

Negotiation with Nature and Transcending the Binaries: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Poetry

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a remarkable and perhaps the most prominent figure in contemporary Canadian literature. She is a writer of many facets, poet, novelist, critic, cartoonist, editor, lecturer and an active participant in several literary organizations. However, it was poetry that built her reputation as a writer of international repute. Her writing has explored a wide range of concerns and “expand the brackets” of traditional literary genres establishing her status as a major author in Canada and worldwide. W.J.Keith describes her as “the most brilliant, controversial, versatile, abrasive and enigmatic figure in Canadian literature.(Keith,1983:93) Cooke Nathalie has also called her a “literary lion”, in her autobiography. She was born in Canada in1939 in a middle-class Anglo-Canadian family. Atwood had a first-hand experience with the Canadian wilderness. Her father was an entomologist so during summers, she along with her family lived in remote areas where her father conducted field research, providing her opportunities to feel and see nature very closely. However, Atwood's love of the natural world of the wilderness, is quite obviously rooted in her childhood.

The experience of life in the bush without the distractions of urban society helped her develop creative imagination. Atwood herself has said "as far as I'm concerned, life begins with ecology and with geography" (Ingersoll,1992 : 131) Ronald B. Hatch writes in his essay "Margaret Atwood, the Land and Ecology" that: “mention the name of Margaret Atwood to students of Canadian literature, and one of the first associations is likely to be with the land” (Ronald, 2000:180). Nature and Atwood appear almost inseparable. The present paper is an attempt to explore the impact of Canadian Nature on the psyche of Canadians and how they are inseparable from nature.

The word "Canada" has been derived from the Spanish words "aca" and "nada" meaning wilderness. About ninety percent of her land has no permanent population. Much of Northern Canada is wilderness, forest or frozen Arctic wasteland. The urban centers where most Canadians live and which most visitors visit, are located within 400 kilometers of the border of the United States. The three metropolitan cities, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, which account for thirty percent of the total population of the country occupy less than one hundredth of one percent of its territory. These highly urbanized and technologically oriented centers are as if they were inconsequential specks on the body of a giant snowy whale called Canada.

Canada is described as: “Northern geography of stunted islands, bedrock ridges, flooded forests, drowned worlds, frozen terrain, arctic wastes, and lakes that conceal drowned people” (Klein, 2002: 15). Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it. Canadians as per their history and geography have inherited this mental dilemma of belongingness since centuries. Where do they belong to? Is an important question, they are unable to trace their roots in their colonized history nor are they able to clutch to the wilderness and vastness of Canadian nature. Though, landscape reflects the hidden dangers it contains the sheer magnetism of wilderness and the abundance of nature. This duality becomes a

“touchstone or test” for the Canadians, who relate to nature on various platforms. Canadian nature reflects the cruelty of nature making it “dehumanizing and stunning” (ibid: 73). Although the Canadians struggle to be comfortable in nature, they fail time and again. There is a kind of tension or split which is a characteristic of twentieth century Canadian poetry. The Harvard biologist, Stephan Joy Gould also says that “Nature does not exist for us, had no idea we were coming, and doesn't give a damn about us”. Why, then, should we give a damn about nature? Gould advises us that nature “holds all the cards, and has immense power over us..... If we treat her nicely, she will keep us going for a while if we scratch her, she will bleed, kick us out, bandage up, and go about her business at her own scale” (Djwa, 1973:22). Nature should always be treated like "Mother Nature", though she dictates her strict code of conduct, on the other hand she would care for us like a mother.

Atwood represents nature in many of her poetic works. For Atwood and many other Canadian writers, nature holds an identity of its own i.e. all encompassing. She talks of the various facets, shapes and shades of nature that impart meaning to life and she uses nature as a living entity to evaluate human behaviour, industrialization, modernization and human relationships. Atwood's “nature” has been incorporated in almost all her poetic collections, namely, *The Circle Game* (1966), *Animals in That Country* (1968), *Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), *Power Politics* (1973), *Procedures for the Underground* (1970), *You Are Happy* (1975), *Interlunar* (1984) and *Morning in the Burned House* (1995).

