through the wrong windows. (*PP*, 3)

Technology provides various ways of evading time: the camera, the blueprint ("The City Planners," *CG*, 27), or the museum ("The Circle Game," *CG*, 41; "A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum," *AC*, 20-21). A part of all of these is the philosophic evasion of humanism, the evasion of Atwood's pioneer who asserts man's timeless centrality in a processual nature palpably without centres. This poem, "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," contains Atwood's most vigorous portrait of the humanist:

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! (AC, 36)

The pioneer's sensibilities are spatially oriented throughout the poem; he is appalled by the absence of walls and borders: he constructs a house, fences, furrows, in stubborn resistance to the fact that "unstructured space is a deluge." He attempts to name the objects in his environment — to use language's abstracting power to lift them out of time and into the spatial categories of generic reasoning. However,

Things
 refused to name themselves; refused
 to let him name them. (39)

Ultimately, time triumphs over space. The "unnamed whale" of process, Atwood tells us, bursts through his fences, his fields, his clearings, and his subject-object categorizing mind. By implication, the aesthetics of space and of the humanist ordering of space are also discredited. The land here is metaphorically the raw material of any art — of love, husbandry, architecture, poetry; the farmer is the artist-lover of *Double Persephone* with his choice between "earth, lake, trees" and "a world of glass, hard marble, carven wood."

The Journals of Susanna Moodie narrates a similar struggle between time and space. This theme is signalled in the opening poem in which Mrs. Moodie laments that "the moving water will not show me / my reflection." She sees her adversaries as the sun ("The Planters," 16-17), change ("The Wereman," 19), unpredictability ("First Neighbours," 14-15), and "fire" — both lite! I fire and the "fire" of seasonal process ("The Two Fires," 22-23). She attempts to defend herself through time-denying form:

... concentrate on
 form, geometry, the human
 architecture of the house, square
 closed doors, proved roofbeams,
 the logic of windows. (22)

But the "white chaos" (23) of her environment continually insists itself upon her as the only reality. Whiteness and light, frequent images in Atwood for camera-defying cosmic energy, surround and absorb her. A photograph taken in her old age documents her temporality rather than arresting it:

I orbit
the apple trees
white white spinning
stars around me

I am being
eaten away by light.

("Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age," 48)

Susanna Moodie's death removes her from all possibility of spatial illusion — from walls, manners, categorizations, and clichés "set up . . . at intervals" (55); it confronts her with raw process — here, as elsewhere in Atwood, metaphorically termed "underground." "Underground" for Mrs. Moodie is a "blizzard," a "whirlwind," a "holy fire" ("Resurrection," 58-59). It moves her in the last lines of the book to declare war on spatial structure and location:

I am the old woman
sitting across from you on the bus,
.....
out of her eyes come secret
hatpins, destroying
the walls, the ceiling

Turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the center of a forest

your place is empty.

("A Bus Along St Clair: December," 61)

Such imagery of "underground" is one of Atwood's most important devices throughout her poetry for asserting the dominance of time over space. Time and process are subversive; they lurk under the surfaces of lakes, of photographs, under the ostensibly solid veneers of field and street. Process is liquid; substantiality — the basis of sculptural form — is an illusion man invents with his camera-eyes. Mrs. Moodie calls Canada a "land I floated on / but could not touch to claim" (30). The pioneer declares,

The land is solid
and stamped,

watching his foot sink
down through stone
up to the knee. (AC, 38)

Appearances are thus duplicitous: the appearance of stasis conceals process; the appearance of order conceals chaos; the appearance of solidity conceals liquidity; the appearance of predictability presages surprise. The

double condition of "double" Persephone, desiring process but receiving stone, is reversed for many of Atwood's later protagonists. The doubleness of reality for them lies in the invisible underpinning of temporality in ostensibly spatial objects. This doubleness requires a "double voice," one with "manners" and one with "knowledge" ("The Double Voice," *JSM*, 42), and a possession of "procedures for underground." Time-transcending devices — mythology, art, imagination, stylization — must be recognized as either weapons or crutches used by the weak in the face of mutability.

Many Atwood poems imply, like "Girl and Horse, 1928," that the need to deny temporality is understandably human; many others present a persona who gives herself with zestful ironic self-awareness to games, poses, mythologies, and sculptural perceptions:

We sit at a clean table
 eating thoughts from clean plates

 and see, there is my heart
 germfree, and transparent as glass

 and there is my brain, pure
 as cold water in the china
 bowl of my skull.

