"THE RUTHLESS STORY AND THE FUTURE TENSE" IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S "CIRCE/MUD POEMS"

Gordon Johnston

"I fear/the future on this arras" P. K. Page

Time sense is intimately connected to vision in Atwood; what you see depends on when you're looking, on where you are in the cycle or the story. Atwood, like other Canadian poets such as Pratt, F. R. Scott, Birney and Purdy, has a large sense of time; the past for her is historical, geological and mythic as well as personal. This large view of the past gives her a sense of the patterns, the repetitions and traps in human experience. The present, of course, is also critical in her vision; she depends on that snap or crack in time, the instantaneous perception that allows her to see *into* the things she sees; for example, to see into the sea as her place of origin. This present vision is often so strong in Atwood that not only is the past revealed but also the future. She thereby acquires a prophetic role in Canada, an unusual one in modern letters.

Atwood has demonstrated a clear concern about the future for some time, and an interest in reading it, predicting it. At first, she wondered how to get there or whether she would at all, whether she would survive. She wanted to escape the present (the room, the camera, the circle, the island). Recently, more and more she has been obliged to ask, "What do you do when you get there or get away?" *Survival,* after all, ends with the question: "What happens *after* Survival?"[1] (It is revealing, by the way, that the question is

[1]Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 246.

asked in its passive form. The active form, "What do you do if you survive?" raises the problem of will, of responsibility for action, and that is a problem Atwood does not consider at any length.) Questions about the future are becoming central to her poetry. They blossom in many of the poems in *Two-Headed Poems:* "Nasturtium," "Auguries," "Foretelling the Future," "The Woman Who Could Not Live With Her Faulty Heart" (but does), "Solstice Poem," the daughter poems, and perhaps most powerfully in "Burned Space." These are clearly post-Survival poems in which the cataclysm has taken place, and we come to terms with a transformed world which has transformed us as well.

The most extended treatment of the problem of the future is in narrative form in *You Are Happy,* in the "Circe/Mud Poems." The poem sequence indicates the progression of thought in her last two books of poems. The basic story has changed from that of her earlier work; then, the woman found it necessary to evade or escape. Now, by contrast, it is the man who may be planning to move on. But once we recognize the pattern of development in Atwood, we can see how Circe is an inevitable figure for her, a powerful woman, living on an island, a figure of prophecy and of transformation, of inevitability and the possibility of change.

The problem of the future, the need to know it, the desire to prophesy it, is based on the problems of the present. If the present is intolerable, the fear is that the future will be the same; that is, that one is in a circle. If the present is pleasant, the fear is that the future will change things, that yet again the happiness won't last, as it has not in the past; that is, that one is in another circle. So, predictions are based on the past: it's always been this way, and it always will be; or, it's always fallen apart before, and it will again. Predictions, then, are based on discerned patterns of events or behaviour; or in other terms, on repeated stories, or myths. This of course relates directly to Atwood's poetic concerns and methods. A basic principle of composition for her is that inherited patterns of significance can be applied to experience, and that on the other hand, experience has discernible significance; but also, that there is a gap or tension between the individual experience and its meaning. The intellectual comprehension of the pattern is sometimes in conflict with the intuited or immediate truth about it. This is the tension between mythology and history, and it is the central problem in the "Circe/Mud Poems."

(More conventional Frygian Canlit. theory would say that the tension is that between old world and new world, between the Greek classical mythology *via* Homer which provides the primary pattern, and the substance of the Canadian present. This tension may explain why the poem has not attracted a great deal of attention: readers with a Canadian Studies bias resent the presence of Homer as a vase for the poetic substance; the anti-nationalists resent the messy clay of Canadian experience.)

The tension, however one labels it, is apparent in a number of ways. For example, the double title expresses a relation and a disparity between mythological time and historical time; the speaker of the poem is Circe (civilization, rational discourse, Greece, order, form, past and future, inherited tradition, power in active form, myth, and a Greek view of the magical, the dark, the mysterious); the speaker is also Mud (unformed earth, intuition, Canada, the present, power in passive form, substance, fact). The shape of the poem also demonstrates the strong presence of rational traditional ordering; the tension is evident in the very Homeric number of sections (twenty-four), carefully ordered and timed. The introduction and conclusion are separated from the rest of the poems and related to each other; otherwise, the poems are arranged in groups of four:

1	Ulysses' arrival is predicted
2-4	former visitors and supplicants
5-8	arrival of Ulysses, future possibilities
9-12	gift of herself by Circe, her confusion (In 12, her magic against him does not work; in 13, he opens the severed hand and takes power.)
13-16	the physical relationship (and the mud woman)
17-21	the past controls the present (memoirs, Penelope)
21-23	the prophecies and the dangers
24	the acknowledgement of the two islands

Within this formal structure is contained apparent chaos, a great variety of line lengths and stanza forms, including prose poems very close to prose itself. The tensions are thus embodied in the structure of the poem.