Atwood builds up binaries in nature like stark and soft, creator and destroyer, light and dark, wild and tamed, divine and earthly, gentle and monstrous and through these binaries she has contrasted opposite qualities of nature to finally state that nature transcends above all these binaries and has existence of its own and becomes all encompassing. Nature is not merely an aspect of Atwood’s writing rather most of her writings originated from nature itself. Everything in Canada seems to have a meaning when contrasted against the backdrop of nature. Canadians, even when they are city apartment dwellers, cannot drive away from their consciousness of the wilderness. “It is an almost monochrome snow-scape” says Atwood. There are ample references to such tension in the poetry of Margaret Atwood.

For a moment, the Canadians seek to reveal in the vast majestic, sunny landscape but soon the chill and cold hits them and makes them see nature in a cruel light. The veneer of civilization is ripped and the naked wilderness of nature faces them. Unlike its British and Indian counterparts, the Canadian landscape is not a “domesticated” one, this “unseizable virginity” of Canadian landscape and unrealized intimidating aspect of nature produces in Canadian poetry what Northrop Frye calls “a tone of deep despair” and “a sense of meditative shock” (Frye, 1971:31), or what Margaret Atwood calls “an intolerable anxiety.” Naturally communities here are divided by long distances developed due to what Frye termed “garrison mentality” i.e. the compulsion to climb to the shreds of an inappropriate culture as defense against the encroachments of what is seen to be a hostile environment. The Canadians always try to escape from nature and move to urban centers because there is no joy, no triumph, no victory, no comfort, but only the drive to survive. The author writes in the poem *Midwinter Presolstice* that:

We spend the days quietly trying to be warm; we can't look through the glass; (67)

The escapist attitude of the Canadians is depicted here. There is an ongoing dialogue with wilderness in Canadian literature reflecting an obsessive, repetitive effort to relive and reframe the moment of original encounter with nature. The idea of place has become a recurring metaphor in all Canadian literature. In Atwood's most celebrated novel, *Surfacing* (1972), the

narrator in the reinterpreted notion of place, becomes a “place” that speaks: “I am not an animal or tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (Atwood, 1972: 181). The self or the body itself becomes the contesting site.

At first one may feel that Nature is the all good Divine Mother, but in the Canadian context it is a far-fetched imagery. It cannot really stand up very long against the Canadian climate and the Canadian terrain, of nature measured against Wordsworth's Lake District, where Nature is observed as a nurse, friend, philosopher and tenses who guides man if he would listen to her. Gradually Nature's personality underwent a change. She remained a female deity, but she became "red in tooth and claw". This attitude leads to the feeling that Nature is dead or indifferent and actively hostile towards man; there is lack of harmonious relationship. Canadians feel that they are in exile, small, helpless and victimized. They seem to have little power over their own destiny and lose their existence in the proximity of Nature. Consequently, this attitude towards Nature becomes an obstacle to man's “survival”. The benevolent and malevolent aspects of Nature are reflected in her poetry.

The Canadians sometimes try to preserve their Wordsworthian faith but it collides with the difficulty they face in doing so when Nature fails time and again to come through for them. The result is a markedly double-minded attitude towards Canada. In this way, there are two emotions-faith in the Divine Mother and a feeling of hopeless imprisonment. The repulsion and attraction find expression ceaselessly right from the beginning of Canadian poetry. The tension between the benevolent and malevolent aspects of nature is reflected in the poetry of Margaret Atwood and her contemporary writers like Leonard Cohen, Maya Angelou, Elizabeth Smart and P.K. Page.