("A Meal," *CG* 33)

The persona of *Power Politics* has this kind of ironic awareness of her addiction to the aesthetics of the "circle game." Her lover is another of the men of stone Atwood's "gorgon" personae seem inevitably to encounter:

You stay closed, your skin
 is buttoned firmly around you,
 your mouth is a tin decoration,
 you are in the worst possible taste.

 You are as fake as the marble trim
 around the fireplace, (44)

His determined attempts to transcend time sometimes involve commercial mythology — "suspended above the city // in blue tights and a red cape / eyes flashing in unison" — and at other times political mythology:

in a year there will be nothing left
 of you but a megaphone

 or you will descend through the roof
 with the spurious authority of a
 government official,
 blue as a policeman, grey as a used angel,
 (30)

His beloved, however, enters wholeheartedly into his spatial assumptions about the world:

Put down the target of me
 you guard inside your binoculars,
 in turn I will surrender

this aerial photograph
 (your vulnerable
 sections marked in red)
 I have found so useful. (37)

Much of the charm of this book resides in the woman's mocking use of the man's spatial aesthetics and in the frankness of her entry into a mutually exploitive relationship. He wishes to be a statue; she treats him like one. He acts insensitively, selfishly; she decides she can be equally happy with a useful corpse as with a sensitive lover:

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

Please die I said
 so I can write about it. (10)

Here again a doubleness asserts itself. Games are sterile but fascinating; statues are cold but beautiful; illusory order is false but addictive; the game of "love" is exhilarating, although not in any sense "loving." Beneath these various paradoxes lurks the central one of space subverted by time. "Power politics" for the persona is a children's game of pretense and fantasy. The verbal wit of the book suggests the exhilaration of gamesmanship rather than the pangs of conscience. The self-irony suggests both the double vision of Susanna Moodie and a duplicitous "procedure" for fantasizing away the processual underground.

The evidence of Atwood's first two books indicates that these considerations of the ethical dimensions of aesthetic systems have some bearing on Atwood's own aesthetics as a literary artist. In *Double Persephone* a direct link is visible between the formal garden inhabited by her personae and the formalism of the writing. Atwood exercises her own "gorgon touch" here — substituting formal rhythms and language for the colloquial language of historical time and replacing temporal characters with pastoral and mythological ones.

The shepherdess with giddy glance
 Makes the amorous shepherd dance,
 While sheep hurtle the stiles for love
 And clouds pile featherbeds above.

("Pastoral," *DP*, [5])

In *The Circle Game*, a book with the thematic intention of discrediting the "games" by which mankind converts time into space, the language is more casual; and the surfaces of event, image, and characterization appear realistic.

Love is an awkward word
Not what I mean and
too much like magazine stories
in stilted dentists'
waiting rooms.
How can anyone use it?

I'd rather say
I like your
lean spine
or your eyebrows
or your shoes. (70)

However, the "underground" of the writing of *The Circle Game* is not the processual underground of the pioneer's farm — it is impersonal, mythological, and spatial. One notices this undercurrent in the first poem, "This is a Photograph of Me." The protagonist speaks as a dispassionate observer of herself. Presumably she speaks from the temporal world beneath the surface of the photo, and her detachment is only from the spatial world of the photographic image. But the aesthetic effect of the writing communicates detachment from both worlds: the language is factual, unemotional; the verbs are mostly ones of static condition; the concerns are spatial — where this persona is and of what size:

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

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am. (11)

At times in *The Circle Game*, the detachment from the self and from the human world in general is so complete that people are present only by synecdoche:

The small carved
animal is passed from
hand to hand
around the circle
until the stone grows warm

touching, the hands do not know
 the form of animal
 which was made or
 the true form of stone
 uncovered.

("Carved Animals," 62)

Here, through both the synecdoche of "hands" and the passive voice of the opening verb, the sculptural reality of the carved animal is made dominant. The syntax of the poem, which alternates "hands" and terms for the "carved animal" ("stone," "animal") in the subject position, further dehumanizes the "hands" by making them appear parallel if not equivalent to the carved stone. The language also has a strong sculptural quality: the diction is factual, and the rhythm dispassionate. By creating linguistically unlikely junctures counter to the natural speech-pauses in the language, the line breaks enforce an unmodulated and noncolloquial tone. The temporal dimension of language as an emotional and personal response to experience is thus largely eliminated.