These tensions climax in the narrative in the last third of the poem; after the story of the mud woman (poem 16), Circe agonizes about the past and then about the future, and admits the hold over

her of the myths, the patterns. This is not the end, but it is a high point of self-awareness for Circe, and of self-consciousness for Atwood the poet. The question of the future, she realizes, involves the nature of myth. The nature of myth is another basic question for Atwood, and the substance of Circe's being. The status of the patterns of the rational mind are in question, as is their relation to myth. Myth itself, of course, is born in our wild life, and is free and powerful in a way the rational mind cannot comprehend.[2] It is more correctly born out of our whole life and not in our minds, but it has been appropriated by the rational mind in its desire to discover, and more important to impose, order on the chaos of experience; that is, having been allied to half or less than half of human nature (the rational part), it has acquired another kind of power than its original, the way sectarian converts are apparently capable of miracles.

The solution to the problem of a determined, rational, circular future is in the present, in a concentration on and acceptance of what is here now, in at least a temporary unwillingness or inability to impose order on reality. For the poet, it lies in what Wallace Stevens calls "The more than rational distortion,"[3] what appears in Atwood in what we might call "free simile." This free simile is perhaps the most immediately recognizable feature in her writing; these characteristic similes very often join an abstract idea or a complex perception to something commonplace and substantial; they represent an attempt on her part to free objects and ideas from familiar associations in order to provoke fresh insights or vision, to stretch our ways of thinking: "solid as bacon," "fears hairy as bears," "smooth as pills." They seem free because they are at first surprising; but they eventually reveal levels of meaning, including the rational. They are more than a stylistic quirk in that they reveal the mind dealing with the world in a more than rational way, even when the rational component is dominant.

So we may expect to find in the poems, as a defence against the patterns of mythology, of dominance by the past and so, by the future, the presence of *things,* and of unusual similes that are meant to defy patterned ways of thinking about things, and of an uneasiness about language, since it is the poet's primary means of ordering and thereby violating the world. Circe at the outset, in her mud form, is

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[2]*pace* Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage.*

[3]Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 406.

powerful because she is silent; visitors come to her for the language of the earth (that is, not the "received" language, of civilization). Circe refuses to describe the island; she says, "See for yourself." When she finally gives herself to Ulysses, she gives him the names of things; but she asks for them back when she imagines him leaving. So Circe has a double nature; she has the power of words (that is, prophecy and transformation), and, in her mud nature, she has a distrust of words. She knows the language of the earth, and that is her source of power as long as she does not give those words away. Atwood in her interest in escaping the patterns of civilized destruction and loss is concerned not to do violence to the un-recreated earth, to the mud of existence. As a result, Circe, a creature of mythology, of repetitions, must also speak on behalf of the pre-mythological earth, the mud. The mud may be shaped by the men (or boys) who use her; but she also exists prior to them and apart from them.

As is often the case in Atwood, the relationship between men and women is the basis of the narrative, and the primary means of embodying the opposition or conflict in the poem. The allegorical meanings of male and female are, however, not permanent or inflexible. Usually there is some sense that the male is active, dominating, destructive, mobile, changeable, and the female is permanent, passive, oppressed, abandoned, destroyed. But of course when the female figure is double (as Circe is), the male also is double. Circe is powerful and is also overcome by Ulysses; Ulysses is active and strong himself, but he is also apparently willing to submit to the pre-ordained pattern, to Ithaca and Penelope; he is paaadoxically passive in his acceptance of destiny. He is like many of the men in Atwood's work: decent, unperceptive, a bit self-involved, strong physically; he expects things as his due; he resists the charms which are used against him.

It is necessary for the sake of clarity to distinguish briefly the different levels of significance in the narrative: they may be called the private, the banal, and the allegorical. The private or autobiographical level is not a primary interest, except that because of talk shows and gossip magazines our society has an insatiable curiosity about the private lives of celebrities. The present banal level concerns a woman and a man living on a farm, the man apparently with a former attachment; the future banal is the woman's uneasiness about whether the relationship will last, whether the man will leave her (it is the typical "future banal" of "women's fiction" curiously). Fused with this,

or sometimes at a slightly ironic distance from it, is the allegorical significance of the story. There are two different levels within the allegorical, one based on Circe, and one on Mud. The first is the relation between men and women: the permanence of male-female bonding among humans in general and in our society in particular, the fulfillment of desires, the sources of power for each sex, the blocks between them, the reasons for the self-involvement and distrust. On the other allegorical level, we read the history of the domination of the earth by humans, its resistance, its source of power and attraction, its occasional submission, the significance of humans acquiring the earth's power; again, this level has a general meaning, and a specific one for Canada in its historical confrontation with the wilderness and its present attitude to natural resources.