The depiction of Nature is symbolic of life in the poetry of the Canadian writers of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The titles of Lampman's poems also show the influence of nature on his psyche, the titles are "Heat", "September", "Midnight", "A Summer Evening", "Winter", "Snow" and "Among the Orchard". In the first half of each poem, there is a gloomy world of nature while in the second half of the poem there is a happy and gay world of nature. The depiction of Nature is symbolic of life in society and is often shrouded in darkness, in fog or swirling sand. The following lines exhibit this view: in the outland wilderness

The forest echo with unwanted dins; In clamorous gangs the gathering woodmen press
Northward, and the stern winter's toil begins.

In such descriptions the poet does not present the seamy side of nature. However the picture he portrays, lacks joy and hope and echoes the sense of gloom. The Canadian poets do not seem to be in tune with nature, though it seems, that they possess peace. The poets, perhaps condemn peace because it has an undertone of gloom and inaction. Such picture of Nature unlike that of the world, has a sense of temporariness in the ever changing moments. The poet writes that in such intervals “... I hear / the cricket from the droughty ground / the grass hoppers spin into mine ear / a small innumerable sound” (ibid: 19).

Atwood's nature is not an outward identity and rather finds her way in the minds of almost all the Canadians. This wilderness of Canada provides rootedness to Canadians, though most of them try to run away from this chaotic, gothic, landscape of Canada but unconsciously they derive their life-force from it. Take away the wilderness from Canada and you land up in nothingness/wasteland. Thus, the feeling of nationhood has the concept of nature attached to it. Nature is thus an

Identity inseparable from the identity of the individuals and the nation. Frye states that, "the outstanding achievement of Canadian poetry is in the evocation of stark terror" in regards to Nature. Though this tone of deep terror is not a coward's terror, but a controlled vision of the causes of terror.

Nature acts as a persona that speaks for itself, that has a distinct identity of a own, its traits, etc. characteristics, features and all the small nuances are captured by the creative eye. Nature creates contrasts and parallels with the inner self of Atwood, she talks of nature in its grandest forms i.e. "grandeur" as used by Longinus. She also on the other hand is interested in giving small details of the naturally occurring things like pebbles, stones, leaves, branches, fossils, boulders, mosses etc. Nature acts as a support system that anchors the life of Canadians and Canadian authors like Atwood. They breathe in nature, they are one with nature, they associate it to themselves as their own seek, they succumb to it, nature sustains, thence, it is precious and priceless and nature for them is "I". This notion is vividly captured by Atwood in the lines from the poem *Tricks with Mirrors*:

- 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 (YAH: 17).

Geography, landscape and nature pose very important questions of identity. As "into the new land cleaned of geographies; /its beach gleaming with arrows" (ATC: 77). Northrop Frye also believed that the basis of Canadian identity and self-expression was to be found in the nation's obsession with its vast natural world. Frye writes in *The Bush Garden* (1971) that "It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'who am I ?' than by some such question as where is Here?" (Frye, 1971:79). The words "Here" and "There" pose important questions in Canada, "there" which means England and France is always considered important as compared to "Here" which is an inferior version of "there".

Echoing Northrop Frye's comments, Atwood writes: "For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, there "here" is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not Survive" (Survival, 1972 : 19). Because literature presents "a map, a geography of the mind", Atwood assumes that it can engage the Canadian tendency" to emphasize the personal and the universal but to skip the national or cultural" (ibid). It can also offer answers to the question of "Where is here?" Which perplexes the Canadian sensibility (Frye, 1971:220). The emphasis on maps, places and spatial details is a reiteration of the question "Where is here?" or part of an attempt to find the answer. There is a general sense of discontinuity. The poem – "The True North Strong and Free" assimilated Canadian identity to the northern landscape. In the Canadian cultural tradition the process of coming to terms with self and with country has historically required a coming to terms with landscape. Patrick White in his work *Citizen for White* (1977) suggests that: geography "is what make us." The explorer and the writer must fashion "fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words" (White, 1977: 102).