This tendency to embody a spatial aesthetic permeates all of Atwood's poetry. At the most elementary level, many of the central statements of her poems are assignments of relative spatial position: "I walk across the bridge . . . You saunter beside me, . . ." (*CG*, 12). "In the background there is a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills . . . / I am in the lake, . . ." (*CG*, 11). "There is my country under glass, . . . and beside it 10 blownup snapshots . . ." (*AC*, 18). "When we were in it . . . now / we are out of it . . ." (*PU*, 18). Adverbial phrases of location play key roles in many of the poems: "kneeling on rock . . . above me . . . under my shadow" (*PU*, 8-9); "under a tree . . . around you . . . on the other side . . . out of sight" (*PU*, 10); "in this garden . . . outside the string borders . . . in the evening forest . . . in the bay . . . in another land" (*PU*, 16-17); "Upon the wall . . . around it . . . on the upper lip . . . on the skin" (*PU*, 46). Some poems combine such phrases with statements of spatial location to become entirely about relative spatial placement:

Beside this lake

 my sister in bathing suit continues
 her short desolate parade
 to the end of the dock;

 against the boards
 her feet make sad statements

 (I sit in a deckchair

 She moves the raft out

iscrediting; the
 guage is not
 zation appa

e is not the
 mpersonal
 first poem
 passionate
 oral work
 from the
 ect of the
 guage is
 ition: the

m the
 nly by

... The sun encloses
rocks, trees, her feet in the water, the circling
bays and hills

(Under my hand the paper
closes over these
marks . . .

The words ripple . . .
. . . towards the shore.)

(“Younger Sister, Going Swimming,” *PU*, 66-67)

Somewhat more revealing is the repeated concern of many of the poems with making statements of condition. The underlying implication of such statements is the existence of static qualities — identity, colour, shape: “This is before electricity . . . The porch is wooden, / the house is wooden and grey . . . (*PU*, 7); “She is / a raw voice . . . She is everywhere, intrusive as the smells . . . She is a bulk, a knot / swollen in space . . . a raucus fact . . . immutable” (*AC*, 14-15). This concern with establishing the essence of things is further indicated by the large number of copula verbs in Atwood, especially in opening lines: “Here there are no armies” (*PP*, 38); “You are / the lines I draw around you” (*AC*, 60); “The streets are new” (*JSM*, 50); “Marriage is not / a house” (*PU*, 60); “There are two of them” (*CG*, 68); “There are similarities” (*CG*, 57). In *Procedures for Underground* and the later collections, most of the verbs are in the simple present tense and appear to indicate temporally uncircumscribed action.

The sun shines down
on two cars which have collided
at a turn-off, and rest
quietly on their sides

and on some cows which have come over,
nudge each other aside
at the fence, and stare.

(“The End of the World,” *PU*, 32)

The static effect is amplified here and elsewhere by the selection of verbs denoting condition or minimal action — “shines,” “rest,” “stare,” “refuse,” “permit,” “become”:

You refuse to own
yourself, you permit
others to do it for you:

you become slowly more public. (*PP*, 30)

The temporal indeterminacy of such verbs can contribute to the creation of mythological or surrealistic effects:

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

They have thick elephant legs,

("Eden is a Zoo," *PU*, 6)

On other occasions this indeterminacy suggests habitual on-going action and psychological estrangement from historical time:

I walk the cell, open the window,
 shut the window, the little
 motors click
 and whir, I turn on all the
 taps and switches

I take pills, I drink water, I kneel. (*PP*, 19)

The result of such techniques is the removal of time as an operative dimension from much of the poetry. The speaker appears to be a spectator to her own life, standing outside both this life and its temporal context. The principle of cause and effect tends to disappear under such circumstances; events become juxtaposed in space rather than processually related. Such a condition prevails in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" where the natural "oceanic" action of the land is in no sense caused or precipitated by the pioneer who has juxtaposed himself to it. It prevails in "After the Flood, We" in which the two lovers are introduced syntactically as parallel subjects — "I walk across the bridge . . . you saunter beside me" — inhabiting parallel but self-contained experiences:

I walk across the bridge
 towards the safety of high ground

gathering the sunken
 bones of the drowned mothers

You saunter beside me, talking
 of the beauty of the morning,
 not even knowing
 there's been a flood. (*CG*, 12)

The syntactic parallelism is both ironic, in implying the existence of a relationship that is etiologically nonexistent, and real, in specifying juxtaposition in space as the only operative link between its terms. A similar

lack of cause and effect prevails between the lovers of *Power Politics* whose relationship, despite their physical interaction, also appears to be one of spatial juxtaposition rather than of mutual causation:

You are the sun
in reverse, all energy
flows into you and is
abolished, you refuse
houses, . . .