The movement between the levels of meaning in images that combine them or in phrases that have double meanings is playfully witty and often revealing. For example, in the prose piece where Circe tells Ulysses to see for himself, she also says, "You live here don't you? Right now I mean." The remark has one meaning for the man in the present-day story and another for Ulysses. Does he live here in Aiaia, or in Ithaca? in a historical or mythological world? Her question is also a version of the common question in Canadian letters about living in Canada, and whether we are not rather what P. K. Page calls "permanent tourists."[4] It also reminds us of the question we have been puzzled by since the time of Susanna Moodie: how do you see a *new* place even if you live in it, or can you see it at all? Finally it points to the present world not only as a possible solution to difficulties, but as a source of difficulty in itself.

The play between levels of meaning and time begins in the second poem; the first is dominated by present tense, by the particularity of the details of the disaster which starts the cycle for the man, and starts it over again for the woman. The first lines of the second poem set up a comic version of the mythological lovers of Circe from whom she wants to escape; it is comic because the tone of voice is apparently the banal matter-of-fact voice of the present level, and yet the speaker accepts the strange bird-men as ordinary, even boring. The men come from mythologies of various times; Dedalus and Superman are both present, and so the indictment of the flying men, strong and transient, is generalized. The images of the men also extend the range of reference through history; the simile

[4]P. K. Page, *Poems Selected and New* (Toronto: Anansi, 1974), p. 110.

"hierarchic as greaves and steam-engines," for example, pulls into the poem the Homeric world with its first element, and then overlays it with the world of the industrial revolution. It thus establishes a relation, nonrational and powerful, between two forms of "masculine" energy or violence in two different spheres. The image of the men falling into the ocean "like sick gulls, dethronements, plane crashes" again extends the range of reference through time, and also adds indirect references to ecological, political and technological violence. Circe recognizes an escape from the mythic cycle of these destructive men in her search for the other kind of men, the ones with "real faces and hands," but her expertise at recognizing mythic recurrences, and the strong rational component of her images which at first seem "free" suggest that the escape from the mind and its compulsion to order will be more difficult than even she knows.

The confusions which are caused by this awareness she has of the cycles are made apparent in the sixth poem. Here Circe sees Ulysses not as a fresh beginning ("vacant is not innocent" poem 5), but as enmeshed in his sexual destiny, which consists primarily of killing and moving on. The pointlessness of his existence is clear to her because of her sense of the future; she sees him "killing those whose deaths have been predicted/ and are therefore dead already." She wants him to believe in a different kind of future, to escape Tennyson as well as Homer, but has no confidence that he will.

As in Homer, Ulysses acquires Circe's power by resisting transformation by her; but in this case Atwood does not provide a "present banal" equivalent to moly, the herb by which Ulysses was protected and released (although there is a witty reference in her discussion of the words she gives him earlier to "food, white like roots, and red/growing in the marsh, on the shore" Poem 9). The reason she does not play explicitly on this Homeric detail is easy to see, since the herb would be in a botanical sense a gift of the earth to oppose Circe's magic; but Atwood has for her own purposes joined Circe and the earth. This contradiction results from the fact that Circe is not identical to mud; she is conscious, rational and has a will, even though she repeatedly claims that she is not making decisions or choices. This confusion about will is never properly resolved in the poem; it is never made clear what kind of victim Circe or Mud is. Is she a willing victim? Does the earth allow the depradations of men? Does it not? Do women choose to be

dominated? Do they have any freedom to act, or are they thoroughly controlled by the myths and soap operas of a masculine world?

The problem is given a comic form in the sixteenth poem, the story of the mud woman, in which passivity is regarded as a form of power, or at least in which the males are reduced to absurdity because of their sexual activity. The female Mud comments on them by doing nothing. After this story, in the last third of the poem cycle, the Homeric element is particularly strong; Atwood means to suggest the ruthlessness of the story by indicating its relevance to the present-day events. So we find from the Odyssey, the shades of the dead, the blood in the trench, the sheep offerings, Calypso and Penelope, and Ulysses' memoirs of the lotus eaters, cyclops and the Lystrygonian cannibals. This mythic world is constantly joined to the present banal world of "pears, grease,/onions" (Poem 17), of "inner tubes" and "paper plates" (Poem 20), the details of farm/country life in the modern world which give life in transfusions to the mythic level of the story, and at the same time comment wryly on it by revealing the ironic gap between the pattern and the substance. They thus covertly express Atwood's interest in the present, this island (this country); so, though the force of the mythic world in its rational version is undeniable, it is never present apart from the world of present actualities.