Atwood's character often reveals a sense of alienation and isolation because of their apparent surroundings which compel them to an undaunted spirit and sometimes subdue them

through and recoil them to fearful victims. Atwood's central figures are often tourists, aliens, foreigners, hunters, pioneers displaced persons. Although they travel as tourists or travel writers: their journeys may lead them to unpleasant revelations but do not result in personal transformations. They are locked in their separate worlds, they lead lives of "quiet desperation", emotional flatness. They are split, schizoid, for they sustain public roles but keep their feelings private, hidden from others and even from themselves.

Atwood questions wilderness as an authentic cultural tradition. She shared in an interview that being Canadian meant "enjoying, or suffering, a shared set of circumstances", by which she means "a shared set of anxieties" (Sandler, 1990:46). Atwood remarks in survival that "Canadian writers do not trust Nature, they are always suspecting some dirty trick." (Survival, 1972:49). For Atwood in the early 1970s, the symbols which defined the national psyche rose out of experiences of suffering, endurance, and survival in the wild. There was a marked shift from optimism to an emphasis on loss and displacement in a much bleaker vision of prospects of survival. The Canadian identity was to be extracted from experiences of negation or loss.

As in an interview to Grame Gibson she says: "I am talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your mind" (Gibson, 1973:14). The fear of being overwhelmed in alien territory has given the poet great interest in the country's pioneer settlers who struggled to make to a place for themselves in the wilderness. One of Atwood's most popular poems, *Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer and Speeches to Dr. Frankenstein* in her second collection, *The Animals in that Country* (1968), presents a settler who like the city planners, fights to contain the natural world but loses the struggle. The poem depicts Canadian's struggle to survive in nature, it is about uncivilized verses being civilized and about growing and developing. Atwood in *Survival* (1972) writes, "The Canadian pioneer is a square man in a round whole; he faces the problem of trying to fit a straight line in a curved space" (Atwood, 1972:120). She has tried to show the narrator's imprisonment, the pioneer in the poem stood a point/on sheet of green paper / proclaiming himself the centre" (CG:60). He tries to impose order on unstructured space through his linear thinking, but nature resists, "the forest grows back again" And he is forced to believe that: "This is not order / but the absence / of order" (60). The settler goes insane, he came to the conclusion that human beings are insignificant in front of nature. The people are caught in binaries of nature and culture, rational and irrational. She writes:

In the darkness, the field defend themselves with fences in vain everything is getting it (CG: 61).

The nature poses a resistance to the pioneer's effort to cultivate nature, as Canadian nature is not worth cultivating. "The ground / replied with aphorisms: / a tree-sprout, a nameless / weed-words they couldn't understand" (CG: 61) and finally he cries out "Let me out" (60).

Atwood's poems can be viewed as a parable of Canadian settlement; on a literal level they recall that many white Europeans failed as settlers because they used farming methods wholly unsuited to the Canadian terrain; on a metaphorical plane the poem suggests a human culture that developed in the wilderness by denying its own existence as a part of nature, leaving as a legacy for future generations not order but schizophrenic chaos. The pioneer is symbolic of the people who are trapped by a Romantic vision of nature, the trapper finds his romanticized nature is soon overpowered by the 'real' world of natural struggle. Atwood explores 'the tensions between the straight line [of civilization] and curve of nature'.