I lie mutilated beside
you; beneath us there are
sirens, fires,

Here "you" and "I" are assigned parallel syntactic positions by the parallel syntax of "You are the sun" and "I lie . . . beside you." The spatial quality of the relationship is underlined by "beside" and "beneath"; the latter preposition joins the lovers to a list ("sirens," "fires") of spatially related objects. This use of parallel syntax to indicate parallel but noninterlocking relationship is one of the principal technical resources of *Power Politics*.

You say: my other wives
are in there, they are all
beautiful and happy, . . .

I say: it is only
a cupboard, my collection
of envelopes, . . .

In your pockets the thin women
hang on their hooks . . .

Around my neck I wear
the head of the beloved, (50)

In this instance the distinctness of the lovers is emphasized by the ironic contrast between the parallel syntax and nonparallel content. The woman's dialogue is a non sequitur to the man's; the items "around my neck" are similarly irrelevant to the items "in your pockets." No temporal or causal relationship exists within either pair of items. The links are spatial: the juxtaposed lovers, their syntactically juxtaposed pronouns, their syntactically juxtaposed "pockets" and "neck," and the general juxtaposition created by the stanza arrangement. The over-all effect is one of collage — collaged lovers, objects, and stanzas.

Atwood's most recent work in *You Are Happy* shows little alteration in this manner of writing. A great number of poems are concerned with the making of statements of condition, in which verbs of action become indicators of states of being detached from temporal context.

It is spring, my decision, the earth
 ferments like rising bread
 or refuse, we are burning
 last years weeds, the smoke
 flares from the road, the clumped stalks
 glow like sluggish phoenixes . . .

("Spring Poem," 22)

When a first-person pronoun becomes a subject of these verbs, a self-detachment occurs in which the speaker seems to stand outside the atemporal frame in which the self exists and to view this self as an object outside of process.

History
 is over, we take place
 in a season, an undivided
 space, no necessities

hold us closed, distort
 us. I lean behind you, mouth touching
 your spine,

("Book of Ancestors," 95)

The very structure of many of the poems is spatial. Both sections and many stanzas in the multi-section poems ("Chaos Poem," "Tricks with Mirrors," "Four Auguries," "Head against White") appear to be in arbitrary sequence; no temporal logic would be offended by their rearrangement. Concluding lines gain their effect by the surprise of spatial juxtaposition rather than by temporal logic:

. . . . overhead the weak voices
 flutter words we never said,
 our unborn children.

("Useless," 10)

imprint of you
 glowing against me,
 burnt-out match in a dark room.

("Memory," 11)

. . . I could wear them
 around my neck and pray to them
 like the relics of a saint,
 if you had been a saint.

("Repent," 18)

This structural technique resembles both that of modernist collage and that of the transcendence-seeking poetry of the early Imagist movement. The link between the juxtaposed elements is conceptual rather than temporal;

their juxtaposition introduces juxtaposed contexts which propose an heuristic rather than a causal relation.

... he slopes down,

 ... roped muscles leaping, mouth open
 as though snoring, the photography
 isn't good either. ("Newsreel: Man and Firing Squad," 8)

Atwood's use of personae in this book seems entirely designed to objectify conditions of being, to create a verbal sculpture of an abstract proposition. Such are the ten "Songs of the Transformed." The "singers" all speak from outside themselves and regard their actions as repetitious, if not eternal.

I crackle through your pastures,
 I make no profit / like the sun
 I burn and burn, this tongue
 Licks through your body also. ("Song of the Fox," 40)

All have been, in fact, removed or "transformed" from time by human acts of mythology and stereotype. The Circe persona in the long poem "Circe/Mud Poems" appears designed to stand in place of Atwood's own life on an Ontario farm and to "transform" this life (much as the lives of the speakers in "Songs of the Transformed" have been transformed) out of its temporal context. The actual lovers become the mythological Circe and Odysseus; their farm becomes Circe's timeless island; their actual histories in time become the archetypal "story" of immortal woman and mortal man. Circe here is another Medusa-Susanna Moodie figure who dislikes the timeless world in which she has lived. Her island seems to her a place of "ennuie." Mythological men have become tiresome:

Men with the heads of eagles
 no longer interest me
 or pig men, or those who fly
 with the aid of wax and feathers

 or those who take off their clothes
 to reveal other clothes
 or those with skins of blue leather.