The fusion of the levels takes place in the twenty-first poem in which Circe finally accepts her role as prophetess. The holy birds for the augury are also the farmyard birds of the present; their eggs are divine, and they are divine as lunch. The wordplay fuses the levels comically. The future is a mess literally and allegorically; it is snarled guts, and it is death. It is inescapable. In the next poem, the future is surprising (winter on a summer island), but Circe explains that winter too was inevitable, at least psychologically. In the second last poem, Circe realizes that although she is a prophetess, she does not know her own future. The only story she knows is masculine, Ulysses' story. She is the victim of someone else's future. At this point, which I have called the high point of selfawareness, the power of mythology in its rational sense, of a masculine, destructive, technological, transient world is at its height, and Circe expresses true fear.

Then, in one of the most extraordinary and moving transitions in Atwood's writing, Circe acknowledges that there are two islands "at least" (not the single island of marriage we know from earlier poems,

and not the entirely separate islands of *The Circle Game,* but two)[5] which "do not exclude each other." The partiality of the mind is hereby accepted, the domination by the head is escaped, the compulsion to order things is temporarily controlled. The present, which up until now (except for the introductory poem) has been a means of feeding or sustaining the mythic pattern, now offers rescue from the tyranny of the mind and its constructs. The present is luminous, incapable of being read except as present. On the second island, it is November because it is; the apples are orange because they are, and that is astonishing. Four birds appear briefly, but they are not an augury, not on this island.

Of course, the Islands do not exclude each other; the ability to discern patterns is not lost. The stream not frozen yet is almost too easy to read as a sign or omen. The deer tracks may suggest that we are back in the Odyssey at the point when Ulysses lands on Circe's island and kills a stag to feed his men. But this is a rational, critical reading of the tracks, and not Atwood's. The future on the second island is not known, and Atwood leaves us where we belong, in the middle of our own lives.

The central issue for Atwood as a writer, her chief method and obstacle, is mythopoeic determinism, the ruthlessness of the story. Indeed, it amounts to a principle of composition for her; that is, details trigger a sense of their larger significance, and on the other side, inherited patterns provide a means of ordering the details. Sometimes the pattern is too strong; the things, events, particulars give up their significance too quickly, too easily, as if they were being prompted from the wings. Alternatively, on occasion Atwood plays too easily and coyly with the gap between the theory of the poem as a whole and its individual parts. The whole in this case is formal in a rigorous way, almost flashily artificial. The parts often by contrast risk the banality of irrelevant details and speech rhythms. That the cosmos of the poem should consist of various verse forms and styles is convincing and illuminating; but a writer whose imagination works this way will always face the twin weaknesses of the pattern stretching the details, and the particulars resisting being ordered.

We see here for Atwood, the writer, the question of will which also confronts Circe. Does she as a seer abdicate her will in the face of the inevitable, the mythic? Does she align her will with the pattern, and is not this a form of being a victim? Or does she resist the

[5]Margaret Atwood, *The Circle Game* (Toronto: Anansi, 1966), p. 68.

pattern and risk being incomprehensible? When Circe, in the more difficult phase before the end, predicts monsters for Ulysses, she implies that she may be creating them herself. Is she willing the disasters which she claims only to see? Is she the author of the circle game?

The question of her responsibility for the future aside, Circe's attitude towards the ruthlessness of myth is inevitably ambivalent. There is as much terror as comfort in knowing what will happen. It all depends on what story you tell about yourself; whether you're trapped on an island with someone, or abandoned on an island by someone. Perhaps it is a mark of the gradual liberation of women that Atwood turns to Circe and not to Ariadne for her persona.

But her attitude to the future is also ambivalent, and must be because of her attitude to myth. She fears the future, partly because it is predictable and inescapably involves disappearance, divorce, and death, political and ecological disaster. But because until now the stories have been primarily masculine, they do not entirely elucidate the future, and so, partly Circe fears it because it is unknown. There are two islands.

The unknown future is more hopeful and less tense in this poem cycle than it has been in Atwood's earlier writing; the release from the grip of the pattern is accomplished by details, by the things of this world (which the Homeric pattern would label "moly"), by everything of which there is only one.

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