The Journals of Sussana Moodie (1970) is one of her most famous collections of poetry. Susanna Moodie was an English author who came to Canada in 1832. She becomes the archetypal immigrant, a symbol of Canadian experience. She wanted to appropriate Canadian landscape into her literary work. She expects a civilized order and structure in Canadian wilderness and tries to negotiate the binaries of bush and town, England and Canada. Nature and culture, Enclosure and escape. Atwood also faced similar conflicts during her studies at Harvard. The pain and anguish between the two seems so strong and similar that she admits in one of her interviews that “Both of us were uprooted, both were far from home, both appalled, both anxious, both scribbling for cash, both under pressure. Both knew the space between what could be said safely and what needed to be withheld from speech” (Gibson, 1973:31)

She determines to preserve her Wordsworthian faith. When she is jolted to reality her faith gets shattered, “this space cannot hear” or “or it is my own lack / of convictions which makes / these vistas of desolation” (CG: 80). Another poem Disembarking at Quebec describes Moodie’s inability to abandon a language and value – system which she inherited from her past. Her genteel English identity is immediately undermined when her practical experience of Canadian nature disrupts her attempt to fit into the new landscape. She gives a detailed description as “long hills, the swamps, the barren sand, the glaze of sun on the bone - white driftlogs, omens of winter, the moon alien in day -time a thin refusal”(JSM: 80). These lines are also an assurance from nature to the author in particular and Canadians in general that nature provides safety also. In another poem, The Double Voice voices the dilemma faced by the immigrants such as:

Two voices took turns using my voice:

One had manners, painted in watercolors used hushed tones when speaking of mountains of Niagara Falls, Composed uplifting verse and expended sentiment upon the poor. And on the other hand

The other voice had other knowledge: that men sweat always and drink often (CG: 104).

Moodie casts herself as a sentimental heroine and emphasizes her own taste and sensibility in a manner strongly reminiscent of the eighteenth century Gothic romance. But she realizes amongst the "bears and the bugs" (JSM: 89) that there is no place for sentimentality In the poem Death of a Young Son by Drowning also deals with the dangers and difficulties involved in the Canadian wilderness and Moodie's unfamiliarity with the new land, leads to the death of her son. She describes her son's death and through the description one can easily identify the monstrosity of Canadian nature:

His feet slid on the bank the currents took him he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water (JSM: 94).

The image of nature's monstrous influence is brought forth here. After her son's death in the Moira river, Moodie decides, "plans and future charts" are more useful for a civilized artificially structured land but in Canada they are of no use. The vast frightening landscape of Canada stands beyond expectations. “My arms, my eyes, my grieving words, my disintegrated children”. It is remarkable that here the famous Atwood’s dichotomy of nature/culture plays a crucial role, for Moodie's past culture miserably fails in the Canadian present and her dreams about the land comes to an end. The dream of returning to England is ended and her son's death gives her new roots, she writes:

When will be that union and each thing (bits of surface broken by footsteps will without moving more around me into its place (JSM: 87).

Her mind longs for a union with the land. But she has to give up all her assumptions, pre-conceived notions, and her new way of looking at the new land. W.H. New rightly observes, "Nature has its own codes and signals which man must learn, for they are not his making" (New, 1989:79). However, she asserts that the Canadians should know their position, in the world with regard to geography. They should be aware of depicting their country as outside and different,

Now I am grownup and literate, and I sit in my chair as quietly as a fuse (ATC: 59).

Though the new generations in Canada have started making attempts to locate themselves with relation to other countries, Atwood expresses that Canadians have started becoming aware of the identity of their land with respect to the countries which colonized Canada for long years. She understands that conflicting over the Canadian land will lead to frustration and disappointment. She realizes the truth that she cannot establish the old artificial order in the land, she cannot impose her culture and prepares herself to adopt the new land.

Various outside influences particularly of the British and the Americans have also had their impact on the Canadian identity and create a rift in their views towards their landscape. Modern Canadians continue to be alienated from their environment. The last lines of the sequence read:

Turn, look down there is no city this is the centre of a forest your place is empty (JSM: 116).

The above lines spoken by the persona Susanna Moodie has a double meaning – referring both to the colonizer's vision and the speaker's vision of the collapse of modern civilization and their return to the forests. The poem also refers to immigrant readings of colonial space as empty, which implies a concern with the relation between immigrants and indigenous peoples but the poems are more insistently preoccupied with the damage which colonial ways of seeing inherited from pioneers have done to subsequent generations of the white Canadians :

Right now, the snow is no more familiar to you than it was to me: this is my doing (JSM: 110).