She seeks relief both from the unreality of such men and from the atemporality of her island:

I search instead for the others,
 the ones left over,
 the ones who have escaped from these
 mythologies with barely their lives;
 they have real faces and hands, (47)

Odysseus, on the other hand, despite his knowledge that it would be death to submit to transformation out of time, is still tempted by the timeless qualities Circe possesses. He becomes passive and quiescent.

The trees bend in the wind, you eat, you rest,
 you think of nothing,
 your mind, you say,
 is like your hands, vacant. (50)

He relaxes into the deathly unrealities of mythological story.

Don't you get tired of killing
 those whose deaths have been predicted
 and are therefore dead already?

Don't you get tired of wanting
 to live forever? (51)

At times, he seems to wish that Circe were not becoming alive, but would continue as a statue, a "woman constructed out of mud," one who "began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows." Unlike a woman alive in historical time, such a statue would be "simple": "Is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman? Is this what I would like to be? It would be so simple" (61).

On the thematic level, Circe succeeds in escaping into time. Odysseus' fear of transformation releases the talismantic fist from her neck (57), and she becomes aware of two possible "islands," one repetitive and timeless —

... the arrivals,
 the bodies, words, it goes and goes,
 I could recite it backwards (69)

—and the other in history, embodying events that have "never happened":

The second I know nothing about
 because it has never happened;

this land is not finished,
 this body is not reversible. (69)

At the conclusion of this section, she and Odysseus appear to walk on this second "island." Technically, however, the poem throughout is detached, sculptural, and spatial. Circe's consciousness is deliberate, self-detached, depersonalizing, and objectifying.

We two eat
 and grow fat, you aren't content
 with that, you want more,

you want me to tell you
the future. That's my job,
one of them, (66)

Even at the end of the poem, where one is to assume she has returned to history, she speaks with a self-detachment that places her consciousness outside the temporal frame in which her body exists and which presents this body as principally an object in a spatial design:

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. (70)

The theme of escape from space into time recurs in Atwood's work as frequently as events circle back on themselves in Circe's mythological home. From the Medusa of *Double Persephone* who yearns for a man who will resist her transforming gaze to the woman of the final poem of *You Are Happy* who sees her lover awaken from a sculptural pose, Atwood concerns herself with the tyranny of atemporal modes — mythology, stylization, ritual, cultural stereotype, commercial image, social manners — and with the contrasting richness of kinetic reality. Yet for Atwood art itself seems inevitably to possess the "gorgon" touch and to work to transform life into death, flesh into stone. Almost all of her major personae are the artist-as-transformer: Medusa the statue-maker, the Power Politician who transforms her lover into a comic-book hero, Susanna Moodie who can remake her husband into her "idea of him" (*JSM*, 19), Circe who can make men into animals or "create, manufacture" hierarchic lovers (*YAH*, 47). The struggle of these figures to abandon art and enter historical time is enlarged, by the extra-temporal aesthetic implicit in Atwood's use of language and form, into Atwood's personal struggle. In its own doubleness this struggle is impossible to resolve without her abandoning the practice of writing; it is therefore repeated in differing dramatic contexts from book to book. In each book, the language she employs communicates to the reader the presence of a consciousness divorced from the very temporal universe it argues he should enter. The reader thus experiences vicariously the dissociations from time and the detachment from being which the Circle Game or the game of Power Politics creates. The power of the poems is amplified by the implicit information in their language and form that the consciousness behind them suffers victimhood from the forces that the poems decry. Like Circe and Medusa, this consciousness has pathological power which it does not want, has insight into process and foreknowledge of event which only its alienation from process allows. Like a mirror, it creates art at the expense of its own participation in reality:

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.
You are suspended in me

beautiful and frozen, I
preserve you, in me you are safe.

It is not a trick either,
it is a craft:

mirrors are crafty.

(“Tricks with Mirrors,” *YAH*, 26)

Throughout Atwood's work the operative irony is that a voice, excluded from time but wanting in, owes its very ability to speak to the static forms made possible by its exclusion. Art, speech, and writing are “crafty”; they separate one from process and from one's kinetic self. Her personae, as above, and elsewhere in “The Circle Game,” *Power Politics*, and “Circe / Mud Poems,” taunt their lovers with this knowledge. If these men wish to make use of the transforming power of the lady-artist, they must forego the temporal woman they may also desire. Atwood's poems circle back on themselves, recreating one central drama of artist-woman engaged in an unsuccessful struggle to escape art for mortality. Essential to this drama is the implicit impossibility of resolution — an impossibility embodied in “the gorgon touch” with which Atwood's language, form, structure, and characterization are directed. Order here may conceal chaos, but only an embracing of order enables a speaking of either.

York University