These lines continue addressing the inhabitants of 1960's Canada. The lover in the poem Axiom is described in terms of landscape as:

You are a sea, your eye
lids curve over chaos, My hands
Where they touch you, create
small inhabited islands
Soon you will be
All earth: a known
Land, a country (ATC:78).

In the poem Axiom the lover with the Canadian psyche desires to explore the unknown virginity of the landscape and gradually feels a sense of belonging, a sense of consummation after having explored the hidden virginity of the beloved's landscape.

In her poetry, once behind the mirror, or behind the photograph, or under the surface of picturesque nature, we may see unsettling and unwanted things. The darkness and suffocation of the Canadian wilderness teaches Susanna Moodie to:

take care to look behind, within where the skeleton face beneath the face puts on its feather mask, the arm within the arm lifts up the spear.(JSM:78)

Such subterranean threats and horrors belong to the literary Gothic, most familiar to the twentieth century in films such as *The Exorcist*, *Jaws*, *Poltergeist*, or *Rosemary's Baby*, a genre in which a threat comes variously from primitive, underground, underwater or subconscious sources. Atwood tends to leave mysterious details. The narrator asks us to look beneath and search her, she is "drowned." Is she metaphorically "drowned," denied, suppressed and repressed? Is she herself a metaphor for the natural forces which the circle gamesters seek to obliterate? The poems leave us guessing at a mystery. No concrete answer is offered by the poet. The details make the poet ambiguous and mysterious.

The horror faced by the narrative voice is not confirmed by the other characters. It is only the narrator who is lost in nature, invisible, distorted, drowned beneath the lake and senses the prisoning rhythms of nature. It is the narrator who could see nature dissolving and moving beyond the lenses and could see how glaciers and winter, menace the self and the other. The narrator tries to move away from the rigid order of nature, she needed "safety" but finds that it is not possible to be safe in the Canadian wilderness, she expresses herself in the poem *After the Flood*, as

I walk across the bridge towards the safety of high ground .gathering the sunken bones of the drowned mothers (CG: 9).

The poet speaks in different voices as she attempts to negotiate the boundaries between the flow of nature and the rigid order imposed by human activities. Nature is depicted submerged or "drowned", but the narrator makes efforts to contain nature in buildings and photographs. The narrator fails time and again to contain or objectify nature, as nature being very powerful erodes humankind's efforts. The speaker in the poem *This is a Photograph of Me* speaks:

If you look long enough, eventually you will be able to see me (CG: 8).

Nature in these poems is invincible, but the order that humankind erects against the chaos of natural forces is life threatening. Atwood poses a very significant question: "Is there a boundary required to be drawn to protect humankind, from the violent nature? The Pioneers, settlers and immigrants have tried to impose human order and logic, but "too much order destroys the spirit" says Atwood. But no real answer is offered, the dilemma is finally expressed in the poem, *A Place: Fragments*, where the narrator of the poem stands confused between the binary of human order and the chaos of nature as:

We live in the houses of ice, but not because we want to in order to survive we make what we can and have to with what we have (CG: 40).

The narrator is not only fearful of nature but she fears the city also, "the cities are only outposts" and "the land flows like a / sluggish current" (40). She does not find solace or comfort, neither in the city nor in nature. But the concluding lines are significant:

Nor above or behind or within it, but one within it an identity : something too huge and simple for us to see (CG:43).

To some extent, these lines provide an answer that identity can only be attained if human beings come to terms with nature. These lines are probably the voicing of Atwood's own response to the binaries existing between nature and city, silence and language etc. She uses her poetic talent to show the readers how nature is violated and the character's spiritual resurrection takes place. The narrator claims that "this is my kingdom still". This assertion gives the idea that after a time, Moodie becomes an inseparable part of the land accepting all the differences. At last their identity established is in the new land, which they once hated. Then we were made successful and I felt I ought to love this country. "I said I loved it" (JSM:111) The use of active verbs "took" and "hung" like "tugged" and "catch" in the poem, *The Deaths of the Other Children* presents the deaths of the children and the gradual disintegration of their mother's body and identity as a direct result of intentional malignity of nature.

The concept of nature as monstrous is a favored concept of Canadian writers, as David Punter comments: "In contemporary Gothic... the natural world is not benevolent, and indeed it is not merely organically 'red in tooth and claw,' it is actively hostile and actively able to find interesting and tormenting ways of getting its own back" (Punter, 1980:400). Nature is also depicted as a female self, she identifies the female with nature, but she at the same time is conscious about how nature can become a trap that limits and defines women in terms of what Beauvoir terms the "Other". She is the exploited and devalued force in nature / culture dichotomy. Culture tends to exclude female presence or power. For example "I began to forget myself/in the middle of sentences / events were split about" (JSM: 111).

Atwood no longer anatomizes destructive dichotomies, what Christ calls "the opposition of spirit and body, nature and person" but instead celebrates "matriarchal guides" (Christ, 1976:316). She prays to the "Black Stone Mother God" and salutes her dying grandmother, "mother / of my mother, old stone / tunnel through which I came" (THP: 40). In another poem, *All Bread* she reminds us of our connection with the earth,

Lift these ashes into your mouth, your blood: to know what you devour .So it can be shared. Together we can eat this earth.

Atwood here has tried to bring into focus the changed attitude of the Canadians. She problematizes the very idea of "wilderness". She herself points out some of the difficulties with the "wilderness" as a concept in her poem in *Migration: C.P.R.*, where the speaker decides to journey across the land from the relatively civilized to what is seen as the more primitive west. As Atwood taught at the University of British Columbia on the west coast in 1964, she had first-hand experience of living on the edge of the world. But the west cannot yield true wilderness, since: In the forest, even apart from the trodden paths, we can tell (from the sawn firstimps) that many have passed the same way (CG: 23).

Towards the end the personae realize that the human existence is possible only through their union with the natural world, as: "identity is something too huge and simple for us to see" (43) Thus, human existence becomes meaningful only with its connection to land. As in the poems. *The Explorers* and *The Settlers* the narrators achieve their power from union with the natural world. The settlers are "drifted / picked by the sharks / during so many blue green centuries before they came", and further she writes "still / we are the salt / seas that uphold these lands" (46). The dead speakers are more vivid, more present, than the city dwellers locked

in their grid like enclave. Sherill Grace writes: "Perhaps the deaths described ... are both necessary and propitious" (Grace, 1995:19) for the speakers merge with the landscape where children now play. Atwood in the last poem of *Interlunar* asserts that,

Trust me, this darkness is a place you can enter and be as safe in as you are anywhere
(*Interlunar*: (45))

The poem starts with the word "darkness" and ends with "light", as the poet leads the other, the reader to the shore:

The lake, vast and dimensionless, doubles everything, the stars, the boulders, itself, even the darkness that you can walk so long in in becomes light. (*Interlunar*: (46))

These words can be considered as the voicing of Atwood's ideas about nature. She tries to assure the readers (especially the Canadians) to have faith in nature. As Canadians, survival is possible only if they accept the reality of nature and make efforts to accept the strangeness of the wilderness.

George Woodcock writes: "A negative view of culture is confronted by a positive one of nature; the sterile black and white of print stands judged by the fecund green of the natural world. Superficial and cold, mirrors and ice are opposed to images of flowing water or places deep underground; Christian sacrifice is measured against American redemption" (Woodcock, George 1980:127). This clearly marks a shift in the ideology of Canadian authors, who earlier considered nature to be hostile but finally accepted the positive aspects of nature.

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